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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

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OFFICIAL REPORT

FOURTEENTH PARLIAMENT

*FIRST SESSION*

*Tuesday, 10 January 2023*

*The House met at 1:30 pm*

VOLUME 95

NO 80

**ATTENDANCE**

**PRESENT:**

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

Mr Abdul Samad (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).

Mr Shawn Huang Wei Zhong (Jurong).

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

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

Dr Janil 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.

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).

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).

Dr Shahira Abdullah (Nominated Member).

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

Mr Sharael Taha (Pasir Ris-Punggol).

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

Mr Sitoh Yih Pin (Potong Pasir).

Ms Hany Soh (Marsiling-Yew Tee).

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

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

Ms Carrie Tan (Nee Soon).

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

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

Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong (Hougang).

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

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

Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong).

Dr Tan Yia Swam (Nominated Member).

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer).

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

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

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

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).  
Mr Alex Yam (Marsiling-Yew Tee).  
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:**

Ms Janet Ang (Nominated Member).  
Prof Koh Lian Pin (Nominated Member).  
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 Vivian Balakrishnan (Holland-Bukit Timah), Minister for Foreign Affairs.

**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)
Dr Vivian Balakrishnan	04 Jan	11 Jan
Ms Janet Ang	06 Jan	15 Jan
Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M	08 Jan	16 Jan

**[Mr Speaker in the Chair]**

**ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

**PROPOSAL FOR COHORT SMOKING BAN IN SINGAPORE**

1 **Dr Lim Wee Kiak** asked the Minister for Health with regard to the law imposing a cohort smoking ban that was recently passed in New Zealand (a) whether the Ministry can provide an update on whether the study on how the ban can be applied to Singapore has been completed; and (b) if so, when will the findings be published.

2 **Mr Liang Eng Hwa** asked the Minister for Health (a) whether an update can be provided on the study to impose a cohort smoking ban, which is similar to the recent ban imposed by New Zealand; (b) what are the issues that will be faced in its implementation; and (c) how soon can this cohort smoking ban be implemented.

**The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health (Ms Rahayu Mahzam) (for the Minister for Health):** Mr Speaker, before I begin, may I wish you a "Happy Birthday", as it is your birthday today? *[Applause.]*

Speaker, may I answer Question Nos 1 and 2 together?

**Mr Speaker:** Of course.

**Ms Rahayu Mahzam:** MOH is continually reviewing and enhancing our anti-smoking measures. This includes studying international practices and ideas on how to further reduce smoking prevalence.

New Zealand has introduced legislation to implement a tobacco cohort ban. It has, however, not banned vaping, unlike Singapore.

We will study further on whether New Zealand's implementation approach is feasible in Singapore, as the implementation of the ban in New Zealand will be limited to retail sale to affected cohorts. Therefore, affected cohorts will still be able to smoke cigarettes that are supplied by their peers or others who are not from the affected cohorts. The tobacco-free generation policy in New Zealand will have a longer-term goal of denormalising smoking rather than completely curbing access to tobacco products in the short term.

Nevertheless, it is an interesting policy move that is worth studying further to see if it is appropriate and effective in Singapore's context.

**Mr Speaker:** Dr Lim Wee Kiak.

**Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang):** Thank you. I have one supplementary question. It is not just New Zealand. Even Malaysia is looking at this. The question is apart from doing a generation ban, we have moved up the age limit to 21 years. Is MOH considering moving the age limit even higher?

**Ms Rahayu Mahzam:** Besides New Zealand, I believe Denmark, Malaysia and the UK have also announced their intent to introduce and implement this policy, but there are no details yet on these countries' legislation or timeline for implementation.

As Dr Lim Wee Kiak rightly pointed out, it is not that we are not doing anything. There are a lot of other things, including legislation and all that. We have to look at all these concurrently and see what is the impact it has made over the past few years. In respect of that particular issue, it is something that we will constantly review to see what is the effectiveness of doing so, in light of all the different measures that we have already in place.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Liang Eng Hwa.

**Mr Liang Eng Hwa (Bukit Panjang):** Mr Speaker, this idea of the cohort ban has been talked about for some time. I can understand that the Government will have to be very careful in deliberating and it may take awhile. But we also know the ill effects of smoking and second-hand smoke. It is without a doubt, indisputable why we should curb smoking and second-hand smoke.

I want to ask the Senior Parliamentary Secretary why is the hesitation still there and what can be the downside to having a cohort ban on smoking? Now that we have been pushing for Healthier SG, would MOH not see this as a longer-term Healthier SG move, so that there is a structural shift towards better public health for the public and for the individual as well?

**Ms Rahayu Mahzam:** I thank the Member for the question. As mentioned, we are not closing our minds to this. In fact, we are reviewing it but we are also learning to see how it is going to be effective in our context. For a ban to be completely effective at curbing access to tobacco products for the affected cohorts, we need to introduce laws to penalise older persons who are not subject to the ban but they may abetting or supplying the products.

At this juncture, if we are looking New Zealand, they are actually not banning vaping and we have a certain strong position on vaping because we know that that is the start to a lot of the addiction to tobacco.

We are not closing to door to this. We already have many measures in place. As with everything, we want to make sure that it is effective because it is also the implementation, the resources that we have to put in. We must make that whatever, we do generates the outcome that we desire and we are not just paying lip service to it. That is where the effort is being put; to see, in conjunction with all the things that are already in place, how effective can this be and how can we tweak it to suit the purposes that we need at this juncture.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Dennis Tan.

**Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong (Hougang):** Thank you, Speaker. Could I ask the Senior Parliamentary Secretary one question? Is the Government setting itself any timeline to review this? As the other hon Member Dr Lim has mentioned, other countries are already looking into it and have expressed intention to introduce it. So, is the Government setting any timeline to review this prospect of having a generational ban?

**Ms Rahayu Mahzam:** I can assure the Member that these issues are alive. We constantly look into it. As Mr Liang alluded to, we are rolling out Healthier SG and different components of Healthier SG are things we are constantly looking at. These are things that are currently being reviewed, as we speak.

We have already announced that there is going to be a campaign against vaping, coming up in the first part of this year. Everything is running according to timeline. We do need to see, insofar as what happens in other countries, what the outcomes there are. As it stands, we are already constantly reviewing, constantly taking in feedback from partners that we are working with to see how best we can implement this.

### **ADDITIONAL MEASURES TO CURB GAMBLING ADDICTION GIVEN SPIKE IN AMOUNTS SPENT ON LOTTERIES AND SPORTS BETTING**

3 **Mr Seah Kian Peng** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development given the significant increase in the amount of bets placed on lotteries and sports betting in the financial year ending March 2022 (a) whether, and if so, what concerns does the Ministry have; and (b) whether the Ministry assesses there to be a need for additional measures to be introduced, such as to curb gambling addiction or to highlight responsible gambling.

**The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Social and Family Development (Mr Eric Chua) (for the Minister for Social and Family Development):** Mr Speaker, the increase in Singapore Pools lotteries and sports betting turnover between Financial Year 2020/2021 and Financial Year 2021/2022 can be attributed to a few factors. Financial Year 2020/2021 saw lower turnover due to COVID-19 safe management measures and there was likely to be pent-up demand that surfaced in Financial Year 2021/2022 after COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed. Football tournaments globally also resumed in 2021, which led to increased sports betting.

MSF focuses on tackling problem gambling, as the negative impact goes beyond the individual gamblers and also affects the gamblers' families and loved ones. MSF, together with the Gambling Regulatory Authority (GRA) and MHA, regularly review and strengthen our social safeguards, and mandate gambling operators to implement responsible gambling measures.

For example, the Gambling Control Act enacted in March 2022 extended the exclusion regime administered by the National Council on Problem Gambling beyond the casinos, to gaming machine rooms and Singapore Pools' online gambling platform. Should an individual bet online excessively with Singapore Pools, family members can apply for a Family Exclusion Order to suspend the individual's online betting account.

In addition, financially vulnerable individuals such as those on Government social assistance and subsidy schemes, legal aid and tenants and occupiers of the HDB Public Rental Scheme, are automatically excluded by law from betting online with Singapore Pools, as well as from the casinos and gaming machine rooms.

From November 2022, private clubs operating gaming machine rooms are also required to educate patrons about responsible gambling, problem gambling and help services and assist patrons who display signs of problem gambling.

MSF will continue to work closely with GRA and MHA to monitor the situation, and review the need to introduce further measures to minimise the risks of problem gambling.

At the end of the day, individuals should exercise personal responsibility and avoid betting beyond their means. Help is available via the NCPG Helpline or Webchat. We also encourage family and friends to look out for their loved ones and advise them not to bet excessively.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Seah.

**Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade):** I thank the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the answer. I just have a few supplementary questions. First, for the avoidance of doubt, I certainly support all the measures that we have introduced over the years.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary mentioned that the attribution for the increase this year is due to pent-up demand because the previous year, we had COVID-19. Therefore, by that, do we expect that in the coming year, this will normalise and it must necessarily see a reduction. My first supplementary question will be, what are the indicators we will look for before we feel that this is something that we need to introduce more measures for or find other measures?

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary also mentioned that we will look at Singapore Pools' online betting to see what the trends are. But that is just one avenue. We know that there is a lot of betting which takes place not through Singapore Pools. So, my second question is, how do we monitor such trends? It is certainly not easy.

Finally, I have said this before, in measures such as these, I would prefer that we err on the side of caution and therefore, it is better to impose more than less measures.

**Mr Eric Chua:** Mr Speaker, I thank the Member for his supplementary questions. On the first question about what indicators do we look at, we must first understand that the numbers we are looking at in terms of what has been reported for FY2021/2022, is contrasted against a very low base in the previous FY. That previous FY, as I have explained, we have implemented quite number of measures, not just in Singapore. But in Singapore alone, we have had our circuit breaker from April to June 2020 and also a whole slew of other postponements in terms of sporting activities. For instance, the Tokyo Olympics, for which is one of the favourites for sports betting, Copa America as well as the UEFA European Football Championship. These are some of the examples that really accounted for the low base in FY2020/2021.

Having established this, what are the indicators that we look at? We can safely and quite surely rely on a few factors. For instance, we look at gambling participation rates over the years. Over the past 10 years, gambling participation has remained quite stable at about 50%. I think it has been stable throughout the past 10 years. The key, as I mentioned in my main reply earlier, is whether there is a problem of a rise in the incidence of pathological and problem gambling. I am happy to share over the Member that over the past few years, there has not been any marked increase in the overall probable pathological and problem gambling rates. That has constantly remained at 1%.

I do agree with the Member that on social issues such as these, we do want to err on the side of caution – which is why we have implemented quite a number of exclusions. I will not repeat what I have already mentioned in my main reply. I think it is also a matter of perspective – to some, it will be very onerous to be able to place a bet today. But I think for us as policy-makers, we want to strike a good balance, and I think we have done just that with our existing regime.

#### **MISUSE OF DRUGS ACT 1973 PROVISIO TO COMMIT FOR TREATMENT A PERSON REASONABLY SUSPECTED TO BE CASUAL DRUG USER**

4 **Mr Murali Pillai** asked the Minister for Home Affairs whether the power of the Director of the Central Narcotics Bureau to commit a person to a Drug Rehabilitation Centre for treatment or rehabilitation or to be subject to supervision on the basis that the person is reasonably suspected to be a drug addict under section 34 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1973 may be enlarged to include a person who is reasonably suspected to be a casual drug user but not an addict.

**The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim) (for the Minister for Home Affairs):** Mr Speaker, under section 34(2) of the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA), the Director of the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) can subject a person to supervision in the community, or admit a person to a Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC), if the person tests positive for a controlled drug on a urine or hair test. This is regardless of the person's drug-taking habits, or whether he is a drug addict or not.

However, if the urine or hair test result is negative for a controlled drug, section 34(1) of the MDA requires the Director of CNB to have a reasonable suspicion that a person is a drug addict before committing him to a medical examination or observation. Only if the medical examination or observation shows the person to have signs or symptoms consistent with drug abuse, can the Director of the CNB subject him to supervision, or commit him to a DRC.

#### **FEASIBILITY OF SEAWEED PRODUCTION IN SINGAPORE'S WATERS**

5 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment (a) what is the Government doing to explore the feasibility of seaweed production in Singapore's waters; (b) whether the Ministry includes the local production of seaweed as part of its 30 by 30 agri-food strategy; and (c) whether the Ministry includes seaweed farms as part of its sea space lease provision.

**The Senior Minister of State for Sustainability and the Environment (Dr Koh Poh Koon) (for the Minister of Sustainability and the Environment):** Sir, given our land and resource constraints, including sea space, our "30 by 30" goal focuses on food items that have large consumer demand and can be grown in a productive and resource-efficient way, such as fish, vegetables and eggs. We currently do not have plans to allocate sea space for seaweed production. Nevertheless, we are prepared to consider proposals from the industry on new food types, including seaweed, that will help us contribute to our "30 by 30" goal.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Perera.

**Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied):** I thank the Senior Minister of State. Given the fact that around the world, there is a considerable degree of experimentation right now, even by developed countries in Europe and elsewhere to cultivate seaweed in coastal waters because of the benefits in terms of the emissions and also in terms of biodiversity and given that there is some experimentation around using technology to do this efficiently, would the Government be open to considering those kind of proposals in light of those benefits amid new developments and technologies.

**Dr Koh Poh Koon:** Sir, I thank the Member for sharing his views. We are aware that there have been efforts in different parts of the world to try and look at seaweed cultivation as a means of commercially providing substrates either for pharmaceutical use or for consumption. But in looking at whether seaweed is suitable here, we have to first depend on commercial assessments to see whether this is something that industry players think is viable.

Just for information, as I said in my main reply, we are looking at whether there is enough local consumption demand to generate that commercial interest. And secondly, whether that really meets our nutritional goals.

On the first point, broadly speaking, seaweed is not really a widely consumed item in Singapore as compared to the other food types like vegetables. In fact, the annual volume of imported seaweed has been less than 1,000 tonnes, compared to vegetables where we have to import 544,000 tonnes per year. So, in terms of the commercial viability and the local demand, it may well be a commercial calculation that there is really no big demand here.

The second thing is on experimentation of seaweed cultivation at the coastal area. Here, we have also got to be very careful. What is suitably grown in other coastal areas in other parts of the world may well be different here because the water temperature is different, the water nutrients are different, the kind of biodiversity here is also different and we do have to understand by introducing a certain variety of seaweed or sea grass here, how they can impact the biodiversity and the micro ecosystem here, that can impact also the other type of organisms like fish. So, it is something that the agencies together with the experts have to study, to make sure that in trying to experiment something new, we do not introduce dangers to our own shores and create more problems in our ecosystem and biodiversity.

#### **EX-OFFENDERS ASSISTED UNDER JOBS GROWTH INCENTIVE SCHEME**

6 **Mr Murali Pillai** asked the Minister for Manpower (a) how many ex-offenders have been assisted under the Jobs Growth Incentive (JGI) scheme up to the end of the year 2022; (b) what are the top 10 industries that employ ex-offenders under the JGI; and (c) what steps have been taken to promote a higher take-up rate of the JGI amongst ex-offenders before the scheme expires on 31 March 2023.

**The Minister for Manpower (Dr Tan See Leng):** Based on the latest available data, the Jobs Growth Incentive (JGI) has supported the hiring of approximately 2,300 ex-offenders as at May 2022. The implementation of the JGI has been accompanied by an increase in interest among employers to partner with Yellow Ribbon Singapore (YRSG) to hire ex-offenders.

The top 10 sectors which have employed ex-offenders with JGI support are as follows: environmental services, logistics, food services, wholesale trade, construction, retail, professional services, food manufacturing, precision engineering and real estate. These sectors collectively account for over eight in 10 ex-offenders hired with JGI support.

To promote the take-up of the JGI amongst employers for hiring ex-offenders, YRSG has been raising awareness of the JGI and other available support amongst employers. Employers who hire ex-offenders directly through YRSG, Industrial and Services Co-operative Society or halfway houses engaged by the Singapore Prison Service will automatically receive JGI if they meet the eligibility criteria for JGI.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Pillai.

**Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok):** Mr Speaker, Sir, I am glad to note the reasonably good take-up rate of the JGI by about 2,300 ex-offenders. May I ask the hon Minister whether in his view, these ex-offenders had got into good jobs, not just in terms of jobs offering prospects but jobs offering security. And if so, after the expiry of the JGI in March 2023, I wonder whether the Ministry may want to continue provide incentives for ex-offenders to get into such jobs so that not just they benefit, their families benefit, but society-at-large benefits because we will be able to actualise their potential and ensure as far as possible, that they leave their past behind.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** I thank the Member for his supplementary questions. Indeed, as I have shared earlier on, ex-offenders have been employed in a fairly wide range of sectors. The implementation of the JGI has been accompanied by increased also in the number of employers registering with YRSG and then hiring them through YRSG. YRSG has also been seeking to on board more companies from the

growth sectors. Today, quite a sizeable number of them continue to remain in employment nine months after they have first been placed. We feel that this provides very positive and very, very promising insights for us to continue to help them.

With regards to post-March when the JGI programme is sunset, I want to also reiterate that the JGI is an extraordinary measure and this was introduced during COVID-19 to support employers to expand local hiring and is not a permanent – not envisaged and not planned to be a permanent scheme. We are reviewing future plans to see how we can help, taking into consideration the economic, the labour market situation as well as the outlook.

As we speak, there are other employment support measures today by YRSG and these will continue to be available to ex-offenders and employers beyond March 2023. Some of these programmes include skills training for inmates consisting of combination of literacy skills, critical core skills and technical skills. Placement services, career retention support, as well as career coaches and advisory services to match inmates with suitable employers and to help them remain gainfully employed. YRSG continues to establish partnerships and they are recruiting more employers to join them.

By recruiting, by increasing the number of partnerships with employers, we then put out Train and Place and Grow initiative. We helped to set up training academies in prison and provide capability building opportunities to help supervisors better mentor ex-offender employees.

MOM, alongside MHA, is looking into other ways to encourage more employers to hire ex-offenders. To the Member's suggestion in terms of our policy review, we certainly would take them on board.

**Mr Speaker:** Assoc Prof Jamus Lim.

**Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang):** I just wonder if the Minister, in light of the fact that as he explained, the JGI was so extraordinarily successful with helping with the placement of ex-offenders, whether this suggest to him that the Yellow Ribbon scheme, in and of itself, might actually be under-providing the kind of support that would be necessary to help with the rehabilitation of ex-offenders?

**Dr Tan See Leng:** I thank the Member for the supplementary question. I do not think it is a linear correlated type of relationship, because the real big issue over the last two and a half years has been COVID-19 and the externality, the black swan event, was so huge that, if you look at the JGI across the board for the entire economy and industry, it has supported three quarters of a million people. And I think it has benefited something like tens of thousands of firms. So, if you look at a magnitude of that part of it, I do not think, by virtue of the fact that it has helped so many people and has uplifted so many people, to then come back and say that, "Oh, as a result of that, our YRSG initiatives are insufficient". I do not think it is an apple-for-apple comparison.

My point is that, moving forward, as I have said, we continue to review, to tweak the policies to see how we can help our ex-offenders to get gainful employment, even faster and stay in gainful employment even faster. But if we sunset the entire JGI scheme and we maintain it for a very targeted group of people, particularly the ex-offenders, then obviously it brings to mind, how do we protect the confidentiality status of this group of people.

There are a lot of all these considerations that we would take on board and I do not want to front run this thing. We are working very closely with agencies on the ground, with MHA; and we will take the suggestions as proposed by the hon Member of Parliament Mr Murali on board as well.

## **SUFFICIENCY OF OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDICINE SUPPLIES IN SINGAPORE**

**7 Mr Saktiandi Supaat** asked the Minister for Health (a) whether the Ministry periodically monitors the sufficiency of supply of over-the-counter medicines in Singapore; (b) if so, what is the periodic interval; (c) what is the amount of emergency stockpile of such medicines to respond quickly to acute nationwide shortages; and (d) whether the Ministry will consider introducing controls against the purchase of such medicines in large quantities for the purpose of sending them out of Singapore.

**8 Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Health whether an update can be given on the current state of our national stockpile of essential supplies of common over-the-counter medications.

**The Senior Minister of State for Health (Dr Janil Puthucheary) (for the Minister for Health):** Mr Speaker Sir, may I have your permission to answer Question Nos 7 and 8 on today's Order Paper together?

**Mr Speaker:** Please do.

**Dr Janil Puthucheary:** My response will also cover the matters raised by Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim scheduled for a subsequent Sitting.

Sir, retailers keep close track of their supplies of over-the-counter (OTC) medicines and medical supplies and bring in more stock or alternative brands when there is a surge in demand.

At the same time, MOH also monitors the stock levels of commonly used medicines and medical supplies, especially when there are exceptional surges in demand or disruptions to supply. If necessary, MOH will work with the retailers to procure additional stocks to meet the demand, or issue relevant advisories. In addition, MOH maintains stockpiles of key medicines and medical supplies to be prioritised for the higher acuity patients in our public healthcare institutions.

In extreme situations, where there may be global shortages, MOH will take additional measures such as imposing sales limits to prevent hoarding and ensure that the medicines and medical supplies are fairly distributed.

Over the past year, our medical supplies, including oximeters and oxygenators, have been adequate to meet demand. Towards the year end of 2022, due to higher incidents of viral infections, there were temporary localised shortages of specific brands of medicines used to treat fever, coughs and cold. Retailers therefore persuaded customers to switch to alternate brands which were not in short supply. In the past couple of weeks, demand has moderated and stock levels have improved.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Saktiandi Supaat.

**Mr Saktiandi Supaat (Bishan-Toa Payoh):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would like to ask two supplementary questions in relation to what the Senior Minister of State has answered. I thank the Senior Minister of State for the answers he gave earlier. First question is in regards to – the Senior Minister of State mentioned that the situation has improved, but given the endemic COVID-19 situation that we are in now, would he see possibilities of over-the-counter medicine running out of stock more frequently? And in relation to my Parliamentary Question, how often or periodically does MOH or its relevant agencies assess the periodic intervals to assess the stock?

Second question is, leaving it to market entities like the Senior Minister of State mentioned, to assess their stock, would it sometimes, at times, depending on the periodic intervals that we check, lead to market failures and lead to runs potentially if there is a global shortage which lead to anxiety in the population. How can we assess that in terms of, by either domestic production or diversification of our over-the-counter medicines that will be much in need, given the endemic COVID-19 and going forward as well?

**Dr Janil Puthucheary:** I thank the Member for his questions. The supplies were more than adequate and, certainly, our national stockpiles, which include what the vendors have, have remained within our policy thresholds all the way along. We have a fairly granular live view of the stocks held by the vendors, as well as in our national stockpile. So, we are fairly confident that we would be able to meet the demands in general.

I would put it to the Member that as COVID-19 becomes endemic and, as a population, we treat it and behave towards it like we do other illnesses, there is less chance of the panic buying or the anxiety-induced purchasing that we saw towards the end of last year. And so, we would be less likely to have similar problems with over-the-counter medication.

If I may also offer some medical advice. One way to deal with the anxiety, the routine use of mucolytics and expectorants is not necessary for most of us who have healthy lungs and baseline good health when dealing with an illness such as COVID-19. Secondly, there is no necessity to purchase branded medication. A variety of generic preparations will do the job just as well.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms He Ting Ru.

**Ms He Ting Ru (Sengkang):** First, I would like to thank the Senior Minister of State for the impromptu medical advice. I have a couple of supplementary questions. The first being, can the Senior Minister of State confirm whether there was a need to tap into the stockpile, given the situation last year. I think that it is just something that the public is probably interested in knowing. Did this also affect antigen rapid test (ART) kits and other essential medical supplies, not just over-the-counter (OTC) medications.

And finally, related to the point that the hon Member Saktiandi Supaat raised earlier, in terms of tracking the levels of stockpile of these relevant medications and supplies, does the Ministry use AI, or any other dynamic tracking tools to make sure that while actually maintaining the adequate levels of supply, that we also minimise usage, given that some of these have very finite shelf life?

**Dr Janil Puthucheary:** Sir, I thank the Member for the questions. The localised short-term supply issues were largely managed through the vendors' own stockpiles. And indeed, a variety of data and ICT tools are used to manage the supply, as well as the stockpiles at the vendor, as well as the national level.

## **CASES REPORTED TO ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICE AND THE CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICE**

**9 Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development (a) how many cases are reported to the Adult Protective Service and the Child Protective Service in each year between 2020 and 2022 respectively; (b) how effective has the Strengthening Families Programme @ FSCs been so far since its inception, especially in reducing potential cases requiring the assistance of the Adult Protective Service and the Child Protective Service; and (c) what have been the most effective steps taken in preventing new cases of family violence or abuse.

**The Minister of State for Social and Family Development (Ms Sun Xueling) (for the Minister for Social and Family Development):** Mr Speaker, Sir, the number of inquiries received by the Adult Protective Service (APS) and the Child Protective Service is available on MSF's website.

For the year 2020, there were 1,196 enquiries received by APS; and in 2021, it was 1,948. For enquiries received by the Child Protective Service, this was 5,223 in 2020; and 6,513 in 2021.

I would like to add that these numbers are elevated compared to the pre-COVID-19 years of 2017 to 2019. Also, that these enquiries, given that several of them may be general enquiries, may not involve actual incidences of family violence.

There is increased awareness on family and domestic violence through our public education campaigns, such as the "Break the Silence" campaign. And also, there are more channels of reporting of suspected abuse or neglect, following the launch of the 24-hour National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline (NAVH) in February 2021. MSF's Strengthening Families Programme at Family Service Centre,



or FAM@FSC for short, supports couples who may face greater challenges in their marriage and families showing early signs of stress. Not all of these family cases involve violence or abuse.

The activities at FAM@FSCs include marriage and divorce support programmes, family counselling service for family relationship issues, including mental, financial, parent-child issues, and ageing and extended families. As such, they may not involve incidences of violence or abuse.

Where further support is required, families are referred to other services, such as Protection Specialist Centres and Family Service Centres.

Tackling family violence requires a multi-pronged approach. I had mentioned that we invest in public education campaigns, such as the "Break the Silence" campaign.

Second, we help professionals and volunteers in the community to better detect family violence through training.

Third, Social Service Offices and social service agencies reach out to families who may have a higher risk of experiencing family violence and refer them to appropriate services.

Fourth, we inculcate in the young positive behaviours that build healthy and respectful relationships through age-appropriate material.

Lastly, we help couples who may require greater support, such as young couples, to build a strong marriage foundation through marriage preparation programmes. Such programmes help couples understand better how they can build healthy relationship skills, how to resolve conflict amicably and reasonably, and be more aware of family violence and how to seek help.

The multi-stakeholder Taskforce on Family Violence, which I co-chair, was set up in February 2020. We had proposed a comprehensive set of recommendations to tackle the various aspects of family violence, from upstream prevention and detection, to various efforts to ensure the protection of survivors, to increasing the accountability, as well as the rehabilitation, of perpetrators.

The Government has accepted, in principle, all the task force's recommendations in October 2021. We are progressively implementing these recommendations.

### **FLEXIBILITY UNDER WORK PASS FRAMEWORK TO HIRE FOREIGN NURSES TO MEET HEALTHCARE SECTOR NEEDS**

10 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Health what are the measures taken with MOM to exercise appropriate flexibility under the work pass framework on the hiring of foreign nurses to meet the healthcare sector's manpower needs.

**The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health (Ms Rahayu Mahzam) (for the Minister for Health):** Mr Speaker, MOH and MOM recognise that the healthcare sector needs foreign nurses and support care staff to augment the nursing workforce, to meet our growing healthcare needs. Hence, additional work pass quotas and greater flexibility to recruit foreign nurses and support care staff from non-traditional sources, have been allocated to the healthcare sector.

These measures have been used very judiciously by the sector.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Louis Ng.

**Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon):** Thank you, Sir. I thank the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the reply. Could I just check, specifically, whether we are looking into the Dependant's Pass application by nurses? I think we agree that many have gone back home because they want to be closer to their loved ones and they cannot bring their loved ones to Singapore. And so, two clarifications: one, whether MOH is monitoring how successful their Dependant's Pass application is; and two, whether MOH can work specifically with MOM to see whether we can look into these applications more favourably.

And happy birthday to you as well, Sir.

**Ms Rahayu Mahzam:** To answer the question, yes, we are aware that this is an important concern of the foreign nurses, and yes, this is something that we are looking into specifically as well.

### **REVIEW ON CONTRIBUTION AMOUNTS BY EMPLOYEES TO SELF-HELP GROUPS**

11 **Mr Seah Kian Peng** asked the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth whether the Government assesses there to be a need to raise the respective contribution amounts by employees to self-help groups, namely, the Chinese Development Assistance Council Fund, Eurasian Community Fund, Mosque Building and MENDAKI Fund and Singapore Indian Development Association Fund, particularly for those earning high incomes.

**The Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth (Mr Alvin Tan) (for the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth):** Sir, the self-help groups are primarily funded by contributions from the respective ethnic communities. The contribution rates are determined by the respective self-help groups, based on the needs of their communities. These rates are progressively packed with those earning higher incomes contributing more.

The self-help groups review their contribution rates when needed, taking into consideration their programme requirements and the prevailing economic situation faced by the communities. Individuals may choose to also contribute more than the rate set by self-help groups, by writing to the respective self-help groups. They may also make additional donations to self-help groups, apart from their monthly contributions.

### **PROPOSED RULE TO REQUIRE COMMERCIAL VEHICLES AND BUSES TO HAVE REAR VIEW CAMERAS INSTALLED**

**12 Mr Gan Thiam Poh** asked the Minister for Transport whether the Ministry will implement a rule requiring all commercial trucks, lorries and buses to have rear view camera installed as an added safety measure to prevent accidents from happening to workers while the vehicle is reversing.

**Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Ang Mo Kio):** Question No 12. Happy birthday, Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Supplementary questions still remain as two per Member.

**The Senior Minister of State for Transport (Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan) (for the Minister for Transport):** LTA requires all heavy goods vehicles and buses to install devices that cover the vehicle's blind spot areas, as well as the rear view. These devices include blind-spot mirrors and camera monitor systems, which include rear-view cameras, and the objective is to ensure that the driver has sufficient field of vision and awareness of persons near their vehicle.

LTA will continue to monitor developments internationally, and together with other agencies and industry stakeholders, study the need for additional safety requirements.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Gan Thiam Poh.

**Mr Gan Thiam Poh:** I thank the Senior Minister of State and just have a clarification. Are there cases where the lorries had not complied and are causing accidents? As a result of the accidents, the families are caught in a very difficult position.

**Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan:** I thank the Member for his question. Yes, this requirement for heavy goods vehicles and buses to be equipped with such devices to cover blind spots, as well as the rear view, is under the Road Traffic (Motor Vehicles, Construction and Use) Rules. During their annual inspection, if they are found not to have complied, there could be a penalty imposed, a fine as well as jail term. The first offence is up to a \$1,000 fine and three months' jail; and it is double for repeat offences.

But in addition to these equipment, I want to appeal to the drivers to exercise caution and care and due diligence, to check before they make such manoeuvres. Because even if you are equipped with these devices, you still need the driver to be careful. If they are reversing, I think MOM also advises, as far as possible, to get people to guide them when they reverse the vehicle.

And for pedestrians and workers to be alert to moving vehicles in the area.

But notwithstanding this, let me say that, as I have said earlier, we continue to look at international developments and study the need for additional safety requirements. At the moment, because of camera technology, most of the vehicles are fitted with blind-spot mirrors, side mirrors, and so on, to enable them to have better vision. Only a very small number of vehicle manufacturers have equipped their vehicles, including goods vehicles with rear view cameras, in lieu of side mirrors. That is because, for such large vehicles, it is a large field of vision and you need good, adequate camera resolution in order to provide clear images for the drivers. So, this is something we are monitoring.

In addition to that, in Japan and Europe last year – in June 2022, Japan has required its automakers to equip all their vehicles, including new goods vehicles, with devices to enable the drivers to check on the rear of the vehicle. But the devices do not have to be just rear view cameras. It could be other devices – sensors, for instance, or even mirrors, perhaps of a different type. And it is only implemented for new models immediately from June; and for existing models, from May 2024.

In July, EU also announced and implemented a similar set of requirements, but it is not for existing registered vehicles.

So, we are also closely monitoring these developments and looking at reviewing this and studying whether it is feasible to add on additional safety requirements.

### **SPATE OF HOME FIRES RELATED TO ELECTRICAL APPLIANCES AND DEVICES**

**13 Mr Liang Eng Hwa** asked the Minister for Home Affairs (a) among the recent spate of home fires, whether there are increasing cases of electrical related fires; and (b) what further preventive measures can be put in place to tackle fires related to electrical appliances and devices.

**The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim) (for the Minister for Home Affairs):** Mr Speaker, with your permission, may I take Question No 13 and also a Parliamentary Question filed for a subsequent Sitting by Ms Denise Phua<sup>1</sup>.

**Mr Speaker:** Please proceed.

**Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim:** The number of fires in residential premises has been steadily decreasing, from 1,235 cases in 2018, to 934 cases in 2022. The main causes of these fires were unattended cooking, the indiscriminate disposal of lighted materials, such as cigarette butts, and fires of electrical origin that could be caused by faulty electrical appliances or wirings.

The number of residential fires of electrical origin has remained constant from 2018 to 2022, ranging between 250 and 300 cases annually.

The Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF), in partnership with the People's Association, the National Fire and Emergency Preparedness Council (NFEC) and the Community Emergency and Engagement Committees, has been organising a series of Community Resilience Days in the heartlands to raise the level of fire safety awareness among residents.

SCDF has also been working with the NFEC and HDB to educate new homeowners on fire safety and emergency preparedness through the MyNiceHome Roadshows.

After a residential fire, SCDF will conduct door-to-door engagements with the residents of the affected block to share fire safety tips. This includes distributing brochures which advises on preventing battery and personal mobility device (PMD) fires.

SCDF regularly reviews the Fire Code, which stipulates the fire safety requirements for buildings in Singapore. For example, since June 2018, SCDF has required all new residential premises to be installed with Home Fire Alarm Devices (HFADs).

Homeowners also have a critical role to play. They can prevent household electrical fires by only using electrical equipment that are certified safe such as UL2272 certified PMDs and plugs bearing the safety mark, switching off appliances when not in use and ensuring that wires are in good condition. For residential premises built before June 2018 and therefore not mandated to install HFADs, homeowners are encouraged to install them nevertheless.

SCDF will continue to work with partners to increase public awareness of fire prevention and how residents may stay safe in the event of a fire at home.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Liang Eng Hwa.

**Mr Liang Eng Hwa (Bukit Panjang):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister of State for sharing the data from 2018 to 2022. I do encounter a few of these fires in my constituency and quite a number were electrical related. So, perhaps, the Minister of State can share a little bit more about some of the numbers that he mentioned, specifically, details of the causes of the fires for those incidents.

We know every household fire, besides the casualty, was devastating to families, to neighbours and also to firefighters and first responders. I would like to ask the Minister of State how can we significantly raise the awareness amongst households on the likely fire risks? And also, how can we make our homes and neighbourhood more fire safe?

**Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim:** Sir, I thank the Member for the supplementary questions. I will share more details about the numbers, year by year.

The number of residential fires, for 2018, as I shared earlier was 1,235. For 2019, 1,168. For 2020, 1,054. For 2021, 1,010. For 2022, it was 934. So, it was on a decreasing trend.

However, for the number of electrical fires, it has remained stable over the years. For 2018, it was 288. For 2019, 293. For 2020, it went down further to 253. For 2021, it was 261. For 2022, it was 257.

These are the details. Indeed, we agree with the Member that even though we saw the numbers decreasing, every fire would cause disruptions to lives and some lives have been lost.

We continue to work together with the community, as well as from the professional angle, we want to make sure that we continue to review and put in place fire safety standards. At the same time, our SCDF officers will do their best to go and respond as fast as they can and put out the fire.

We will also continue to enhance and raise awareness on fire safety.

We have developed post-COVID-19 Community Resilience Days. So, I hope that we can get more and more people to be on board to be part of this. But above all, I think it is the personal responsibility. How we, the Members of the House including myself, as well as well fellow Singaporeans, can play our part: one, to not be complacent about fire safety; and second, how we can make our home safe in terms of our daily activities.

For the data over the years that I shared earlier, the reasons and the causes of fires remained similar, such as unattended cooking and the appliances that we use, there may be overloading. But most importantly, some of the things that we should do are: do not leave cooking unattended; keep stove tops, cooker hoods and ovens clean and free of grease; and also, we should not throw burning embers or cigarette butts into rubbish chutes without first fully extinguishing them; and do not leave batteries or devices to charge unattended.

Today, we travel a fair bit and we are able to do many online shopping. Some of these devices that we use in Singapore, we also must take upon our ownership to see whether they are suitable for use here, and also, how we can make sure that if left unattended, that they do not give rise to fire risk.

So, while the community, organisations and agencies continue to enhance fire safety standards and raise awareness, I hope this is something that we have come together for. We can see some of the reports that we have seen about fires. So, even though numbers have been going down, I think it is important for us to bring the message home and each of us has a role to play in this. We want to get more

and more people to be aware, to be conscious and put our concern into actions so that we can keep the fire risk as low as possible.

Note(s) to Question No(s) 13:

<sup>1</sup> To ask the Minister for Home Affairs how effective are the actions taken over the last five years in addressing the top causes of fires, especially at residential premises.

## IMPACT OF COVID-19 SITUATION IN CHINA ON KEY SUPPLY CHAINS FOR SINGAPORE

14 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Trade and Industry in light of the COVID-19 situation in China (a) whether the Ministry anticipates any disruptions in key supply chains for Singapore; (b) if so, which areas are expected to be harder hit; and (c) what measures are being taken to address these potential disruptions.

**The Minister of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Low Yen Ling) (for the Minister for Trade and Industry):** Mr Speaker, the COVID-19 situation in China is currently evolving. While we do not anticipate any major sustained disruptions in the supply chains of essential goods to Singapore, in the short term, we may see some localised disruptions in China's production capabilities and supply chains.

However, over the past few years, companies in Singapore have strengthened their business continuity plans as well as supply chain resilience plans, and we encourage them to continue doing so, to mitigate supply chain disruptions.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms He Ting Ru.

**Ms He Ting Ru (Sengkang):** I thank the Minister of State for the response. I note that we do not really anticipate any major disruptions, but I also would like to ask whether we do anticipate any short-term or medium-term price or financial impacts from any disruptions, short-term disruptions, out of this.

**Ms Low Yen Ling:** Mr Speaker, I thank the Member, Ms He Ting Ru, for her supplementary question. Like I have mentioned in my main answer, we have studied the situation very closely and in fact, since a few months back.

The current COVID-19 situation in China is still unfolding – like what Minister Ong Ye Kung and Minister Iswaran mentioned in their Ministerial Statements yesterday – as China continues to take steps to open their borders and transit to a new normal.

MTI and all our economic agencies, including EDB, which is working with MNCs, with suppliers, with partners in China, as well as Enterprise Singapore working with Singapore companies with operations in China and also suppliers in China, we are working very closely with the companies via EDB, Enterprise Singapore and also the industry and trade association.

Our sensing is, at this juncture, we are not expecting any major sustained, disruption in the supply chain of goods from China to Singapore. However, in the short term, that could be some localised disruptions in China's production capabilities and supply chains.

Let me share a little bit more. For example, we work very closely with companies with suppliers and operations in China and they shared with us that as they look into 2023, and as they look at the situation unfolding in China, they do not anticipate any major supply disruptions in China.

Our key imports from China includes electronics and that is not disproportionate to the world. Electronics, machinery, metals and metal products, which are primarily used by the businesses in manufacturing and construction sector. Since early 2020, we have been working with these two sectors – in fact, with many other sectors – to future-proof themselves against supply chain disruption risks.

They have done a few things. One, they have strengthened their business continuity plans. They have also stepped up their supplier diversification and build up their inventory buffers to better prepare for any supply chain disruption. They shared that they have prepared for such scenarios because just like in the last three years, from time to time, as long as any province in China detect a COVID-19 situation, there will be a shutdown. So, they have prepared for such situations and they are fairly confident that they will be able to tide through this period.

## POLICY ON USE OF DIALECT LANGUAGES ON RADIO AND TELEVISION CHANNELS

15 **Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong** asked the Minister for Communications and Information (a) what is the Government's present position on the airing of Chinese dialect programmes on radio and television channels; and (b) whether there are any plans to allow some or more programmes in Chinese dialects on our radio and television channels to promote the preservation of heritage and encourage younger Chinese Singaporeans to be conversant in their dialects.

**The Minister for Communications and Information (Mrs Josephine Teo):** Mr Speaker, taking into consideration the reach of Free-to-Air (FTA) radio and television to a wide range of audiences including the young, dialect content is limited on these platforms to support the prevailing language policy of Mandarin as one of the four official languages.

Nonetheless, we recognise the value of dialect programmes to convey information and public policies to the elderly who are conversant only in dialect, such as on MediShield, Pioneer Generation Package and other Government support measures. Mediacorp's Channel 8 provides a dedicated belt of dialect programmes every Friday late morning. Its radio station Capital 95.8FM also offers news bulletins in various dialects, read a few times daily.

In exceptional circumstances such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowances were given to convey critical information and public service messages catered for the elderly as part of our national effort to provide accurate and timely information to every Singaporean about COVID-19 and to keep them engaged at home.

There are currently no plans to allow more dialect programmes on FTA TV and radio. Such content is available on other platforms such as pay TV and over the Internet – and if I may add, in plentiful supply.

#### **FACTORS IN DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT TO PRESS CHARGES AGAINST PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

16 **Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng** asked the Minister for Law (a) what are the factors taken into consideration when deciding whether or not to press charges against persons with disabilities, especially those with less than full mental capacity; and (b) whether the Ministry is able to share on any past case studies to illustrate the above.

**The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Law (Ms Rahayu Mahzam) (for the Minister for Law):** Mr Speaker, the responsibility for deciding whether to charge a person is vested in the Public Prosecutor, who exercises prosecutorial discretion to institute, conduct or discontinue any proceedings for any offence.

In deciding whether to charge a person, the Public Prosecutor will consider the facts, the sufficiency of evidence and the public interest. This will involve a careful weighing of a wide range of factors, including the circumstances of the alleged offence and the person.

Where the person has a mental condition or disability, the Public Prosecutor will consider the nature of the mental condition or disability, its severity and the connection, if any, between the mental condition or disability and the alleged offence.

Where appropriate, for example, where the person has no criminal history, the alleged offence is not serious and the person's culpability is lowered as a result of his mental condition or disability, the Public Prosecutor may decide to issue a warning, instead of charging the person. This may, in some cases, also involve a referral for treatment at facilities such as the Institute of Mental Health.

If the Public Prosecutor decides to charge the person, the Public Prosecutor's charging and sentencing position may be calibrated to take into account the person's mental condition or disability.

To illustrate, in a 2020 case, a 21-year-old offender committed offences of theft of an SCDF vehicle, cheating and causing hurt to another person by performing a rash act. He was diagnosed with Schizoaffective Disorder, a serious form of long-term major mental illness, which contributed to his offending. The Prosecution decided to charge him, considering that the offences were not minor. However, taking into account his mental condition, the Prosecution submitted for a mandatory treatment order to be imposed against the offender, which required the offender to undergo psychiatric treatment in lieu of imprisonment or a fine.

Ultimately, the Public Prosecutor's exercise of discretion as to whether to charge a person, including a person with a mental condition or disability, is a fact-dependent exercise.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Denise Phua.

**Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng (Jalan Besar):** I thank the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the response. I am well aware that MinLaw and MHA are already stepping up in terms of awareness and supporting people with disabilities in the prosecution processes and even in Police investigations.

But I have still have a lot of families whose children – and some of them are adults now – who committed offences. They seem to be, at the first instance, very, very worried at the start of the process. So, I wonder if the Government can do something to assure the disability community and the families, and also to educate further the Government agencies involved, to assure them that the Government is not heartless and that many of these steps are put in and things will just get better.

It is just to allay the fear. There are lots of anxieties and worries when their children who have less mental or social capacity commit offences. And that kind of anxiety is just all over the social media or in writings to us as Members of Parliament.

**Ms Rahayu Mahzam:** I thank the Member for the feedback and I am sure the Member is familiar with some of the efforts that we have put in place. But maybe for the assurance of the Members of this House as well as to the public, perhaps, I could repeat some of the efforts that have been put in place in attending to these matters.

Firstly, the training of frontline officers. Police officers who deal with persons with disabilities during investigations are trained to identify to deal emphatically. They are also trained to spot the behavioural indicators associated with mental disabilities and to engage them sensitively. They undergo a mental health awareness course developed by the Agency for Integrated Care for Government agencies to train their staff in managing persons with mental health conditions, including persons with dementia. This helps the officers become more aware of the signs and symptoms, and guides them in communicating with persons of these conditions.

As part of their core skills training, the investigation officers (IOs) learn the protocols to handle persons with mental disabilities. All these officers also undergo training to continuously shore up their skills. These programmes ensure the IOs are proficient in required investigation procedures and protocols, including those relating to the handling of persons with mental disabilities.

So, firstly, there is training. But apart from training, there is also a set of internal standard operating procedures when dealing with persons with mental disabilities. The focus is to accord additional protection to such persons and ensure that they are supported throughout the investigation process.

Specifically, the Member may be aware of the Appropriate Adult Scheme for Persons with Mental Disabilities (AAPMD) which was introduced in 2015 to support persons with mental or intellectual disabilities during law enforcement interviews. AAPMD is administered by the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore (MINDS). Under this scheme, an Appropriate Adult who is a trained volunteer is present during interviews to facilitate communications between the IO and the person with mental or intellectual disability. The Appropriate Adult watches for signs of distress, supports the emotional well-being of the person and assists in communication.

These are some of the areas that we can continue to highlight to the parents who are involved. They are understandably anxious when these things happen and typically all rationality goes out the window because you are very worried. So, this is something we can look into. I will take this back as feedback and see what avenues we can continue to enhance the understanding of this. If there are specific cases, please feel free to refer them to us and we will see how we can assist.

## **FACTORS IN DETERMINATION OF VALUE OF LAND FOR PUBLIC AND PRIVATE HOUSING**

**17 Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Minister for National Development in determining the value of land that will be used to build HDB BTO flats (a) what is the differential that the Chief Valuer applies to land used for public housing compared to that for private housing; and (b) whether the private housing land use comparables used to value land for HDB BTO flats are based on the records of the last transacted private residential land sold by the Government and private parties.

**The Minister for National Development (Mr Desmond Lee):** Mr Speaker, the Member asks what differential is applied by the Chief Valuer to land use for HDB, compared to private housing. He goes on to ask whether the private housing land use comparables that are used to value land for HDB BTO flats are based on records of the last transacted private residential land sold by the Government and private parties. Let me explain.

The land sold to the private sector for private housing development is typically done by open tender through the Government Land Sales, or GLS, programme. The value of the land is determined through price discovery as developers bid for the land.

On the other hand, sale of state land to HDB for public housing developments does not fall under GLS. Instead, the fair market value that HDB must pay for the purchase of state land for public housing is independently determined by the Chief Valuer using well accepted and established valuation principles. Transactions pertaining to land sold for private housing developments are not used to value the land sold to HDB for public housing developments. Instead, the Chief Valuer considers relevant public housing transactions and the specific parameters of the site.

On the differential, which is also the Member's question, HDB has publicly stated that the land premium paid for public housing land parcels is lower than the premiums for equivalent land used for private housing, as observed from the returns of successful tender bids by private developers through GLS. This is in part because of the greater restrictions that apply to public housing such as buyers' citizenship status, minimum occupation period, income ceiling, non-ownership of private properties and so on.

I must caveat that I am saying this broadly at the expense of technical accuracy and detail of the work actually done by the Chief Valuer, which is an independent office. But suffice to say, he adopts the same valuation principles used by professional valuers in the private sector and these principles are also consistent with the principles that other valuers use to value public housing or HDB flats. So, when your residents apply for loans, they get the valuation. That is what the valuer does – determine the value of HDB flats.

There is such a thing as the value of public housing and public housing land and it can be ascertained.

Relevant to this topic raised by Mr Giam are the recent comments made by Mr Leong Mun Wai in the public domain, where he said that state land sold to HDB should instead be valued at the historical cost of acquisition rather than on professional valuation principles which I have just articulated. He argues that by doing so, HDB flats can be made even cheaper than they are. I will leave the point about HDB home pricing and affordability for the debate that we will all be having soon. But we will deal with the point about valuation of land for public housing today.

Let me take a bit of time to explain to fellow Singaporeans and Members of this House why Mr Leong's proposal to value state land meant for HDB at historical cost cannot work.

First, land has value. Professional valuers in the private sector will tell us that. And actually, all of us intrinsically understand this. So, when Mr Leong calls for land to be sold at historical cost, he is overturning this fundamental point that land has value. Given that most Singaporeans own their homes, he is essentially saying that by a stroke of his pen, a significant portion of the asset value should be ignored.

In fact, this was the discussion too that Mr Chiam See Tong had with then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew back on 21 March 1985 in Parliament, where Mr Chiam was arguing about what the real value of HDB land was and whether it could really be discovered. And after some to-ing and fro-ing, if you check Hansard, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stood up and asked the Member squarely.

Allow me to quote. Mr Lee asked, "May I ask whether the Member concedes that there is such a concept called 'value of land'? And that there is such a profession known in Singapore as a Land Valuer? That the Government has a Chief Land Valuer? That there are, in the private sector, experts who regularly go to Court and give evidence as to what the value of land is? And that the Ministry of National Development, by transferring it from the HDB to the Government, is in fact making the books widely known that the value of each plot of land will be determined, and is determinable, because the land can be used for defence, it can be used for schools, it can be used for condominiums, it can be used for HDB, it can be used for URA, who is prepared to pay what price for what use. Is there no such concept as value of land?"

That in a way is a rhetorical question that he asked at the end. And after some further exchanges, Mr Chiam accepted that if that was what the Prime Minister said, then that was what he said. Perhaps grudgingly but I think that made the point clear. So, that is the first point.

Second, when you buy and sell land or property in Singapore, and I will say in many parts of the world, you may often call for a valuation report. The valuer will usually apply established and accepted valuation principles accepted by the profession and by the public to determine current market value.

For example, he looks at the relevant recent transactions, makes adjustments for attributes and so on, and produces the valuation report, detailing his grounds. But I do not think you or your professional valuer will base your transaction on how much the property had changed hands back in history. So, that is second.

Third, the idea of valuing land at historical cost sounds attractive but is really problematic. If the land was acquired by the Government in the 1960s, HDB pays for the land at 1960s' pricing? If the land was, say, recently acquired, maybe 2015, then HDB pays the 2015 price, far higher than before? And what if the land had all along been state land and was never acquired by anyone or from anyone? Is the value of the state land at historical cost then zero, that is, HDB pays zero dollars? Or do we go back to 1819 or thereabouts or further back in time to try to find some historical transactional record that was made and say, "Ah, that is the price"?

I think most people will understand why this is wrong.

If you want to sell your property today, whether it is an HDB flat, condo, terrace house, shophouse or office, you will look at what it is worth in the market today and use that as some basis for you to transact, to bargain or to negotiate. Imagine if someone comes up to you and says point blank, "Hey, he should really be paying you the historical cost instead of market price", that is, how much you or your forefathers had paid for it way back in the past – let us use that as the basis, as it is really what it costs to you or your lineage.

Or imagine one of our Pioneer Generation Singaporeans, one of our seniors, maybe in the past earning \$500 a month, maybe more, maybe less; and who may have paid say \$50,000 for his flat back in the early days. Today, because Singapore has done well thanks to his generation's hard work and contribution, it is certainly worth a lot more. When you go and do house visits, many seniors tell you proudly they are still living in the flat but it is worth a lot more.

If you adopt Mr Leong's new approach, would this senior be required to sell at just above \$50,000 or even with say, COV, cash over historical value? Would his children and descendants inherit a flat valued as it was back then in the 1960s, that is, worth very little compared to today's prices?

We know that Mr Leong makes a superficially attractive proposition but we know that the proposal is unfair; it is not logical and simply cannot fly in the face of long-established, well-accepted valuation principles.

Fourth, Mr Leong's valuation approach is actually dangerous for Singapore, because it is not really about valuation principles at all. It sounds like it, but it is not. He is in fact seeking to raid our national reserves in promising you that he can make HDB flats dirt cheap – but better, without having to tax Singaporeans more or to find ways to pay for it through revenue sources.

As my colleague Minister Ms Indranee Rajah had explained late last year, state land is part of our national reserves – quite different from other countries, other provinces, other cities, other districts in other countries which use the sale of state land as a way to fund their recurrent expenditure.

State land in our reserves has value. Its value grows if Singapore is well-managed and does well. If our reserves are well-husbanded and grow, they give greater assurance that our future generations of Singaporeans will have resources to deal with crises, catastrophe and calamity, like pandemics, like war, like economic crises, like climate emergencies. If they grow, they not just benefit the security of our future generations, but they also benefit us today. While Government cannot touch the proceeds from land sales which go to the reserves and are then re-invested, part of the growth in value of our reserves, the Net Investment Returns Contribution (NIRC), is used to fund today's needs such as healthcare, housing, subsidies, security and so on.

So, when state land is sold to HDB, HDB must put back into the reserves the fair market value (FMV) of the land, turn the land that is in our reserves into its equivalent value of money at this point in time, so the reserves are not worse-off or diminished. And FMV is determined by professional valuation principles.

Mr Leong's proposal for HDB to pay historical price to the reserves means putting back into the reserves far less than what the state land is really worth today. This is a raid on the reserves, plain and simple, and will diminish the resources available for your children and their children.

When Mr Leong advances his argument, it is about affordable housing, cheap housing; it is about valuation approach. So, it is complicated, with lots of charts, but the end product is housing will be a lot cheaper, but hey presto, with no need to pay more today by you.

He says everything else but through sleight of hand, he hides from you the plain fact that he is really wanting to raid our reserves.

Finally, while I said I would leave the debate on HDB affordability to another time – and as PSP has said, they would also debate in Parliament on this point – I will just make this final related point for Members to consider. We spend considerable amounts of national resources to keep our BTO flats affordable: at the house price-to-income ratios being comparable to other countries, where you can see the stark difference; at the mortgage servicing ratios as they are.

Mr Leong says he can make them even cheaper. They should be, he says. But to do this, there is one way: cut back on other Government expenditure, whether it is healthcare, security, education, or whatever you would want to trim back so that you spend more on this. Or by raising revenues through taxation or through other means, so that he can deliver on even cheaper BTO flats. But they are not going to be popular or wearable. So, instead, the approach is the populist one – raid our reserves, but do not say it.

He says Government can sell land to HDB at distant historical cost and ignore market valuation principles, so that Singaporeans today can get dirt cheap housing without having to pay more taxes or experience cutbacks elsewhere to pay for this. Get the benefit of the cake and eat it. As Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong had said previously in a debate on the GST and on many other occasions, if you want to tap more on the reserves, diminish it, use more of it for today and leave less for tomorrow, let us just say it plainly – let Singaporeans see it as it is and we can have a debate come the next round when we talk about housing, about reserves, about expenditure, about sustainability. Then, we can have a sound, fair basis for discussion.

But the point that he has made, the argument he is proposing, the proposition he is making, I think most people would recognise that this deal sounds too good to be true.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Gerald Giam.

**Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied):** I thank the Minister for his reply to my question. Will the high resale prices that we have seen in recent years push up the value of BTO flats and impact the price that Singaporeans pay for their BTO flats? Or does HDB increase subsidies to completely offset the increase in land valuation due to this factor?

Second, the Chief Valuer's decision on the valuation of a piece of land has a great impact on the amounts that Singaporeans have to pay for their HDB flats. How does the Government ensure that, in practice, the Chief Valuer is able to make his valuation decisions completely independently and that no one attempts to influence his decisions?

**Mr Desmond Lee:** First, let me put it beyond any shadow of doubt: the Office of the Chief Valuer is independent. It is in the Constitution his powers and his protection are set out in law. And that answers his second question clearly. There is presidential protection on the Office of the Chief Valuer.

Second, the Member asks how to ensure that the Chief Valuer's valuations do not overly impact the cost of BTO flat prices. We have explained previously that HDB does not price HDB flats to recover the cost of land and construction. The Member may be thinking about what the private sector does. The private sector developer bids for a piece of land. It has to be very careful how much it bids for. It then says, "Okay, let me call my consultant and contractor to ask about the costs of development. And then, let me set my per-square-foot price or price my units in order to recover my costs and also to make a profit." That must be it – being a profit-driven private sector.

But I have said – and my colleagues and my predecessors have said – we do not price HDB flats to recover cost of land and construction. The land and construction prices fluctuate. And in some time in our history, including in the last two years, these prices fluctuated a lot – material prices, labour cost and land cost have gone up quite a bit because of the pandemic. If it were so, then, would you not see BTO prices shooting up?

In fact, the average price of 4-room flats in non-mature estates has remained fairly constant before the pandemic in 2019 and last year, despite the resale market having gone up 28% to 29%.

Why is that so? First, we do not price HDB flats to recover costs of land and construction. And that is why HDB collects far less than the costs it has to pay out. And the deficit has been growing, especially the last two years. So, that is first and foremost, the fallacy in the Member's question; and I hope that by this explanation, you understand how it is done.

I go to the Member's first question where you asked how we ensure that resale price increases in the last two years do not overly push up BTO prices. I think what I have just explained answers that. In order to keep the price of BTO flats relatively steady, despite all these resale price increases, we first look at transactions of resale flats that are comparable. But then, we have to apply the appropriate subsidies and grants in order to bring down these costs to an affordable level for Singaporeans.

That is why from year to year, from launch to launch, the subsidies have to be adjusted – because of location, because of resale prices – to ensure that relative stability in the BTO market prevails.

We can have further debate on this when the PSP and the Government debate this. We welcome the WP to participate as well.

**Mr Speaker:** Leader of the Opposition.



**Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Just following up from Minister's point on subsidies – I filed a written question for yesterday's session, enquiring the dollar value of subsidies allocated by HDB in each year from 2010 to 2022 for HDB BTO apartments in both mature and non-mature estates respectively, and how many of such flats were constructed each year.

Minister replied saying that the market subsidies are not directly comparable across projects, launches and years as they depend on prevailing market conditions, attributes of the BTO projects offered and prevailing household incomes. I understand that answer. But Minister in his reply did not set out the subsidies for each year. I cannot understand why that information cannot be made public because those subsidies are taxpayers' subsidies. The taxpayer is actually funding the home ownership programme, vis a vis subsidies. I need the Minister's explanation as to why that information cannot be given out by the Ministry.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** I think we can deal with this more thoroughly in a debate on a Motion. The short answer is if you look at every brochure when we have a launch – and I am sure the Member has got residents come up to him to say, "Which one, 3-room, 4-room, which floor" – and if you look at the range of BTO prices, we made the effort to put the comparable resale price next to it. That is a sense, broadly, of the whole range of market subsidies that are given to Singaporeans. But we have to bear in mind that based on each family's circumstances, additional grants may or may not be available. So, it will vary, not just project by project, but also depending on who buys it. So, not just subsidies but also grants that a flat buyer receives.

And we have provided the cost of construction, which is put out and published. The overall amount of money that Government uses as taxpayer dollar to fund home ownership is public information; it is a huge figure, with some breakdown. And we also put it in the brochure, not just for Members of Parliament but for individual buyers to get a sense of the range of the difference between the resale prices that are comparable and the prices that they are being asked to pay. Again, prices come in a range due to different floor, different facing, different block.

And of course, as I have said before, the subsidies that we provide, on top of the grants, will vary from launch to launch, from year to year, even within the same town, because and especially when resale prices fluctuate a lot. I mean, when the market is flat, the subsidy is roughly about the same. But just think about it: you have resale prices shooting up 28%, 29% in the last two years. I may be getting my figures a bit wrong but broadly, you know the resale price has gone up a lot. But look at the average BTO prices. They have remained relatively stable – of course, adjusting for different locations. That must mean that you have to adjust the subsidies even for projects launched in succession in an area, in order to ensure that there is stability.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Jessica Tan.

**Ms Jessica Tan Soon Neo (East Coast):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would like to ask the Minister a supplementary question. As we talk about valuation and its impact on BTO prices, as we know, because of the current situation of supply, the affordability of resale flats is also in question.

So, how can we assure people if BTO is not an option and they are going into the resale market, that it is still affordable, especially for first-time home owners.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** We all recognise that resale prices have gone up. The reasons for this have been articulated before. That is why, amongst other things, we have made two rounds of cooling measures to moderate demand. We are also mindful of the headwinds that may come our way this year – economic headwinds, geopolitical headwinds, very high mortgage interest rates. So, all in, let us keep an eye on the resale market, both private and HDB. People are being rather prudent and careful as they should be. There are macro prudential rules to constrain overstretching. And if you have read news articles at the early part of this year, there have been reports that suggest that the property market is stabilising.

It may be too early to draw definitive conclusions, but our overriding objective is to ensure stability in the property to ensure it does not run away from economic fundamentals. So, I think that is important. On top of that, we continue to study how to ensure that both BTO and the resale market continue to remain affordable for different groups of Singaporeans at different income levels. That study continues.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Leong Mun Wai.

**Mr Leong Mun Wai (Non-Constituency Member):** Speaker, I would like to ask the Minister one question. I am not sure when I mentioned that HDB prices should be priced based on historical cost of land. Where did I write that? I think I did not mention that.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** There was an exchange between the hon Member and Senior Minister of State Sim Ann last year. And further, Facebook and social media posts. I think we leave that for the debate. If the Member tells us that he does not think Government should charge HDB at historical prices, then I think that advances the discussion. Basically, a step forward.

3.02 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Order. End of Question time. The Clerk will now proceed to read the Orders 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.]

## SECOND READING BILLS

### SKILLSFUTURE SINGAPORE AGENCY (AMENDMENT) BILL

Question again proposed.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Mark Chay.

3.02 pm

**Mr Mark Chay (Nominated Member):** Mr Speaker, Happy Birthday!

And thank you for the opportunity to join this debate on the SkillsFuture Singapore Agency (Amendment) Bill. At the outset, I would like to declare that I am a director of three institutions that provide SkillsFuture-funded courses.

As a practitioner in the industry, I wholeheartedly welcome these amendments and I would like to seek the following clarifications and make the following suggestions.

First, regarding the appointment of inspectors, I would like to ask the Minister what the qualifications are to be an appointed inspector? As inspectors are given a degree of power and authority, what happens when such powers are abused? It would be expected that these inspectors discharge their duties professionally and in a demeanour expected of any public officer.

Second, the definition of "advertisement" in article 57(E) seems relatively narrow. I should be grateful if the Minister could address how the Bill captures other forms of marketing, such as roadshows or in-person hard selling.

Mr Speaker, I have been in the education and training industry for over a decade. I have encountered a variety of dishonest actors in the industry. Some of them are educators and a majority of them are agents. Education institutions that engage agents may provide accurate information about a programme; however, there is little education institutions can do should such marketing agents go off script and use unethical means to close a sale. This is particularly so as it is not realistic to expect all prospective students to be familiar with the prevailing rules and regulations in order to qualify them for funding support from the Government.

It is incredibly upsetting to see marketing agents going to the heartlands using potentially inaccurate and misleading information to recruit students. I, therefore, am happy that this Bill also captures marketing agents. There should be no room for unscrupulous agents to profit from Government-funded training programmes. And let me say that again. There should be no room for unscrupulous agents to profit from Government-funded training programmes. And in my humble opinion, Mr Speaker, training providers should not be allowed to engage commission-based recruitment agents for any SkillsFuture-funded courses.

Singapore takes pride in many things. A high standard of education is one of them. The SkillsFuture programme has delivered in many ways to encourage Singaporeans to take charge of their learning and career development. It promotes lifelong learning, ensuring the workforce in Singapore is equipped with the relevant skills to meet the changing economy, thereby facilitating Singaporeans to transition into new industries and occupations. However, care should be taken that funding should only be provided for students who genuinely wish to upgrade themselves.

At this juncture, I would like to take the opportunity to respond to comments made by Assoc Prof Jamus Lim in his speech yesterday.

I believe that even more so trainers of SkillsFuture and WSG courses should undergo appropriate training to teach. I myself have undergone the Advanced Certificate of Training Assessment (ACTA) course which was a precursor to the ACLP programme which Assoc Prof Lim had referred to yesterday.

In my course of work, I have hired and observed many trainers and there is a difference between those who have and have not gone through the programme. They learn pedagogical and andragogical training. They understand curriculum. They are able to design a programme and the definition of teaching is the engagement of learners to enable understanding and application of knowledge, concepts and processes through design, content selection, delivery, assessment and reflection. That is in itself, a skill. Also, the nature of such courses is competency-based, practical and vocational in nature and not necessarily academic.

I often lean on my experience in sports and I know that the best athlete may not be the best coaches. Of course, if you are a practitioner, of course if you are great at what you do, you are able to impart passion and ignite a fire to it to enable your students, your charges, your athletes to go further and pursue this.

But let us be very clear, that when you are in the training ground, when you are at the pool or the court, you are there to teach, you are there to coach and having the right skills is of utmost importance.

In conclusion, I believe the SkillsFuture movement will continue to be an essential part of lifelong education and strengthen the competitiveness of Singapore's workforce. I believe the proposed amendments to the Bill will safeguard not just Singaporeans but the reputation and brand of Singapore and its training and education system.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Sharael Taha.

3.08 pm

**Mr Sharael Taha (Pasir Ris-Punggol):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine, US-China tensions, China's trajectory as it recovers from COVID-19, the likelihood of recessions in US and EU, political instability in other countries and many more macroeconomic trends, cast uncertainties on the economy's prospects for the short-to-medium term.

Despite these uncertainties, there remains opportunities, provided we continue to stay united and demonstrate to the world that Singapore remains an open, safe, stable and reliable country and most importantly possess a capable and relevant workforce so that we can continue to attract investments and, as a result, have good jobs for our people. That has been and continues to be Singapore's formula for success. However, the global competition for investment is intensifying and we must continue to upskill and reskill ourselves to strengthen our value proposition and remain relevant to the world.

Beyond the short-to-medium term macroeconomic challenges, the need to upskill and reskill is nothing new for Singapore. This has been integral for our success and will continue to be a cornerstone of our economic strategy as we continue to ensure that we remain relevant to the world by having the right skillsets that the world requires.

Education should be understood broadly and not stop prematurely at the end of a person's schooling life. Nor should education be defined solely within the confines of a school. Continuous education must constantly prepare Singapore's workers for future workplace demands which is evolving very rapidly.

I am pleased that we remain committed to our Continuing Education and Training (CET) Masterplan and I am happy to hear from Minister Chan that our education system and MOE will "move beyond the first 15 years of education to the next 50 years" as mentioned in the Straits Times last Friday.

Furthermore, MOE has extended its portfolio to include not only classroom learning, but more importantly, lifelong learning. Since the Skills Development Levy Act in 1979 and the establishment of Skill Development fund, we have shown and proved that in Singapore, we remain committed to training our workforce and have been improving and developing how we continuously train and upskill our workforce; including the passing of the SkillsFuture Singapore Agency Act 2016 which established the SkillsFuture Singapore Agency and the topping up of SkillsFuture credit during the COVID-19 period.

SkillsFuture is a key enabler in developing the culture, infrastructure and platform for continuous education and learning. SkillsFuture also represents a repository of resource for our workforce to attain mastery of skills and it must remain so.

Education must be more than just having the right paper qualification. We must strive to achieve excellence through continuous knowledge acquisition and application, and building relevant experience required in the industries.

For our workforce to continuously develop, attain skills mastery and remain nimble to take advantage of new opportunities and also to plug skills gap around the world, SkillsFuture must aspire to have the participation of as many people in our workforce as possible. This is only possible through collaboration with education and training partners.

Hence, I am glad to hear from Minister Chan in the November Parliamentary Sitting that since the introduction of SkillsFuture, 840,000 Singapore citizens have utilised their SkillsFuture Credit (SFC). However, that is only 30% of eligible Singaporeans. Worryingly, the percentage of people who use SFC is highest among those in their 30s and it reduces among those in their 40s and 50s and older.

And as we move towards increasing the participation rate in developing skills and improving the effectiveness and the value of training, the underlying process of disbursing grants, collecting levies and onboarding the support of trusted education and training partners must be simple to encourage participation yet robust to prevent any abuse.

Unfortunately, some have taken the opportunity to abuse the funding arrangements such as the case of the husband and wife masterminds, Ng Cheng Hwee and Lee Lai Leng, who were behind the \$40 million SkillsFuture scam by submitting and forging falsified documents between May and August 2017. Hence, I stand in support of this Bill to strengthen the regulatory powers of SkillsFuture against fraud and abuse of its incentives and grants.

However, I have three clarifications for the Minister.

Firstly, given that there have been a few cases on SSG such as the total of \$42 million fraudulent claims, AGO's finding on overpayment and the shortfall of outstanding Skills Development Levy, how can we improve and enhance governance such that there are no leaks and similar incidents do not occur?

Secondly, how do we increase the participation rate of utilising SkillsFuture for eligible Singaporeans?

And lastly, how do we improve the training efficacy and assess SkillsFuture's success in meeting its strategic goals?

Allow me to elaborate on these three points.

Firstly, given the cases of fraud, overpayment and shortfall in collecting Skills Development Levy (SDL), what were the lessons learnt from all these cases and have they been implemented and if not, what is the timeframe for implementation?

For example, the overpayments for SkillsFuture Singapore is attributed to errors in manual processing and SSG has shared that it is taking measures to reduce reliance on declarations and manual processing. Has this been implemented? And if not, what is the implementation plan?

Has SSG completed the process of recovering the outstanding SDL owed by companies and how do we prevent similar occurrences? Given this Bill will give SSG greater enforcement powers, will SSG be resourced with additional staff with the right skillset to implement effective enforcement? I also note that the Bill indicates extra financial expenditure, what is the expected increase in operating cost?

Secondly, how can we boost the participation rate of eligible Singaporeans in utilising their SkillsFuture to more than 30%? Based on data shared by Minister Chan in the November Sitting, what is more worrying is the decreased rate of participation as age increase. Are there plans to encourage more of our mature workers to participate in upskilling and retraining? Possibly, one opportunity is to encourage our mature workers to transit to a second career to be trainers and impart their experience to the rest of the workforce.

Lastly, how do we increase the effectiveness of training for the courses supported by SkillsFuture? On quality of training, I do note from the website that there are many training partners. From just a search between "A" and "C" alone, there are already 60 training partners. How do we ensure the quality of training is preserved, to which I agree with what our fellow colleague Mr Mark Chay has mentioned earlier. Beyond the accreditation of the instructor, are the training partners regularly audited too?

On effectiveness of training, can SSG considering using outcome-based course subsidies? Can we have a tiered course subsidy system where the full subsidy is only granted when the individual or organisation can show proof that they have implemented or applied what was learnt during the course.

For example, for the Implementing Lean Sigma course, which is a course on productivity, can the full subsidy be given only after the individual or company show that they have delivered projects to improve their productivity?

And on simplicity, there is a SSG website, SkillsFuture website, MySkillsFuture portal, SSG-WSG website. As an end-user, the landscape can be very confusing. Can this be simplified to be more customer-centric similar to the "Support-Go-Where" portal that provides the inter-agency support available for individuals? Mr Speaker, in Malay, please.

*(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).]* Skillsfuture is important in promoting lifelong learning amongst Singaporeans. Since its launch in 2015, more than 840,000 Singaporeans have used their SkillsFuture credits to take up skills upgrading courses. However, this figure represents only 30% of those eligible. This means that 70% of eligible Singaporeans have yet to use their SkillsFuture credits. What is more worrisome, its utilisation is highest among the younger ones, compared to those who are 40 years and above.

How can we boost the participation rate from the current 30%? As it is essential that older workers upgrade their skills, how can we encourage more mature workers to participate in the SkillsFuture programmes?

Lastly, how can we enhance the effectiveness of training in SkillsFuture courses? We must ensure that the quality of training is not affected, even as we increase the amount being offered. I am also aware that Singaporeans who wish to participate in these courses must visit various websites, such as SkillsFuture, My SkillsFuture, SSG-WSG sites, and this can cause some confusion. Perhaps, SSG can consolidate these websites into one website such as the "Support-Go-Where" portal to facilitate participation in SkillsFuture.

*(In English):* Notwithstanding the clarification above, I stand in support of the Bill to enhance the regulatory powers of SkillsFuture against fraud and abuse of its incentives and grants.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Don Wee.

3.18 pm

**Mr Don Wee (Chua Chu Kang):** Mr Speaker, Sir, in Mandarin.

*(In Mandarin): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).]* Lifelong learning is now an integral part of our social compact in Singapore. Through continuous education, our people are staying updated with the relevant knowledge and skillsets. This enables us to be competitive in employment and contribute meaningfully to our families and community.

SkillsFuture plays an important role in our Continuing Education and Training (CET) landscape. In MySkillsFuture portal, these available courses and training providers are grouped by industries and areas of training. Learners can register for courses and claim SkillsFuture Credits via this website. Most assume that the courses offered on this website have been vetted and are recognised by the Government. Otherwise, why would the Government permit Government funds to be used on these programmes?

*(In English):* Hence, I would like to seek clarifications regarding circumstances in which training providers falsely indicate that their courses are recognised by the Government. How can we provide greater clarity on the validity and quality of these courses? Does the Ministry plan to make the portal even simpler and more straightforward, so that the public can check for accredited training providers easily? Are there any guidelines to help the training providers promote their programmes?

Will the Ministry exert greater control over where such courses are offered, in addition to the website? In addition, how will the Ministry familiarise Singaporeans with Industry Transformation Maps so that Singaporeans will know which relevant certified courses to enrol in?

I have another concern regarding training companies. Has the Government received complaints about training providers using IT gadgets to bait elderly Singaporeans to sign up for IT courses? When they turn up on the day of the courses, they are asked to click on a few buttons and leave the training venues shortly after signing the attendance sheets, without learning what the courses promised to offer. In other words, does the Act prohibit the training providers from offering irrelevant items to attract course participants, even though such courses are funded by SSG?

I have also received feedback about seniors being recruited to attend courses, especially the IT-related ones, even though they do not have the required language or foundation subject knowledge to understand the training materials. Do SSG's authorised inspectors and persons contact the participants and check on the learning outcomes? How does SSG check on the courses which are conducted virtually, if any? Such random checks will deter training providers from making fraudulent representations about participants passing courses when they had failed.

If the Bill is passed, can the persons convicted of the offences be blacklisted and barred from setting up or financing other training operators for a minimum period of time?

Will the Ministry share how many suspension notices have been issued against errant training operators since 2016?

How does Government prevent scammers from posing as accredited training providers, which can be found on SkillsFuture's online portal and obtain personal information from potential applicants?

The Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) are credible training providers. But are we relying too much on these IHLs? How does the Government encourage credible professionals to become SkillsFuture's certified trainers? Private sector players maybe more updated and relevant as they can be more nimble and quicker to customise programmes for Singaporeans.

Gone are the days when Universities were the main authority on one's qualifications for a job. Tech companies must continue to drive movement where one's proficiency in a particular software leads to a new career opportunity. Smaller training providers may be more flexible than the conventional IHLs when customising training syllabus.

To raise the quality of adult training and education in Singapore, SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) sets out Adult Educators (AE) Qualifications Requirements that apply to training providers providing SSG-funded certifiable courses. Can SkillsFuture work with the respective sector agencies, like the Singapore Accountancy Commission, to groom more individual trainers, like the Chartered Accountants, lawyers and engineers who will advertise their courses responsibly?

Finally, may I request that the more experienced adult educators be granted more credit exemptions for the Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) Advanced Certificate in Learning and Performance (ACLP) modules from the Institute for Adult Learning. Thank you. I support the Bill.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Louis Ng.

3.23 pm

**Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon):** Sir, these two Bills will consolidate enforcement powers and offences under the SkillsFuture Singapore Agency Act, regulate abusive funding arrangements as well as offences relating to false or misleading advertising and empower the SkillsFuture Singapore Agency (SSG) to direct refunds for cancelled courses. This will create a centralised system and better support career development for all Singaporeans.

I have three points of clarification on both Bills.

My first point is on the difficulty in determining the competencies, expertise or skills to be advanced by a course or programme. The new section 57E amended by the SSG Bill will make it an offence to publish false or misleading advertising. This includes advertising on the curriculum, modules or subjects to be covered or competencies, expertise or skills that will be advanced. There are good faith reasons for why curriculum, modules or subjects to be covered may change after advertising for a course has started. The subject matter may have evolved, or the curriculum may need to adapt to the interests and proficiency of the class. The competencies, expertise or skills that a course actually succeeds in advancing may also be fairly subjective.

Can Minister share if the Ministry intends to proactively monitor advertising by course providers? Or will the Ministry rely on complaints by the public to identify potentially false or misleading advertisements before intervening?

Can Minister also share if the Ministry will provide guidance to course providers on best practices on advertising and in managing communications with participants especially on changes in course content to avoid any dispute over false advertising in the first place?

My second point is on identifying fraudulent claims at an earlier stage.

In the case of *Public Prosecutor vs Ng Cheng Kwee*, the Prosecution described most of the fraudulent claims as having been "automatically approved by SSG" and that only "a small proportion of the claims were flagged for a manual check".

Following this incident of fraud which occurred in 2017, the SSG announced in 2018 that it has strengthened its fraud detection systems using data analytics. This follows the recommendations of an inter-agency task force set up to review SSG's fraud mitigation capabilities.

Given that it has been four years since these systems were introduced, can the Ministry share how it is monitoring the effectiveness of these fraud detection systems? Can the Ministry also provide an update on how effective these systems have been?

My final point is on the incorporation of a deferred payment model.

The Lambda School in California teaches information technology skills online and charges no tuition fees. Instead, students can agree to pay a percentage of their income after they are employed, and only if they are making more than US\$50,000 a year in the first five years. The deal is that students pay back 17% of their income from their first two years of work after, if earnings exceed US\$50,000 a year, with a cap of US\$30,000 of fees they pay in total. Otherwise, students also have the option of paying US\$20,000 in tuition upfront and keeping their future income. The incentive structure is clear. If the training institute does not impart transferable knowledge to trainees that results in a successful outcome, the institute will not benefit.

Can Minister share if the Ministry has looked into such a deferred payment model for certain SkillsFuture courses? If so, what are the Ministry's findings on the usefulness of such a model in Singapore Sir, notwithstanding these clarifications, I stand in support of the Bill.

**Mr Speaker:** Dr Wan Rizal.

3.27 pm

**Dr Wan Rizal (Jalan Besar):** Mr Speaker, as an educator, I believe strongly in the value of lifelong learning. I have seen first-hand the transformative power of education and I believe that everyone should have the opportunity to continue learning and growing.

This is why I rise in support of the two Bills, which aim to strengthen the regulatory powers of SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) to prevent fraud and abuse of its incentives and funds but, above all, protect lifelong learners and their interests.

One of the key amendments in these Bills is the prescription of new offences related to "abusive funding arrangements" and the power for SSG to recover its funds or take action against false advertisements. This will help to deter training providers from trying to abuse SSG's incentives and funds and ensure that the money provided by SSG is being used in a way that supports lifelong learning and the growth of individuals.

In addition, the amendment will allow SSG to appoint authorised persons and inspectors who would have greater investigative power and conduct enforcement actions. This will help ensure adequate oversight and accountability but, importantly, put errant training providers to task.

However, there are a couple of concerns about the amendments. One concern is that the amendments may disproportionately affect small businesses and organisations, as they may not have the resources to defend themselves against enforcement actions. This could lead to an unfair distribution of the burden of compliance and discourage small businesses and organisations from participating in SSG's programmes.

Small businesses and organisations are vital for driving innovation and economic growth. Additionally, it could indirectly impact students, such as reduced access to certain courses or programmes or increased cost.

Another concern is the need for clarity, transparency and accountability in the enforcement process. Without adequate oversight and clear guidelines on how enforcement actions will be carried out, there is a risk that SSG's powers may be perceived as misused or abused. This could lead to a lack of trust in the system and discourage people from participating in the SSG's programmes.

To address these concerns, there are a few suggestions for the Ministry to consider.

The first would be to clarify the criteria and definition that SSG will use to determine whether a funding arrangement is abusive. This could help ensure that the powers given to SSG are being used fairly and consistently and reduce the risk of abuse by providing clear guidance on what constitutes an abusive funding arrangement.

Another suggestion would be to provide more oversight and accountability in the enforcement process. This could be achieved through the establishment of an independent body that is responsible for reviewing and approving enforcement actions, as well as providing guidance as how they should be carried out. This would provide an independent and impartial source of oversight and help to build trust in the system.

Finally, it would be helpful to provide more guidance and support for small businesses and organisations that may be affected by these amendments. This could include providing legal assistance or educational resources to help them understand and comply with the new rules. Sir, may I conclude in Malay, please.

*(In Malay):* [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] In conclusion, the proposed amendments to the SSG Act and SDL Act are necessary to address fraud and abuse of the SSG funding scheme.

However, it is important for SSG to ensure that these amendments are implemented in a fair and transparent manner and take into account the concerns and needs of small businesses. By addressing these issues, SSG can help to ensure that its funding schemes are used effectively and efficiently to support the skills development of Singaporeans.

Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to encourage everyone who have not used their Skills Future credits to start considering courses that they may be interested in, be it to upgrade themselves or their skills.

If this Bill is passed, I hope it will give greater confidence to Singaporeans and reduce any doubts about registering for a course to upgrade themselves.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Melvin Yong.

3.32 pm

**Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye (Radin Mas):** Mr Speaker, I stand in support of the two Bills which seek to strengthen the regulatory powers of the SkillsFuture Singapore Agency (SSG) to deter the abuse and misrepresentation of SSG funding and schemes. However, I have a few questions and some suggestions.

In a recent speech at the Singapore Perspectives 2023 Conference, the Minister for Education highlighted how we needed to better support Singaporeans in their lifelong learning ambitions. I cannot agree more. Lifelong learning ensures that our workforce stays productive, adapts to fast-changing global and industrial changes and becomes more resilient in both employment and employability.

Singapore's movement towards lifelong learning must be underpinned by assurance that our training institutions are credible. I therefore support the proposals in the Bills to strengthen SSG's funding and schemes which will serve to enhance the credibility of adult learning programmes as a whole.

However, given the enhanced powers of SSG officers to enter premises, search for and seize documents, and to conduct interviews, I would like to ask if the proposed new powers are to be given to all SSG officers. What type of training would be provided to those officers who are assigned these powers, and what sort of safeguards will be put in place to ensure that these new powers will be used appropriately and not be abused?

When entering a premise against the will of the premise owners, the officers may face hostile resistance. Officers should therefore be adequately trained to exercise their new powers and the requisite rules of engagement.

Mr Speaker, beyond strengthening our regulatory framework to deter fraud, we also need to ensure that SSG-funded courses adequately support Singaporeans' changing aspirations. I would like to provide two suggestions: (a) regularly review and remove courses and training providers that have poor take-up rates and poor reviews; and (b) to on-board courses that support Singaporeans who work remotely.

Let me elaborate. First, we need to regularly review and remove courses that have poor enrolment figures to free up funding for courses that Singaporeans actually need and want. We should also regularly review training providers for the conduct of their SSG-funded courses and the effectiveness of these courses.

I would like to ask how often are SSG-funded courses subject to review. What is the average number of courses that had their funding status removed due to poor sign-ups? Does SSG require and take into consideration participants' post-course feedback?

I feel that only by holding courses and training providers to a high bar can we attract more Singaporeans to use their SkillsFuture Credits purposefully for training.

Sir, we also need to change the way we fund courses to better support Singaporeans who work remotely. The Work-From-Anywhere trend has meant that more Singaporeans are working remotely even if the work is done for a local company. We should move away from funding classes that are held in-person and explore extending more funding to online courses. Let us support all Singaporeans, regardless of where they are based in their lifelong learning journey.

Sir, the proposed amendments will help in deterring abuse and misrepresentation of SSG funding and schemes. As we work to improve the governance of our lifelong learning funding, we should also ensure that we support the changing aspirations of Singaporeans, as we continue to encourage every Singaporean to be a lifelong learner. With that, I support the two Bills.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Shawn Huang.

3.36 pm

**Mr Shawn Huang Wei Zhong (Jurong):** Mr Speaker, in 2021, over 247,000 Singaporeans utilised their SkillsFuture Credits, up from 188,000 in 2020. Thus far, it has served Singaporeans well in helping individuals make well-informed choices in education, training and in their careers. Ongoing efforts in maintaining and developing a high-quality education and training system ensure a responsive and relevant resource for the industry and its future developments.

This system must be a platform that can give employers confidence that the skills and training are practical and recognised by the industry, becoming a trusted system for acquiring skills and mastery of capabilities.

Above all, it must foster a culture that supports and celebrates lifelong learning. Why do we do this? The main objective is to provide Singaporeans with opportunities to develop their fullest potential throughout their life, regardless of their starting point.

And no matter at which phase in life, one will have access to the resources to attain the skills and training required to be more effective at work and progress further in their career, for some, a less difficult transition into a new industry.



The integrity, credibility and quality of the system underpin these core tenets. Of late, the rise of abuse cases has threatened these.

We have heard about examples of such abuse. We have training providers falsely indicating that the Government recognises their courses. We have bogus claims being submitted for courses that were not conducted. We have multiple companies where claims were submitted to SSG for employees whose only role and job was to attend SSG-funded courses. These are growing concerns, and it affects the credibility SkillsFuture in Singapore.

Therefore, it is timely to review the SSG Act to uphold the integrity and the reputation of SkillsFuture.

I have a few questions for the Minister. First, how are the penalties ascertained, and how will they evolve?

Given the expanded scope, how do we ensure that the Statutory Board can adhere to high standards of conduct? How does SSG plan to raise, train and sustain this capability? Are there any precedents of such expanded powers in other Government Statutory Boards?

Whilst under investigation, will there be powers to impose or lift any interim restrictions imposed on the companies or individuals? How do we ensure the process is swift and reasonable during the investigation to avoid unnecessary disruptions? Mr Speaker, I support the Bills.

**Mr Speaker:** Minister of State Gan Siow Huang.

3.40 pm

**The Minister of State for Education (Ms Gan Siow Huang):** Mr Speaker, let me begin by thanking Members for their views and support for the SkillsFuture Singapore Agency (Amendment) Bill and the Skills Development Levy (Amendment) Bill.

The various points raised reflect our common interest in strengthening the SkillsFuture movement and equipping Singaporeans with the skills to seize the opportunities ahead.

I would also like to thank Members for their various suggestions on matters such as tapping more on private training providers and companies for upskilling, accreditation of adult educators, types of training to support and so on. We will continually review our policies and take Members' suggestions into consideration.

I will not be addressing them today as they are not directly related to the Bills. I invite Members who would like to have a full reply on these issues to file Parliamentary Questions, so that we can address them properly.

Let me now turn to the comments related to the two Bills which cover three broad areas. First, why there is a need for these amendments? Second, how the amendments will be operationalised, including how the offence and enforcement provisions will work in practice? Third, whether the penalties and powers of SSG are appropriately calibrated, and whether there are adequate safeguards against abuse?

I will address each of these in turn.

Mr Yip Hon Weng and several Members talked about the importance of giving Singaporeans the confidence to participate in training programmes of good quality, while Assoc Prof Jamus Lim asked whether the amendments are born out of an abundance of caution.

Over the years, the SkillsFuture movement has been growing steadily in strength. In 2021, about 660,000 individuals and 24,000 enterprises participated in and benefited from SSG-supported programmes. Companies have also leaned forward to drive skills development, with 25 SkillsFuture Queen Bee companies partnering SSG to uplift skills in their respective sectors.

There are now close to 1,000 training providers, providing about 25,000 courses supported by SSG.

We are continuously strengthening the quality of the Continuing Education and Training (CET) ecosystem in Singapore. The amendments that we are making today will equip SSG with the necessary powers to take action against errant parties who mislead others or abuse SSG's funding system. I would characterise them as part of our ongoing efforts to enhance our system, which has grown steadily.

Faced with a wide array of training programmes, Ms Denise Phua, Mr Yip Hon Weng, Mr Don Wee and Mr Melvin Yong have asked about how the public can verify the authenticity of programmes and provide feedback to raise the quality of the courses. The list of SSG-supported courses can be found on the MySkillsFuture portal and can serve as a reference for members of the public. Feedback on SSG-funded courses is also taken seriously. Trainees who have undergone training programmes are invited to submit their post-course feedback via the Training Quality and Outcome Measurement, or TRAQOM survey. The results go toward SSG's evaluation of programmes.

The trainees' feedback will also reflect as ratings on the course listing within the portal. Through this effort, we enable learners, companies and bona fide training providers to have greater confidence to participate fully in the SkillsFuture movement.

While SSG uses a range of tools to identify advertisements that could be false or misleading, members of the public may contact SSG directly as well if they have doubts about the claims made about SSG-funded programmes. I urge learners to take ownership of their learning journey, make good use of the available channels to give feedback to SSG on their learning and also point out suspect practices so that collectively we can strengthen our CET ecosystem.



Mr Yip Hon Weng and Mr Sharael Taha asked whether the amendments we are making today will address the underpayment of the SDL owed to SSG. To clarify, this set of amendments seeks to strengthen SSG's legislative levers and enforcement powers against abuses of SSG's funding system. As for recovering underpayment of the SDL which I had previously touched on in Parliament, SSG has contacted all affected employers to reconcile the variances and is in the process of recovering the underpayments. It has also reviewed its processes to resolve future payment issues in a more scalable and timely manner.

Mr Sharael Taha also asked about the overpayment of grants. SSG's plans to streamline its business rules and use more data-at-source verifications and systems-enabled checks, to avoid future lapses, are progressively being implemented.

Allow me to now turn to questions about how the amendments, such as the offence provisions, will be operationalised. Mr Patrick Tay asked whether taking legal action can be the last resort. SSG appreciates that there are administrative errors and missed deadlines that can occur from time to time. These are not regarded as offences, but areas of improvement to be worked on.

Mr Yip Hon Weng asked about the outcome of the 93 training providers that SSG had taken action against in 2021. Actually, the majority of these cases were related to breaches of SSG's funding terms and conditions, such as failing to submit the required annual returns to SSG. Since these are administrative lapses, most of the 93 training providers were suspended from SSG funding for six months, without further repercussions.

In cases such as the publication or distribution of misleading advertisements, opportunity will be given for the errant party to take corrective action, for example, to take down or correct the advertisement. However, if the facts of a case constitute an offence, or if there are recalcitrant persons who refuse to comply with SSG's directions, SSG will have to refer the case to AGC to determine the next course of action.

Ms Denise Phua asked who would be held liable for offences. Where the person who commits an offence is an entity, the existing SSG Act and SDL Act already contain provisions which explain the circumstances in which individuals can also be liable for the same offence committed by an entity. For example, under section 61 of the SSG Act, a director or manager of the company who conspired with others to effect the commission of the offence, may also be guilty of the same offence as the company.

Ms Denise Phua asked whether the onus to ensure accuracy is on the advertising agency or the training provider. The training provider may be held liable if the Court ascertains that the training provider had known or ought to reasonably have known that the advertisement is false or misleading or has been reckless as to whether the advertisement is false or misleading.

Mr Mark Chay asked whether the definition of advertisements can include what is communicated to potential learners at roadshows. The provision covers advertising materials that are distributed at roadshows.

Mr Yip Hon Weng asked about the presumption of intention. As I mentioned in the opening speech, there are three elements to the offence of entering into or facilitating an abusive funding arrangement. First, the offenders must have entered into or facilitated an abusive funding arrangement. Second, they must have known, or have had reason to believe, that the funding arrangement is abusive in nature. And third, they must have entered into or facilitated the abusive funding arrangement with the intention to dishonestly or fraudulently induce SSG to provide funding to them, or to someone else.

It is only when the first two elements are present and when it is proven that the person has taken steps to help the person or someone else obtain funding from SSG, that the statutory presumption comes into effect to put the onus on the person charged with the offence to demonstrate that he did not have dishonest or fraudulent intentions. It is therefore open to the person to rebut the presumption. The Court will consider all the evidence in deciding whether there is intent and whether all the other elements of the offence are present.

I will also add that a statutory presumption is not novel and is also found in other similar offences, such as the offence of promoting abusive funding arrangements through the Productivity and Innovation Credit Scheme.

Several members highlighted the need to clearly communicate the changes to training providers. I agree. SSG has existing channels of communications with training providers, including circulars, engagements and feedback channels. SSG intends to have dedicated sessions to explain to training providers the intent and substance of the amendments, and engage them on any clarifications they might have. We will do our best to communicate these changes, but the onus rests with training providers to ensure that they, their partners and their staff adhere to the law.

Mr Patrick Tay asked how long it would take for SSG to complete investigations for possible offences. The length of investigation depends on the scope, complexity of the issue and the level of cooperation received by the involved parties in the investigation. Nonetheless, I assure Members that SSG will take swift and timely action in its investigations. Following the commencement of the Amendments, SSG will also review the offences to see which ones may be compoundable.

On whether recalcitrant companies will be barred or blacklisted, SSG takes a serious view of SSG-funded training providers that do not comply with prevailing regulations. The enforcement actions taken against these errant training providers are published on the Training Partners Gateway portal today, including suspension and termination.

Ms Denise Phua and Mr Sharael Taha asked about the extra financial expenditure arising from the Amendments. Together with MOE, SSG evaluates its manpower and resourcing requirements on a regular basis to ensure that it is adequately resourced. We will consider the Amendments as part of this regular review and ensure that SSG is adequately resourced.

Assoc Prof Jamus Lim said that the amendments seem to allow for the wrongly obtained funds recovered by SSG to be channelled towards funding its operational costs and that this could create potentially perverse incentives for over-zealous regulation and possible abuse. Let me clarify that any recovered funds would not be channelled towards SSG's operating costs. They would be paid back to the funds they were drawn from so that they can be used for the intended purpose, which is to support upskilling efforts.

Mr Don Wee asked whether SSG would obtain feedback from participants on learning outcomes during investigations. As I mentioned earlier, SSG collects feedback on learning outcomes comprehensively and also regularly, from trainees via post-training surveys; immediately after the course is completed, and six months after course completion. Such feedback is to monitor quality and guide the CET sector on how we can improve. The survey is not done in conjunction with investigations and questions are not designed with the intent of aiding investigations into abuse of SSG's funding. However, I will not preclude investigators using such feedback, or indeed any other available data, if they are relevant to the cases.

Let me now address the queries regarding penalties, powers and safeguards. Mr Mark Chay and several Members asked about SSG-appointed inspectors, including whether their powers are appropriate, whether there are safeguards to prevent abuse of power and whether the inspectors have the necessary capabilities to carry out their work.

I would like to reassure Members that we have calibrated the powers appropriately. Broadly, the principle is that investigative powers should be commensurate with the nature of the offences. The enhanced investigative powers in the SSG Act are similar to those that SSG currently has and exercises to investigate offences under the Private Education Act.

There is a robust process to appoint only a selected group of SSG officers as inspectors to exercise powers to investigate offences and their tenure will be subject to regular review. To ensure that inspectors have the necessary and up-to-date skills, they undergo capability development programmes regularly. SSG officers are trained to leverage technologies and use tools such as data analytics to spot anomalous patterns in support of the enforcement work. SSG also participates in the regular inter-agency forum where public agencies such as the Police share best practices and experiences. Now, even the inspectors need upskilling.

The legislative amendments include safeguards against the abuse of these powers. For instance, an inspector must produce the identification card issued by SSG before they can exercise powers under the Act. In addition, powers to require the attendance of a person by written order can only be exercised if the inspector has information that the person appears to be acquainted with the case. Inspectors who abused their powers would be subjected to disciplinary action.

The differentiation of roles between authorised persons and inspectors, which Mr Yip Hon Weng asked about, is another safeguard to prevent abuse of power. The role of authorised persons is to verify information provided by persons who apply for funding from SSG and whether the funds obtained have been properly applied. On the other hand, inspectors require stronger powers as their role is to investigate offences. Because their roles are different, we have differentiated the powers that they can exercise.

Ms Denise Phua asked whether inspectors can access information stored in the cloud. For the purpose of investigating an offence under the SSG Act, inspectors have the powers to require any person to provide or grant access, without charge, to electronic documents.

Mr Shawn Huang and Ms Denise Phua asked about how penalties are ascertained and whether they are commensurate with the offences. The penalties will be decided by the Court, within the limits stipulated in the Bill. As for how the limits are determined, we have referenced the penalties for offences in other Acts to ensure that the penalties in the Bill are appropriate and proportionate.

Finally, Dr Wan Rizal raised the suggestion of having an independent body to review and approve enforcement actions. To be clear, it is the Court that determines whether to convict a person of the offence and the penalties to be imposed on a convicted person. As for other enforcement actions that SSG can take, such as taking down a false advertisement, we assess that it is not necessary to have an independent body.

Over the years, we have taken concrete steps to enhance the relevance and quality of adult training and education in Singapore. Confidence and trust in the training ecosystem have grown, with more individuals participating in upskilling and more companies, trade associations, sector agencies and unions leaning forward to partner SSG to drive skills development in Singapore.

We must and will continue on this path to strengthen our lifelong learning system, involve industry more closely and encourage innovation, and quality in our training. As the Government continues to ramp up our investments in SkillsFuture and prepare for the future economy, it is important for us to strengthen SSG's legislative levers so as to deter errant behaviour as well as to preserve public confidence and trust in the training system.

The two Bills will help enable us to do so in three main ways. First, by allowing SSG to take legal action against errant parties and achieve a stronger deterrence effect. Second, by protecting learners from being misled into courses through false or misleading advertisements. Third, by enabling the timely and proper restitution of public funds, which ensures that investments from all our stakeholders be it the Government, individual learners, or employers, can be put to good use.

My final point is that building a strong continuing education and training ecosystem is a shared responsibility with learners, enterprises, training providers and the Government. I would like to thank the team in SSG for its perseverance and hard work. Through partnerships with the stakeholders, I am confident that we can collectively strengthen the SkillsFuture movement and enable more Singaporeans to acquire the skills that they need, to seize the opportunities ahead.

With this, Mr Speaker, I hope that I have addressed Members' questions and suggestions. And with your permission, I beg to move.

**Mr Speaker:** Are there any clarifications? None.

Question put, and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time and committed to a Committee of the whole House.

The House immediately resolved itself into a Committee on the Bill. – [Ms Gan Siow Huang].

Bill considered in Committee; reported without amendment; read a Third time and passed.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I propose to take a break now. I suspend the Sitting and will take the Chair at 4.25 pm.

*Sitting accordingly suspended*

*at 4.02 pm until 4.25 pm.*

*Sitting resumed at 4.25 pm.*

**[Deputy Speaker (Ms Jessica Tan Soon Neo) in the Chair]  
SKILLS DEVELOPMENT LEVY (AMENDMENT) BILL**

Order for Second Reading read.

4.25 pm

**The Minister of State for Education (Ms Gan Siow Huang) (for the Minister for Education):** Mdm Deputy Speaker, on behalf of the Minister for Education, I beg to move "That the Bill be read a Second time."

The Skills Development Levy (Amendment) Bill is linked to the previous Bill in our Order Paper, SkillsFuture Singapore Agency (Amendment) Bill 2022. In the debate we have just had on that Bill, I have explained the amendments proposed in both Bills. Members have already raised their questions and expressed their views on both Bills during the earlier debate, although they are still welcomed to do so now, if there are any additional questions or views. Mdm Deputy Speaker, I beg to move.

Question put, and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time and committed to a Committee of the whole House.

The House immediately resolved itself into a Committee on the Bill. – [Ms Gan Siow Huang].

Bill considered in Committee; reported without amendment; read a Third time and passed.

**HOUSING AND DEVELOPMENT (AMENDMENT) BILL**

Order for Second Reading read.

4.28 pm

**The Senior Minister of State for National Development (Ms Sim Ann) (for the Minister for National Development):** Mdm Deputy Speaker, on the behalf of the Minister for National Development, I beg to move "That the Bill be now read a Second time."

Madam, this Bill seeks to amend the Housing and Development Act in three areas. First, it will extend existing polling provisions for HDB's upgrading programmes to also cover upgrading works at HDB commercial sites carried out under the Revitalisation of Shops Scheme, or in short, the ROS Scheme. Second, it removes the requirement for the date of lodgement or date of rescission to be stated in HDB's notice served under Section 59(2) to 59(4). In place of this, provisions have been introduced to prevent the Board from lodging the instrument of vesting or rescinding the agreement for a lease until after the expiry of the period during which the purchaser, personal representatives or any interested persons may appeal to the Minister.

Lastly, it facilitates HDB's operationalisation of its service of notices via additional options, such as email.

HDB shops play important social and economic roles in our neighbourhoods. They provide affordable and convenient essential goods and services to residents. They also form the social glue within a community. HDB shops and shopkeepers that have been serving their communities for a long time contribute not only to local employment, but also add to the heritage and character of our heartlands.

HDB recently partnered with EnterpriseSG to undertake the Heartlands Shops Study, to examine the social and economic value of HDB shops for various stakeholders such as residents, business owners, workers and merchants' associations. Over 2,800 stakeholders were engaged. The key findings of the study are:

First, residents hope that we can improve trade mix in HDB shops to keep up with the changing needs of the local community and make the range of goods and services more interesting and diverse. Some also suggested that heartland shops serve as incubators for local entrepreneurs who are just starting out.

Second, residents feel that heartland shops play a special role in fostering a more inclusive community. For instance, HDB shops provide essential products and services at affordable prices and provide convenience to local residents, including older residents who may not be able to travel far.

Third, many respondents say that HDB shops contribute to the character and heritage of their neighbourhoods. Long-serving shopkeepers who know their customers well bring a sense of comfort and constancy to residents.

Given the important role the heartland shops play in our HDB estates, the Government has been reviewing how to support our heartland merchants better.

In the past one to two years, the Heartland Digitalisation and Revitalisation Committee (HDRC), co-chaired by Minister of State Low Yen Ling and myself, supported heartland merchants in advancing their digitalisation efforts and growing revenue streams. The HDRC worked with agencies to introduce initiatives such as Heartlands Go Digital to accelerate the adoption of digital solutions and Visual Merchandising to improve heartland shopfront aesthetics to attract customers.

Events were also organised to attract footfall. For example, the three-month long Heartlands Festival 2021, which ran from November 2021 to February 2022, resulted in 20% more footfall in participating precincts, and up to 30% more revenue among some shops. The 2022 edition of the Festival commenced last November. Support packages such as rental waivers for our HDB merchants and Community Development Council (CDC) vouchers were also given out to Singaporean households to use at participating hawkers and heartland merchants.

HDB also supports budding entrepreneurs and Social Enterprises through various schemes. For aspiring entrepreneurs, HDB sets aside retail spaces for allocation to start-ups in our shopping centres such as Oasis Terraces and Northshore Plaza. For Social Enterprises and SMEs with inclusive hiring practices, HDB supports them by direct allocating some commercial spaces to these businesses and provide them with a 20% rental discount.

We want to do even more. To enhance the vibrancy of heartland shop precincts, we need to invest in physical upgrading. This is necessary to rejuvenate the heartland shop precincts and improve the shopping experience for customers, while retaining the character and charm of the shops, especially older ones.

HDB introduced the Revitalisation of Shops (ROS) scheme in 2007 to provide funding for upgrading HDB shops and to improve the vibrancy of commercial areas in HDB heartlands. Under the ROS scheme, HDB co-funds common area improvement works at HDB town or neighbourhood centres. Examples of such works include corridor re-tiling, landscaping, installation of roller shutters and vertical blinds. To ensure a common vision and continuity of the revitalisation effort in the long term, shop owners need to co-pay a certain amount of the works and merchants' associations would currently need to gather 100% support from shop owners in the Town or Neighbour Centre before ROS upgrading works can proceed.

MND and HDB have engaged Merchants' Associations and shop owners, and a majority shared that the current ROS requirement to obtain 100% support from benefiting shop owners is too stringent. They are unable to proceed with upgrading even if there is only a small number of shop owners who oppose the upgrading.

For instance, the Marine Parade Merchants' Association had managed to gather 77% support from the shop owners to upgrade Marine Terrace Neighbourhood Centre, but ultimately could not benefit from the scheme as a small minority of shop owners are not in favour of the upgrading. Some merchants' associations have shared with us that some shop owners are less interested in upgrading because they rent out the entire shop unit, rather than operate the shop themselves. For these owners, they may be more interested in the steady rental income stream. Unfortunately, if the upgrading does not proceed, the physical environment around the shop cluster may become dull over time, and it may become less attractive to customers. Instead, a refresh of the physical environment will be a win-win – residents can enjoy a better shopping experience, and shop operators may gain more customers over time.

Therefore, MND has reviewed the ROS and is proposing to adjust the scheme to allow upgrading to proceed if 75% of the shop owners vote in favour of the upgrading. This is aligned to HDB's upgrading programmes for residential flats. For example, the Home Improvement Programme (HIP), can proceed if 75% of residents vote for it. Clauses 4 to 7 of our proposed amendment will extend the same framework to HDB shops.

The majority of the merchants' associations engaged have expressed their support for this move, and based on our experience with residential upgrading, we believe this to be a fair approach that balances the preferences of stakeholders with the need to rejuvenate our heartlands.

Let me elaborate on clauses 4 to 7. Clause 4 amends section 75 of the H&D Act to introduce the definition for "commercial property upgrading works". The term "commercial property" refers to any property permitted to be used for the purpose of carrying out business, and would include units such as retail shops, childcare centres, commercial schools, offices or sports and recreation centres. This amendment will allow upgrading works aimed at attracting footfall and vibrancy to be carried out within and outside of any commercial property in the HDB commercial precinct.

Clause 5 amends section 77 to allow HDB to conduct a poll of the HDB shop owners for the purpose of shop upgrading works within an HDB commercial precinct and allows for the works to proceed when at least 75% of the votes by shop owners are in favour of the upgrading works.

Clause 6 amends section 78 and empowers HDB, upon a successful poll, to recover a portion of the cost of upgrading works from all shop owners and Town Councils, including the minority who did not support the works.

Clause 7 amends section 85(b) to allow the Minister to set out rules to operationalise the above amendments.

In our consultations, many businesses appealed to reduce the current level of co-payment for upgrading costs by shop owners, currently pegged at 20% and capped at \$5,000, to make the ROS Scheme more attractive and benefit a wider community. To support our heartland businesses in their rejuvenation efforts, we are studying further enhancements to the co-payment structure, including lowering the co-payment share of shop owners. We will share more details at the Committee of Supply 2023.

Let me move on to the other administrative amendments.

Today, HDB may serve formal notice to a personal representative or an interested person to vest ownership of a flat back to HDB, if upon death of the owner, his personal representatives fail to take steps to deal with the deceased owner's interest in the flat in the prescribed period. In such an event, HDB would serve a notice to inform the Estate of the deceased and all persons known to have an interest in the property, of HDB's intent to vest the property back to HDB. Before repossessing the flat, sections 59(2) to 59(4) require the notice to include the lodgement or rescission date, that is, the date when vesting to HDB will take effect, so that the person is aware of when the flat will revert to HDB. This serves to give him or her sufficient time to submit any appeals. However, in practice, it is not always possible to state the precise date when the vesting to HDB will take effect as this date is dependent on when the instrument of vesting is registered by the Registrar of Titles. The proposed amendment to clause 3(a) therefore seeks to simplify the notice to exclude the requirement for this date.

However, to retain a period of time during which a person to whom notice is served can still appeal against the vesting, clause 3(b) inserts a new subsection (5A) that will prevent HDB from effecting the vesting of the flat until 28 days after serving notice of the Board's intent to do so. This aligns with the 28-day period which a personal representative or an interested person may appeal to the Minister under section 59(6).

As a similar safeguard to the one in clause 3(b), clause 2 amends section 50 to insert a new subsection (3A) that prevents HDB from repossessing or taking certain steps needed to vest the title or the estate or interest in a flat, house or other living accommodations until 14 days after serving notice of the Board's intent to do so. This aligns with the 14-day period which a purchaser may appeal to the Minister under section 50(4).

Finally, there is a need for HDB's service delivery model to be updated to meet expectations of today's HDB flat owners, and to be more environmentally friendly. Clause 8 repeals and re-enacts section 111 to provide additional option for HDB to serve notices such as via email.

However, these additional options will not be extended to notices or summons with higher gravity. HDB notices or summons pertaining to compulsory acquisition and vesting of title will continue to be served physically.

In conclusion, Mdm Deputy Speaker, this Bill enhances the ROS Scheme by introducing formal polling provisions that I have just described under clauses 4 to 7 and also makes administrative amendments to notice servicing under clauses 2, 3 and 8. Madam, I beg to move.

Question proposed.

**Mdm Deputy Speaker:** Mr Lim Biow Chuan.

4.41 pm

**Mr Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten):** Mdm Deputy Speaker, I spent my entire younger days living in a HDB estate, firstly at a rental flat at Selegie House and then later, my family moved to Rochor Centre.

As a child, I recall going to the neighbourhood shops to buy stationery for school work or to buy drinks and food from the local coffeeshop. I cut my hair at the local barber and my parents would buy their groceries from the provision shop just downstairs. The shopkeepers would usually know you by name, which block that you stay in and the usual items that you buy. If you forget to bring money to pay, they allow you to pay another day.

I still have vivid memories of all these shops in the HDB neighbourhood. For many residents, the shops like coffeeshops, barbers, clinics, opticians, clothing retail shops, provision shops or now known as mini markets, medical halls, stationery shops and so on, all these form part of their growing up experience in the heartlands.

When my children were young, I recall bringing them to the neighbourhood shops at Ang Mo Kio, to walk around and to buy groceries. Before Price Kaki came about, I had already shopped around and found that you can get the best price for infant formula and diapers from an HDB shop.

In November 2022, HDB released the result of the Heartland Shops Study which reveal that seven out of 10 residents surveyed visit the heartland shops at least once a week and about one-third of their monthly expenditure is spent at heartland shops. Many residents surveyed felt that: first, the heartland shops serve as a social space to facilitate interaction among residents; secondly, these shops provide affordable goods and services; and thirdly, they provide jobs for seniors and others who may prefer to work near their homes.

A large majority of residents also felt that the heartland shops play an important role as part of our culture and heritage of Singapore.

Unfortunately, with the introduction of large shopping malls, many of these heartland shops are at risk of disappearing. They face steep competition with the larger players in the retail industry and today, they also face stiff competition from sales done online.

But these shops do provide a livelihood for many local residents. According to HDB, there are a total of about 15,000 shops spread out across town centres, neighbourhood areas and precinct shop clusters that are either rented out by HDB or owned by private operators. From the Heartlands Shops Study survey results, it is clear that the heartland shops provide an important service to residents living in the area.

When the Revitalisation of Shops (ROS) scheme was introduced in 2007 to support shop owners and merchants' associations in order to improve the vibrancy and competitiveness of HDB shops by co-funding the upgrading of common areas and promotional events, I was fully supportive of the scheme as I felt that it would help rejuvenate the neighbourhood and give a big boost to the business of these shops.

Marine Parade Merchants' Association was selected for the one-year ROS pilot scheme in 2007. I was then the Adviser to Marine Parade and was involved in the various meetings held by HDB, the Town Council, the Merchants' Association and the grassroots organisations to work out the details of the pilot ROS scheme. There were no issues with the co-funding for the promotional events. These events help generate more footfall to the heartland shops, and this also meant more business for the businesses in the area.

However, for the upgrading of the common area, there was a major obstacle as the merchants' association is required to garner the 100% support from the shop owners. The reality on the ground is that shops in the HDB precinct come in different sizes and different scales of business. The owner of a large shop space who had rented out his space to say, a supermarket; he has no interest in the upgrading of the common area as he already has a steady source of rental income. The owner of a small retail shop, say optician or a clothing shop; he will feel the strain of paying up to \$5,000 for the upgrading fee without knowing whether the additional expense would result in increased business for his shop. So, without the support of 100% of the shop owners, then any proposal to upgrade the common area is doomed to failure. Even if one single shop owner refuses to sign off, then all the efforts of the merchants' association would be wasted.

So, Marine Parade Merchants' Association tried to secure the ROS funding on several occasions but did not succeed on any one of them. Thus, Mdm Deputy Speaker, I support the proposed amendment to the Act to allow HDB to carry out polling for the upgrading works or ROS and to allow the works to proceed when at least 75% of the shop owners vote in favour of the works. This is similar to the polling process adopted by HDB for the MUP and HIP for residential estates. The majority of the shop owners should not have the upgrading works held back by a few owners who do not wish to contribute to the common good of all the shop owners and businesses.

I have three queries for the Senior Minister of State.

First, section 76 of the Act allows for the definition of precinct to be determined by the Minister. So, for many HDB heartland centres, the shops located at the fringe of the centre are usually considered part of the precinct. However, if the upgrading of the common areas does not benefit them – for example, if the merchants' association wishes to provide a roof shelter or landscaping for the town centre area to make the place more attractive to shoppers, these shop owners at the fringe are unlikely to support the upgrading works.

So, may I ask the Minister whether the shops located at the fringe of the town centre, can they be excluded from being considered part of the precinct? Because if these shops do not benefit from any of the upgrading works, they would surely not support the upgrading proposal. It will also not be fair to them to ask them to contribute to the cost of the upgrading if they cannot see the benefit in any way.

Next, for the poll of the prescribed owners of commercial property, will HDB distinguish between commercial properties of different sizes? Will a big shop, say for example the size of a supermarket, be given the same voting right as a small shop regardless of the size of the shop unit? So, if a bigger shop has a bigger vote share in a poll, would this affect the interest of the smaller shops?

Finally, may I ask the Senior Minister of State, for the upgrading works to the common area, will the Town Council have any say in the decision? Here I need to declare my interest as the Chairman of Marine Parade Town Council. I say this because some upgrading proposals may carry higher maintenance costs which will eventually be paid from the service and conservancy fees. How does HDB balance the need to upgrade the common area versus the possible higher maintenance costs in the long run?

May I ask that the Minister consider the above concerns when setting out the rules to operationalise the amendments to the Act? I support the Bill.

**Mdm Deputy Speaker:** Mr Louis Chua.

4.49 pm

**Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis (Sengkang):** Mdm Deputy Speaker, home is where the heart is. And at the heart of our public housing estates are our heartland retailers and hawker centres which play an integral role in our lives throughout one's life stages.

Growing up as a child in Ang Mo Kio and certainly before the age of e-commerce, I still fondly recall how the unassuming neighbourhood centre had almost everything that we needed, with the wet market, hawker centre, coffeeshops, bakeries, minimarts serving our F&B needs; the friendly neighbourhood general practitioner (GP) and dentists looking after our health needs and the retailers selling everything from clothes, hardware, spectacles, laser discs and even Tamiya cars and Pokémon cards that I had a particular interest in in the past.

While shophouses and five-foot ways of yesteryears have given way to HDB town centres and neighbourhood malls, it would be a pity if our heartland shops are not able to overcome the challenges of modern retail and the current difficult business environment. Hence The Workers' Party had in our manifesto called for a strengthening of our hawker centres and HDB shops, and I am supportive of the Bill's intent to support our heartland shops through creating a new category of commercial property upgrading works, while providing for such upgrading works to be carried out.

The convenience of e-commerce has changed most of our lives, largely for the better. During the periods of COVID-19 related lockdowns and mandatory quarantine, food delivery and e-commerce have helped us tide through some very difficult times. Based on SingStat data, online sales now represent about 12% to 15% of total retail sales in 2022, up from the mid-single digit percentages during the pre-pandemic periods from 2018 to 2019. For computer and telecommunications equipment, this is as high as 52% in March 2022 and even for supermarkets and hypermarkets which was the domain of brick-and-mortar retail, this is now similarly at 14% of total retail sales. I believe online sales will only continue to rise as a share of the overall retail market.

For our heartland retail shops, significant upgrading and rejuvenation is much needed, and time is of the essence for many shop owners who are struggling with narrowing margins amid competition and input-cost inflation and slowing sales volumes as they continue to lose market share to glitzy shopping malls and e-commerce alike. While the future of retail is likely in omni-channel retailing where both digital and brick-and-mortar retail coexist, it is important for us to urgently revitalise our heartland shops so they do not lose relevance, as they play an important role in adding vibrancy and character to our neighbourhoods. I thus hope the Revitalisation of Shops Scheme and other commercial upgrading initiatives can be rolled out expeditiously across our heartland shops once the Bill is passed.

Moving on to the specifics of the Bill, I welcome the move to reduce the threshold for shop owners to approve upgrading works from 100% to 75% of the total value in votes under clause 5. This would facilitate the upgrading process and not allow any single dissenting shop owner from halting the process indefinitely, while still ensuring that there is supermajority approval for any approved works.

Clause 6 however prescribes that the Board may recover from every owner of such commercial property within the precinct as is mentioned in section 77(3A), the costs incurred by the Board in respect of the commercial property upgrading works.

Any upgrading works will necessarily benefit our heartland shops directly and indirectly, as it is the clear intention of the ROS and related schemes. Even for heartland shop units which are directly owned, common areas are under the ownership of the HDB. It follows logically that any capital expenditure incurred on common areas should be the responsibility of the HDB as well. This is similar to retail malls owned by commercial landlords who may undertake upgrading works and Asset Enhancement Initiatives or AEIs to ensure that the mall is in a good condition and continues to be attractive to shoppers.

I take Senior Minister of State's point that the Government is studying the possibility of reducing the level of co-payment for upgrading costs by shop owners. However, I do hope the Government can review this issue and consider if there really needs to be a co-payment element at all.

More broadly, I wish to share several points of consideration to better support our heartland shops. The first is the proactive curation of the tenant mix or trade mix. I note changes to the Price Quality Method tenders for HDB shops which will apply to new tenders starting in the first half of 2023, where the weightage for the business concept and affordability criteria will be raised from the current 25% to 30% to 35% to 45%.

The lower emphasis on pricing is a welcome move, given the importance of the affordability of goods and services, and the types of trades offered. Beyond the specifics relating to each tenderers' design and layout, affordability and productivity, I hope the higher-level curation of trade mix for each area can be conducted on a more proactive basis to ensure the optimal share of each trade category via increasing or reducing the number of similar shops. For example, while F&B is the most relevant to our daily needs, there should be a conscious effort to ensure that less popular trades such as a dental clinic or even a veterinary clinic can be found within each neighbourhood.

Related to the point about the proactive curation of tenant mix is the push for digitalisation. With residents conditioned to the scanning of QR codes because of COVID-19, it is heartening to hear that today 93% of heartland merchants have gone digital in the form of accepting e-payments. To take it one step further, I wonder if additional support can be provided to our heartland shops to adopt digital point-of-sale (POS) systems? This could further enhance our heartland shops' store productivity and enable them to better manage their finances. Should there be consent provided, sales information on an aggregated basis could also be studied by the HDB to provide for a data-driven approach to curating the appropriate trade mix for any particular precinct.

On the customers front, I recently downloaded the ShopperLink app but frankly did not find it very useful. A search for "bubble tea", for example, Singaporeans' favourite drink did not really throw out any results even though we know that there are many of such shops in the heartlands. Moreover, the coverage only appears to be that of HDB malls rather than the large pool of heartland shops across our town centres and neighbourhood centres. To take it one step further again, perhaps the HDB can consider introducing a rewards programme to encourage continued patronage of our mom-and-pop shops in the neighbourhood, similar to those of retail mall owners in Singapore such as the CapitaStar or Frasers Experience programmes.

Finally, while the attention of this Bill is rightly centred on facilitating the upgrading of our existing heartland shops, let us not forget the precincts and neighbourhoods which do not have the benefit of the convenience and rich diversity of having heartland shops in close proximity to our homes. The town of Sengkang which I represent for example is a case in point.

Many residents have often shared with me and my fellow Sengkang Members about the lack of coffee shops and everyday conveniences in their neighbourhood. Within my Rivervale division for example, while it is great that Rivervale Plaza and Rivervale Mall provide various retail offerings for those living in the immediate vicinity, there is only one coffee shop and one convenience store in the entire division. For the elderly or for those who are less mobile, having a meal or buying groceries can be quite a troublesome affair requiring the use of public or private transport.

If my childhood was spent living in present-day Sengkang for example compared to Ang Mo Kio where I had lived, I would not have been able to say, buy lunch for myself!

I would thus like to urge the HDB to also look at neighbourhoods or precincts such as Sengkang which are currently underserved. The Workers' Party has called for a revival of convenience and coffee shops where HDB should allocate a portion of void deck space to provide for at least one coffee shop for every two precincts, or perhaps we could also consider repurposing certain parts of our multi-storey car parks (MSCPs) which are underutilised to allow commercial spaces even if not for coffee shops.

And to take it one step further again, HDB could even offer low-rent commercial spaces allocated by ballot to stimulate microbusinesses, social enterprise and entrepreneurship in our heartlands. Coffee shops and convenience shops are community spaces that allow residents to meet their everyday needs and foster ties with their neighbours while also being an integral part of our heartland culture and should be more actively promoted. Notwithstanding my clarifications and suggestions, I support the Bill.

**Mdm Deputy Speaker:** Miss Cheryl Chan.

4.59 pm

**Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling (East Coast):** Mdm Deputy Speaker, like the hon Member Lim Biow Chuan, many Singaporeans and I would have grown up with the familiar sight of mama shops, clinics, fruit stalls, confectionery, traditional chinese medicine (TCM) halls and many others at the void decks below the HDB blocks where we lived or would find these shops operating in the neighbourhood centres near the market or hawker centre.

Four decades on, many of these sights remain nor have the trades changed very much. The reason I can imagine these shops and trades survived over the years is simply due to the convenience they bring to the residents and there is a genuine demand for the services provided.

The question today is with the proliferation of e-commerce, extensive delivery services available and changing patterns of work and lifestyle needs of the younger generation, will these shops survive after the last generation of stallholders retire? Should there be a refresh of the type of trades that operate around this what I consider "prime" location? And if a change entails, whom should decide what services continue and whether they remain relevant to fulfill the needs of the future. At least to me, there is much comfort in having a local scene with its unique heritage, characteristics and familiar stall owners who know just about everyone in the 'hood by name or family.

In my constituency Fengshan, this is just what we may see happening after the current lease of the commercial shops near the 85 Market and Hawker Centre runs out over the next two to three years. HDB has explained that the treatment of shops' expiring 30-year leases will be returned to HDB to be let out to operators via a tenancy model.

While I hope to see some changes in the tenancy mix to bring more vibrancy and new services like co-working spaces, gyms, learning and fixer spaces for the community, I am cognisant that we must retain some traditional and essential services like the clinics, dialysis centres, provision shops, sewing and alteration services, as they are still much needed by the older population who rely on these familiar services and for others in need of a last minute purchase.

Thus, the curation of service types after the shops' leases expire becomes critically important in shaping the life of a neighbourhood.

There is, however, a challenge when over 25% of the shops in Fengshan are sold as they belong to the early batch, where sale of shops was permitted. This has been the challenge faced when HDB offered to renew the area earlier but the response for support of ROS by the owners was underwhelming. The clear reason given by the shop owners was that they will not invest in face lift or rejuvenation cost, given the short leases. They felt the ability to recover the sunk cost does not make economical sense – and that I can clearly understand.

What ensues thereafter is the constant change of services in the subletted units. At times, there may even be one too many of a single service type, which has low cyclical demand to sustain them in business.

In clause 5 amendment 2 section 77, where a precinct has been declared to carry out the polling connection, with a proposal for the commercial property upgrading works, an approval seeks for at least 75% of the owner consensus before these works can be carried out. While I understand this concept of approval is similar to other schemes, like the Home Improvement Project, the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, but the probability of flats changing owners are generally higher and new flat owners would mostly renovate post-purchase to upkeep their units.



Thus, I would like to seek clarification from the Senior Minister if State how this amendment can be effected if the sold commercial shops already constitute more than 25% and the likelihood of getting owners onboard to rejuvenate their shops and the neighbourhood is low.

Next, under clause 6(3a), under section 78, it allows HDB to recover the costs incurred, in respect of those commercial property upgrading works. I would like to know how the cost and upgrading work scope will be shared with the owners before any project tender. Will consultation with the shop owners on its design works and the project scope be discussed for better perspective of what to accept?

Lastly, clause 7 section 85(b) specifies that the Minister may make rule prescribing the value in votes of owners of flats for commercial property upgrading works. Can the Minister explain what are some of the principles of these rules, and if I may ask, can HDB also consider to include the lift upgrading for the blocks that were unsuccessful or opted out in the past for those areas that is near the commercial properties?

Mdm Deputy Speaker, I am all for the rejuvenation of our precincts, particularly at the neighbourhood centres. After all, this is a communal area that brings life to an estate and provide the convenience to the residents and over the weekends, some specialty pop-up stalls that makes an exciting walk through the area. If we can retain some heritage of the precinct and concurrently leverage on the understanding of needs versus availability of current and future services, we will be in a better position to transform the precinct beyond just infrastructure investment. Notwithstanding my clarifications, I stand in support of the Bill.

**Mdm Deputy Speaker:** Mr Henry Kwek. Not here? Mr Louis Ng.

5.04 pm

**Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon):** Madam, this Bill will make it easier to carry out upgrading works on common areas in heartland shops. This will facilitate works to vitalise our heartlands. I have just three points for clarification on the Bill.

My first point is on how HDB will determine if upgrading works on common property fall within the purpose of commercial property upgrading works. This Bill prescribes an admirable purpose for commercial property upgrading works. It says that such works are for "improving or encouraging diversity of local convenience shopping facilities and commercial and community activities."

They must also support the economic and social well-being and employment opportunities for persons within the precinct. However, it may not always be clear that such works, when proposed, achieve such a goal.

That is why for commercial property upgrading works, the Bill requires the works to be approved by a 75% vote of the owners who will benefit from the works. The owners who benefit from the works are clear where the works are carried out on commercial property. However, commercial property upgrading works are also defined to include works carried out on common property. In this case, it may be less clear who are the owners benefiting from the works who are entitled to vote.

Can the Senior Minister of State confirm that a poll must still be carried out under the new section 77(3A) where the works are carried out on common property? If yes, can the Senior Minister of State share how HDB will determine who are the owners benefitting from works proposed for common property who are entitled to vote? Will this be based, for instance, on geographical proximity to the works proposed or the scale of the works proposed?

My second point is on the information that will be provided to property owners who are entitled to vote on the upgrading works. As I mentioned earlier, the upgrading works proposed by HDB must be to achieve specific purposes, including improving shopping facilities, encouraging commercial and community activities, and supporting economic and social well-being. In order for the property owners to exercise their vote meaningfully, it is important that HDB provide them with enough information for the owners to determine if these purposes will be met. Can the Senior Minister of State share if information will be provided to owners on how the upgrading works will achieve these purposes, including measurable indicators that HDB will monitor to determine if the purposes are achieved?

My last point is on the recovery of costs for commercial property upgrading works. The new section 78(3A) will allow HDB to recover the costs of commercial property upgrading works from every owner of such property and the Town Council responsible for the maintenance of common property. Such recovery can only be done after HDB has completed the works. Can the Senior Minister of State confirm if such recovery is to be done, whether the owners and the Town Council will be kept informed of the likely costs before a poll is taken? Will the owners be kept updated on any changes in the costs? It is not uncommon for construction costs to exceed initial estimates. Given that the recovery of costs is to be done only after HDB has completed the upgrading works, where the cost exceeds initial estimates, can the Senior Minister of State confirm who will bear the excess costs?

Madam, notwithstanding these clarifications, I stand in support of the Bill.

**Mdm Deputy Speaker:** Mr Henry Kwek.

5.08 pm

**Mr Kwek Hian Chuan Henry (Kebun Baru):** Mdm Deputy Speaker, I would like to declare that I am an Advisor to the Federation of Merchants' Associations, an industrial association that helps the SMEs in our heartlands transform and thrive. I stand in support of the amendment Bill, as it provides very timely and needed support to our heartland enterprises.

ROS is a wonderful program to ensure that our heartland shops remain relevant. In general, heartland merchants are very appreciative of the Government support and, frankly, how many governments in the world do we know proactively think about how to ensure that micro-enterprises, which many heartland enterprises are, thrive in both good times and bad?

Just think about the massive help that the Government has provided during COVID-19 and the CDC vouchers that get Singaporeans to spend more time at the heartland shops. The enhancement to ROS is very much welcome, as it is aimed at overcoming the main obstacles to implementing ROS – which is garnering sufficient support from the merchants to implement the programme.

I must stress that the existing efforts by HDB – both in terms of funding roadshows and the time put in by HDB to do outreach – is very useful and appreciated, and we certainly hope it can continue.

I would like to make three suggestions centered around how to generate support for ROS. Firstly, we can strengthen the partnership between HDB and Merchants' Associations (MAs) to persuade the shop owners. HDB, not MAs, currently writes to the owners. But some owners are very hard to reach and are not interested to responding to letters if they do not know much about the programme, or what is at stake. It is also very hard to put down all the complicated details and address concerns using letters only.

As such, I think many MAs hope that HDB can explore how we can better work with MAs, to jointly reach out to the shop owners, so that MAs can have a chance to appear in person, or at least speak over the phone and make a compelling case for the support of ROS.

The second point I would MND to consider is, can HDB consider excluding the no-response from the vote, if more than 70% of the shop owners have responded? In the long run, the upgrading of an area has huge implications to the vitality of the businesses and the livelihood of the people employed by the heartland merchants. And if a place fails to have a chance to do ROS, we know that it is quite difficult for ROS to be revisited for the foreseeable future, because there are so many other places that wants to do ROS. It is not like an en bloc, where you can have repeated attempts to do that.

So, that is why it is essential for the majority, who are usually for the upgrading, for the upgrading to go through. And by not counting non-responses, we can put in the right incentives for all the owners to respond and we are not depriving the owners of their voice.

The third suggestion I have is, it would be wonderful if HDB can work with MAs to come up with a low-cost preliminary design concept and detail out the works that would likely be done, so that the shop owners will know what they are paying for. From my understanding, the usual process is for the Government to hire an architect to come up with the plans after an upgrading is confirmed. But from the perspective of, let us say, somebody sitting on-the-fence, they would be more likely to be convinced if they have more information about what will be done.

Let me move to a different point, which is what is the right percentage of support for ROS. I am aware that some heartland merchants would welcome a threshold of 60% to determine whether a place can undergo ROS. Some even tell me that 50% is the appropriate number. They tell me that based on their experience, the support from certain trades, mainly chain stores, clinics, that have either strong branding, independent of the heartland locations or do not require much common infrastructure to attract businesses, usually are a lot less interested in supporting upgrading.

The MAs' concerns are valid. but I also understand why HDB would prefer the 75% threshold, as 75% is intuitively a fair number and is in line with HDB's very successful Housing Improvement Programme (HIP). That is why I suggested the three earlier suggestions on generating consensus, using 75% that the Minister proposed today. But I do hope that after a few years down the road, and after one or two rounds of ROS, HDB can then review whether the 75% threshold is the best option.

Beyond these three suggestions on generating consensus, I would also like to suggest that HDB consider prioritising ROS projects that can be added on to existing upgrading efforts – be it ROHS efforts to revitalise a town or when there is a plan by the local Town Council to do extensive renovations at the town centres. There is a lot of fixed cost when it comes to renovating common areas, especially common commercial areas, and when we can combine fundings from various schemes, it will be quite possible to achieve much better outcomes.

In conclusion, the amendments proposed today are excellent moves that would help spur heartland merchants, MAs and HDB to revitalise the vitality of heartland shops. And with that, I stand in support of the Bill.

**Mdm Deputy Speaker:** Senior Minister of State Sim Ann.

5.13 pm

**Ms Sim Ann:** Mdm Deputy Speaker, I thank the Members for their comments and their support of the Bill. Let me address the issues they have raised.

First, there were a few questions about how polling for upgrading works would be carried out. Under the ROS scheme, HDB provides co-funding for improvement of the common area within the shopping precinct to boost the vibrancy and competitiveness of HDB shops. This upgrading may include works at the shopfront that directly benefit the individual shop operators, such as replacement of the floor tiles or lighting at the shopping corridor. It may also include other common area works that would indirectly benefit the individual retailers by improving the overall shopping environment and increasing footfall to the area. Examples include building new spaces for promotional events, the introduction of entrance markers or way finders.

Mr Louis Ng and Mr Lim Biow Chuan have shared their concerns that shop owners who do not benefit from the ROS works – or perceive that they do not benefit – might vote against upgrading the common areas and asked if such shop owners should be excluded from the poll. Mr Henry Kwek also suggested for HDB to consider excluding non-responsive shop owners from the poll, sharing feedback that some heartland merchants would welcome a polling threshold of 60%, or even 50% instead. Miss Cheryl Chan also asked how the upgrading works could be put into effect if the likelihood of getting owners onboard is low.

First, on ROS works. Neighbourhood Centres have clear boundaries, and our intention is for ROS to be provided to a neighbourhood centre as a whole. However, as various precincts have different upgrading needs depending on their age and design, HDB does not stipulate a set scope of works to be carried out under the ROS programmes. Instead, a Local Working Committee (LWC) comprising members from the Merchants' Association (MA), the Town Council and HDB, will be formed when the precinct is selected for ROS. With the local stakeholders' input through the MA, the scope of works can then be tailored to best suit local needs.

The incidence of benefit for the upgrading works will depend on the design and configuration of each neighbourhood centre. We expect precincts selected for ROS to propose enhancements that can benefit the majority – if not all – of the shops in the precinct.

Next, if a poll succeeds, I believe Members would agree, that there is a need for parity for all shop owners. Hence, HDB will recover the cost of upgrading from all beneficiary shop owners, regardless of their vote or their attendance at the poll.

In this context, excluding non-responsive shop owners from the overall count would amount to further lowering the threshold for a successful poll. As Members would be aware, the key basis for this review is to avoid a situation where a single shop owner can exercise what is effectively a veto and deny the rest of the opportunity to upgrade, even if they were all supportive.

At the same time, we have to strike a reasonable balance with the consideration that some individual shop owners might not support upgrading for their own reasons.

We have hence taken a leaf from other upgrading programmes, such as the Home Improvement Programme (HIP), where the threshold of 75% has come to be widely accepted. We believe this would be a reasonable threshold for ROS to move towards.

For sites that continue to fail to meet the threshold of 75%, there are other upgrading programmes which will help to rejuvenate the common areas for the benefit of nearby residents, such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, where HDB provides funding for the Town Council to upgrade common areas for the benefit of residents.

On Mr Lim's query on whether voting rights will differ based on the size of the commercial property, shop owners will be entitled one vote per beneficiary unit, regardless of size.

For shop owners with multiple beneficiary units, they will be entitled to one vote per beneficiary unit as the share of upgrading costs for the site is typically apportioned to the shop owners based on the number of shop units owned by the individual owner, among other factors.

However, in the case where HDB is the owner of the shops in the town or neighbourhood centre, HDB will only hold one vote, regardless of the number of rental units which can be considered as beneficiary units so that there is no contention on polling outcomes.

There were also questions relating to the scope and cost of upgrading.

Miss Chan, Mr Ng and Mr Kwek asked if HDB could come up with a preliminary design concept on the proposed works and provide information to shop owners ahead of polling, for them to exercise their vote meaningfully.

We agree that this is necessary. After the selected sites are announced and the LWC is formed, the LWC will work with a consultant to come up with the preliminary design concept for the upgrading works. Prior to polling, shop owners will be notified in writing of the full scope of works proposed so that they can make an informed decision on whether to support the upgrading. The specific details are being worked out and will be provided when we open the upcoming ROS Batch 8 for application.

#### **[Mr Speaker in the Chair]**

Mr Ng also asked who would bear the costs if the upgrading works were to exceed the initial cost estimates.

Shop owners will be notified of the overall estimated upgrading costs, as well as their share of the bill, before polling. In the event that the construction costs exceed initial estimates, HDB will work with the LWC on the best course of action for the specific site, which may include reviewing the scope of proposed works.

Mr Louis Chua also raised a question on whether HDB would consider wholly bearing the cost for upgrading to the common areas. In this case, we are talking about upgrading for the purposes of improving shoppers' experience and also with the view of drawing in more shoppers, greater footfall, which will result in better business and monetary gain to the shop owners. It is in this case therefore reasonable to expect some co-payment although as I have said we are reviewing the co-payment structure.

HDB co-pays a significant amount because we acknowledge that HDB shops also exist to serve residents. However, undeniably there is also a commercial interest involved. So, we believe that some amount of co-payment would be reasonable.

Mr Lim Biow Chuan also asked how the need to upgrade the common areas would be balanced against higher maintenance costs.

As mentioned earlier, when a Neighbourhood or Town Centre is selected for ROS upgrading, an LWC would be formed comprising members from the MA, the Town Council and HDB. As part of the LWC, the Town Council will be able to participate in the process of determining the scope of works and design of the upgraded precinct and provide a check to ensure that the proposed works will not generate significantly higher maintenance costs that are unsustainable in the long run for the Town Council, which remains ultimately responsible for common property.

In our engagements, it was highlighted that Town Councils may be constrained by funding issues. Please be assured that we are looking into this while balancing against the need for Town Councils to also have skin in the game and we will announce more details further on.

Miss Cheryl Chan also asked if HDB could consider including lift upgrading for blocks that were unsuccessful or opted out in the past as part of upgrading works under the ROS scheme.

Currently, there is a menu of upgrading works offered under the ROS scheme, which are funded jointly by shop owners, HDB and the Town Council. Main items include fixed awnings, re-tiling, shop corridor lightings, digital directory, way-finders, landscaping and street furniture and Digital Display Panels. Shop-specific items that individual shops can opt in for include vertical blinds and roller shutters.

Lift upgrading works are covered under the existing Lift Upgrading Programme. While we note that lifts are important to serve residents in common areas, lift upgrading is a big-ticket item that would exceed the budget allocated for works under the ROS scheme. So, we keep the two separate.

Other questions pertain to prioritisation of ROS sites to align with other upgrading programmes and retaining the roles of MAs, from Mr Kwek; and whether we have indicators of success, from Mr Ng.

We agree that coordinating upgrading efforts will facilitate more comprehensive upgrading of the shopping environment and minimise disruption to retailers. Hence, HDB will continue to prioritise town or neighbourhood centres which have been selected for or are undergoing other HDB upgrading programmes such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme mentioned earlier, Remaking Our Heartlands, or where the Town Councils have plans for Repair and Redecoration works.

We also agree with him that HDB should tap on the strengths of MAs to persuade shop owners to support ROS upgrading in their neighbourhood centres.

MAs indeed play an integral role in our commercial heartland areas, including revitalisation efforts within the neighbourhood centres. They are an important intermediary between HDB and the shop owners. Under the revised scheme, we intend for the MAs to continue to play a key role in the upgrading process.

The LWC, which I mentioned earlier, will include representatives from MAs, who will help us to shape the upgrading plans so that they can meet the needs of the shop owners. While the MAs will no longer need to gather support from the shop owners, HDB will still need to tap on their networks to engage and reach out to shop owners and share the upgrading plans with them.

To Mr Ng's query on measurable indicators that HDB monitors to determine if the purposes of upgrading have been achieved, there are varying outcomes that we aim to achieve through the upgrading works.

Fundamentally, upgrading should improve the shopping experience and hence, footfall. This should translate into revenue for stallholders. But there are also less measurable outcomes such as enhancing the vibrancy and local character of our heartlands, and their role as social hubs for the community to interact and forge bonds.

Ultimately though, the context, including factors such as catchment, trade mix and location, will differ from site to site and hence it would be difficult to impose a standard target across ROS sites. Nevertheless, we will monitor feedback post-upgrading so that we can continuously improve on the scheme.

And in this connection, although some of the points raised were not strictly to do with the clauses of the Bill, I would like to also take this opportunity to address them. In particular, I want to thank the interest expressed by Mr Chua and also Miss Chan in trade-mix curation in our neighbourhood centres and town centres. We agree that this is very important and I appreciate their raising the importance of getting the trade mix right.

Mr Chua has also talked about the use of point-of-sale system and he has also mentioned ShopperLink. Indeed, HDB is in the process of rolling out, point-of-sale systems to the malls that are under HDB ownership, precisely with a view to use the data gathered to analyse and to help shop operators achieve better outcomes and also to provide a better experience for shoppers overall. So, this is ongoing.

Likewise, ShopperLink is also progressively being rolled out. It is a work-in-progress and I thank Mr Chua for his interest in ShopperLink.

As for the specifics, with regards to the injection of eating places in our towns, HDB follows planning parameters for the insertion of food and beverage (F&B), as well as other kinds of amenities and facilities needed by residents as we plan and build each town. In the case of Sengkang, we have been hearing feedback from residents and also progressively been injecting F&B or eating facilities, especially as new developments come up. If the Member has specific suggestion or feedback, he can share it with HDB, which we will study.

Mr Speaker, as mentioned in my opening speech, our heartland shops play important social and economic roles in our neighbourhoods. We know that our heartland shops hold a very special place in the hearts of Singaporeans. Hence, we are giving more support our heartland merchants through enhancing the ROS scheme with formal polling provisions.

Overall, the amendments will enable us to better facilitate physical upgrading, which is a first and necessary step in our plans to refresh and upkeep the vibrancy of our heartland shop precincts. Mr Speaker, Sir, I beg to move.

**Mr Speaker:** Any clarifications? None.

Question put, and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time and committed to a Committee of the whole House.

The House immediately resolved itself into a Committee on the Bill. – [Ms Sim Ann].

Bill considered in Committee.

**[Mr Speaker in the Chair]**

**The Chairman:** The citation year "2022" will be changed to "2023", as indicated in the Order Paper Supplement.

Clauses 1 to 8 inclusive ordered to stand part of the Bill

Amendment agreed to

Bill reported with amendment; read a Third time and passed.

**SUBSCRIPTION TO THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION**

**Mr Speaker:** Second Minister for Finance.

5.30 pm

**The Second Minister for Finance (Ms Indranee Rajah):** Mr Speaker, Sir, I beg to move, “That this Parliament, in accordance with section 4(3) of the International Development Association (IDA) Act 2002, resolves that an additional subscription of Singapore to the International Development Association, of a sum not exceeding US\$70,000,000, be authorised for the purpose of the 20th Replenishment of the International Development Association.”

Mr Speaker, allow me to explain the rationale for our subscription to the IDA20 replenishment.

IDA is the arm of the World Bank Group that provides grants and concessional loans to its least developed member countries, including some of our ASEAN neighbours like Laos and Cambodia. Singapore has contributed to IDA's replenishments since 2002.

The 20th IDA Replenishment (IDA20), originally covering the period FY2024 to FY2026, had to be brought forward by a year to cover FY2023 to FY2025 as almost half of the IDA19 replenishment of US\$82 billion was committed in FY2021 to provide urgent financial resources to support IDA countries that were badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In December 2021, IDA donors therefore supported a historic replenishment of US\$93 billion for IDA20. This 13% increase makes it the largest financing envelope in IDA's history; and demonstrates solidarity by both developed and developing countries.

As highlighted by my colleague Senior Minister of State for Finance, Mr Chee Hong Tat, when he moved the Second Reading of the IDA (Amendment) Bill last October, as a responsible member of the international community, Singapore will do our part.

During our early days, Singapore had benefited from loans and expertise from the World Bank to build key infrastructure as part of our nation-building efforts. We remember and are grateful for this assistance. We are in a better position today; but we know from experience the challenges developing countries face and we want to play our part and give back.

There are also positive benefits in working with marquee institutions like the World Bank Group. This contribute to Singapore's place as an infrastructure financing hub for the development of our region. It also creates good opportunities for Singaporeans and Singapore-based companies as the region prospers.

For this Motion, we therefore propose to maintain our contribution share of 0.20% to this larger IDA20 envelope. This will translate to a subscription of no more than US\$70 million. Mr Speaker, Sir, I beg to move.

Question proposed.

**Mr Speaker:** Assoc Prof Jamus Lim.

5.33 pm

**Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang):** Mr Speaker, I understand that this Motion like similar ones I had spoken on in 2021 on contributions to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are largely routine and technical and reflect our nation's ongoing commitment as a responsible citizen in the international system, as Minister Indranee has also reiterated.

Funding rounds for the International Development Association either are similar and occur every three years. The Motion before us today is to provide said funding for IDA.

In my earlier contribution to the IMF Motion, I had made the case for why contributing to international development efforts can benefit us by enhancing our hard and soft power. And why doing so even when it does not remain a moral imperative. I have also made the case for why we should systematise official development assistance.

Today, I will elaborate on both of these themes and in particular make a more pointed case for a specialised Singaporean foreign aid agency.

As I had previously shared, I have worked for seven years at the World Bank Group in the past of which either as a part and during my tenure at the bank, I have contributed to the work of IDA.

I also have a small balance in my self-funded group retirement account and a staff account at the Credit Union, but do not currently receive nor maintain any direct financial interest in the bank.

Mr Speaker, the need for us to act on the international dimension is even greater today than two years ago given the challenges faced by developing countries around the world. While the pandemic is largely a matter of the past for us and we have more or less successfully transitioned to treating COVID-19 as an endemic disease, the ravages of COVID remain very real in other parts of the world, especially in the poorest economies of Africa, as well as Asia.

In Southeast Asia alone, the Asian Development Bank estimates that the region's economic growth was dampened by close to one percentage point and 4.7 million more people were pushed into poverty. This anaemic growth in our neighbours will affect us too because while Singapore's growth rebounded strongly in 2021 and remain solid last year, it is expected to falter this year in part because of tighter monetary conditions worldwide.

In our assistance to our neighbours and major trade partners helps spark better economic conditions in those places. We could enjoy the spill-over effects from their belated recoveries which could in turn offer a neat counterbalance to weakening conditions in advanced economies worldwide.

Singapore has also enhanced its post-pandemic soft power. Members of this House, including those of the Workers' Party, have flagged certain refinements to our approach assessments of our overall pandemic response and subsequent reopening, have on net been positive. That said, according to an index developed by the University of Southern California, the weakest aspect of Singapore's soft power remains our international engagement.

Enhancing our foreign aid profile can, therefore, further bolster our outreach to our neighbours and improve our foreign relations accordingly.

To be clear, IDA and the World Bank remain among the most effective, transparent and development-focused institutions. If we were to decide that it is a good idea to channel financial support to multilateral development agencies, we can do far worse than doing so through IDA. But even multilateral agencies that have a solid reputation for largely unbiased foreign aid practices may end up inadvertently being subject to quid pro quo exchanges, especially between large players.

Furthermore, while there is solid reason to support development in the poorest nations globally, the nature of multilateral development agencies is that their support is not solely targeted at countries in Southeast Asia, which is our immediate neighbourhood.

We wish to have more directed support in a manner that could potentially spill over onto our shores. A somewhat different tool is required. That is why I wish to go a step further and explain why it is also in our interest to form a small but dedicated foreign aid agency, much like how we already appropriate development funds for various longer-term financial commitments.

One approach that can help seed the initial formation of a foreign aid agency is to set aside IMF and IDA subscriptions, along with a very modest budget for official development assistance into a development fund. This fund can then be managed directly by a foreign aid agency – call it Singapore's Assistance for International Development or SingAid.

The agency need not be large. Indeed, to the extent that we already have civil servants within MFA, whose work is mainly focused on external finance and economic relations, we can hive them off to this new agency. We can supplement this professional team with a stream of rotational staff and interns, especially those who have an interest or experience with international economics. For example, we can second MFA staffers who deal with international economic relations to this body and then absorb a small number of university interns annually. Over time, the agency can even be an oversight body that allows us to launch, perhaps an international volunteer corps – another initiative that I had previously advocated for.

One concern that some may have about bilateral development agencies of this nature is how they may become tools of foreign policy and consequently the aid offered becomes ineffective at best, or could even end up harming the countries it purports to assist at worst.

We can pre-empt such concerns in a few ways.

First, as I have already alluded to, we can keep the agency's mandate narrow and budget tight. This will keep the body focused on its core principles and discourage adventurism. Indeed, if we believe more in our ability to insulate such an agency from political interference than we do others, especially multilateral institutions a homegrown institution may be an even more efficient way to deliver official development assistance.

Secondly, our bureaucracy is famously effective and efficient. I see little reason why we would run the proposed SingAid without the same technocratic vigour. Aid tends to be best delivered when conditional on good policy and we have an abundance of technical knowledge in this area, having gone through our own development journey in exceedingly rapid fashion.

Third, perhaps most importantly, our foreign policy interests are, by and large, largely remarkably neutral. While neutrality is not formally enshrined as a foreign policy doctrine, we have pursued a pro neutral approach since our Independence and our emphasis on fundamental bedrock principles such as respect for sovereignty and the rule of law, along with the pursuit of mutual interest, is aligned with this.

This is an ethos in fact for our entire Public Service and I see no reason why we cannot infuse such principles into a nascent aid agency that is likewise imbued with the same set of principles and avoids the risk that the body descends into becoming a geopolitical tool. If anything, what I am suggesting is that the proposed SingAid focus on providing foreign assistance with an eye on win-win economic outcomes.

All that said, Mr Speaker, it should come as no surprise that I am in thorough support of the Motion and wish that it in fact goes a little further.

**Mr Speaker:** Minister Indranee.

5.42 pm

**Ms Indranee Rajah:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I would like to start first by thanking the Member, Assoc Prof Jamus Lim, for his support for the Motion. Listening to Assoc Prof Lim, I think there is in fact common ground and then there is a part where, perhaps, we have a slight difference of views.

The common ground is: is it a good thing to do, to do something to help developing countries? I think the answer is yes.

Is it common ground that doing so would benefit countries in the region? I think the answer is yes.

And I think also that insofar as this specific Motion is concerned, since Assoc Prof Lim has given his support, I think we can take it that he is in agreement and that this particular issue can be put to rest.

So, the only question is, do we do more? And if we do more, the question is to what extent. And what the Assoc Prof would like us to do is also to set up a foreign development aid agency. I think he even has thought of a name for it. "SingAid" – that was the name he attributed to it.

So, that is where the differences are – which is how much more and do you set up an agency for this.

On the question of whether we should do more – and I think if I heard the Member correctly, he also talked about systematising it. If I remember correctly, that was the word he used.

The first thing I should do is to assure the Chamber and others that contributing to IDA or the World Bank Group is not the only thing that we do. What we do is we take a balanced approach. We look at what is commensurate with Singapore's size and we enter into obligations that we can afford over the long run, after the needs of Singaporeans are met.

When we look at international contributions, we do more than just contribute to the World Bank Group. We have actually done so through various other institutions. Apart from the contributions to the World Bank Group, we also contribute to institutions like the Asian Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the International Monetary Fund. And that, in a way, takes care of the suggestion that it should be done in an institutionalised way, because what we are really doing is leveraging the systems, the administration, the infrastructure and the reach of such international institutions.

But we do more than that. Last year, Singapore contributed humanitarian assistance to Ukraine as well as to the disaster relief and humanitarian efforts following the earthquake in West Java, Indonesia. And during the pandemic, Singapore contributed to the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Advance Market Commitment, or COVAX AMC, which helps support access to vaccines for over 90 low- and middle-income countries. We also contributed vaccines to our neighbours as part of our commitment to tide through the pandemic collectively. More recently, Singapore became a founding member of the Pandemic Fund to enhance global pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

Beyond mandatory contributions, we have also contributed our technical know-how, providing training for close to 150,000 foreign officials under the Singapore Cooperation Programme since it started 30 years ago. And late last year, we announced a sustainability action package at COP27, to support the capacity building needs of fellow developing countries on sustainability and climate issues.

So, you can see that, firstly, we do work with and through institutions to amplify our reach. We go over and beyond that and we make direct contributions. But all of this is part and parcel of a balanced approach.

As a small country, our resources are limited and we have to make sure that every dollar counts. We will prioritise the needs of Singapore and Singaporeans; and use prudent fiscal management to manage our resources well. This allows us to grow the funds and there will be then space for us to contribute to the common good. So, this is what we have done and this is what we will continue to do.

We also do not take our international financial obligations lightly as they often have long durations, and we cannot always predict what economic conditions will be like and what our fiscal situation will be like. So, if you set up a development agency, that is a very long-term commitment and you need to be sure that you can carry this through.

Whilst I appreciate the sentiment within the Member's suggestion, one should also be mindful that we are a small country, we are constrained, we have limited resources. So, our approach is, look after our people. Where we have excess, we give. We give through institutions, we give directly, and we maintain some, so that we can be nimble and flexible.

We must also be realistic to understand with our small size, exactly how much we can do by ourselves. We must also be careful of hubris. There is much that we can and should do, but we cannot do everything alone. And working with others allows us to amplify the impact of what we do. But, that said, I thank the Member for his support.

Question, put and agreed to.

Resolved, "That this Parliament, in accordance with section 4(3) of the International Development Association (IDA) Act 2002, resolves that an additional subscription of Singapore to the International Development Association, of a sum not exceeding US\$70,000,000, be authorised for the purpose of the 20th Replenishment of the International Development Association." – [Ms Indranee Rajah]

### CLARIFICATION BY MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

5.49 pm

**The Minister for National Development (Mr Desmond Lee):** Mr Speaker, I refer to the exchange I had with Member Mr Leong Mun Wai this afternoon regarding the Parliamentary Question on valuation of HDB land. In the course of the discussion, he asked me where, which post or which speech I was referring to when I spoke about his reference to the historical cost of land. At that point in time, I did not pull out the exact reference, but I would like to put it on record now.

And that is a post on the 8 December 2022, where the Member referred to the cost of land or the modest sum, given under the Land Acquisition Act, between the 1970s and 1980s to the Pioneer Generation, who surrendered the land to the Government. And then, he went on to ask for land costs to be taken out of the picture.

### ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, "That Parliament do now adjourn to a date to be fixed." – [Ms Indranee Rajah].

*Adjourned accordingly at 5.50 pm.*

### WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS FOR ORAL ANSWER NOT ANSWERED BY END OF QUESTION TIME FUNDING TO PERSONS PROVIDING COMMENTARY ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN SUPPORT OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES

18 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for Communications and Information whether the Government or any other entities owned or controlled by the Government provides funding to any foreign persons providing public commentary to promote or support Government policies or Singapore on social media platforms such as Facebook.

**Mrs Josephine Teo:** MCI does not track the amount spent by the Government on paid advertising based on nationality.

Except for the Singapore Tourism Board in promoting Singapore as a tourism destination, it is not part of our communications and engagement strategy to pay foreign individuals to publish commentaries in support of Government policies or Singapore, on social media or anywhere else.

### COST OF LAND RECLAMATION OVER LAST 10 YEARS

19 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for National Development what is the cost of reclamation of reclaimed land on a per square foot basis on site area for each year over the last 10 years.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** The cost of land reclamation projects completed in the last 10 years ranges from around \$270 to \$850 per square metre. Land reclamation cost varies across projects, depending on the nature of the project and prevailing costs for materials and manpower.

### RESTRUCTURED HOSPITALS REQUIRING DEPOSITS BEFORE COMMENCING MEDICAL PROCEDURES OR TREATMENT

20 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Health in relation to patients seeking treatment or requiring to be hospitalised at the restructured hospitals (a) what is the policy as to whether a deposit has to be placed with the hospital before commencing procedures or treatment; (b) whether there is a standardised amount as to the size of the deposit; (c) what are the differences in policy between Singapore Citizens, residents and foreign patients; and (d) whether exceptions are made for cases of medical exigencies.



**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** My response will also cover the matters raised in the written question by Ms He Ting Ru on today's Order Paper.

Under current MOH guidelines, restructured hospitals are not to collect deposits from subsidised Singapore Citizens for non-elective inpatient treatments and day surgery procedures which are claimable under MediShield Life and/or MediSave. There are exceptions, such as where patients refuse to settle long-standing bills despite having the means to do so.

For elective procedures which are claimable through MediShield Life and/or MediSave, restructured hospitals may collect a small deposit of no more than \$50. This is to discourage no-shows and avoid wastage of hospital resources. Deposits may also be collected from Permanent Residents, foreigners and Singapore Citizens who opt for private care. The amount of deposit to be collected is generally based on the remaining out-of-pocket cost, after accounting for MediShield Life coverage, MediSave, employment coverage and private insurance.

Where patients have difficulty in affording the deposit, restructured hospitals may waive the deposit for them or explore provision of financial assistance. In the event of medical exigencies, no individual will be denied timely treatment, regardless of citizenship status.

MOH does not track data on the number of procedures or treatments postponed or cancelled due to an inability to put up the required deposit.

## REGULATION OF RENTAL PRICES OF HDB FLATS GIVEN UPTREND

21 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for National Development given the surge in HDB rental prices, whether the Ministry intends (i) to regulate the rental prices of HDB flats if they continue to go up and (ii) to enhance rental regulations to allow Singaporeans to have better access to the HDB rental market.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** With the easing of COVID-19 measures and the reopening of Singapore's borders, there has been strong demand for rental accommodation both in the private and HDB rental markets, which has led to an increase in rents.

Rental rates of HDB flats on the open market are private arrangements between the owners and tenants, and dependent on various factors, such as location and provision of fittings and furniture in the rental property. It would not be appropriate for HDB to interfere in private rental agreements. To facilitate informed decision making by owners and tenants, HDB publishes the median rent of flats in various locations with rental approvals under HDB's Rental Statistics page.

HDB implemented the Non-Citizen (NC) quota for renting out of flats in January 2014 to prevent the formation of foreigner enclaves and to maintain the Singaporean character of our HDB heartlands. Once the NC quota for a block or neighbourhood is reached, no further applications, whether a new or renewal application, will be accepted for renting to the affected group of non-citizen tenants. This helps to allow Singaporeans better access to rent a flat.

Nevertheless, we will continue to monitor the housing and rental market conditions closely and review our housing policies to ensure they remain relevant in meeting the housing needs of Singaporeans.

## TAKE-UP OF E-GOVERNMENT SERVICES BY PERSONS IN DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

22 **Dr Tan Wu Meng** asked the Prime Minister (a) whether the Government tracks the take-up of e-Government services, with this data broken down by age group; (b) whether there has been any observed "drop out" or reduction in the number of service users of an elderly age when Government services are transitioned to digitalised e-Government platforms; and (c) if so, what lessons and conclusions have been drawn.

**Mrs Josephine Teo (for the Prime Minister):** The adoption of e-Government services has increased significantly in recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, about 99% of Government transactions were completed digitally, up from 87% in 2018.

The Government tracks the take-up of commonly used government e-services, with data broken down by age group. For example, Singpass, is used by 97% of Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents above the age of 15. Of the remaining 3%, 58% are aged 65 and above.

As more government services digitalise, the less digitally savvy, such as seniors, may not be comfortable or able to use them. The Government is committed to ensure that our citizens can continue to communicate and transact with the Government, regardless of their digital ability.

First, our e-Services seek to be easy to use for all our citizens including the elderly. Agencies are guided by international accessibility standards such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and some measures which we have adopted in websites and mobile apps include larger font sizes, more distinct colour contrasts and larger button sizes.

Second, we have programmes to help our seniors pick up basic digital tools and skills so that they become confident in using our eservices independently. For example, the Seniors Go Digital programme was set up to provide individuals with one-to-one or small group training on skills such as how to use a smartphone to access government eservices. To date, more than 210,000 seniors have been engaged under the programmes.

Third, we provide non-digital options for those who may not be familiar with or have access to digital services. For example, citizens can visit our ServiceSG centres at Our Tampines Hub and One Punggol to access more than 400 frequently used government services physically. The other three ServiceSG centres located in community clubs also offer over 200 services that they can help citizens to complete. For agency-specific services such as those from the CPF Board, HDB, Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (IRAS), and Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA), citizens are also able to make appointments at their respective service centres to access them physically.

The Government is committed to ensure no one is left behind even as digitalisation progresses. We regularly review how we can better support less digitally savvy residents so they can continue to participate in our increasingly digital society.

#### **SPENDING BY HOUSEHOLDS ON TUITION AND ENRICHMENT CLASSES FOR CHILDREN**

23 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Education whether the Ministry will consider doing a study on the average out-of-pocket spending by households on tuition and enrichment classes for children, broken down by income decile, to better understand the demand for and effects of the private tuition industry by income segment.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing:** MOE does not conduct studies on the out-of-pocket spending on tuition and enrichment classes for children. The Household Expenditure Survey (HES) conducted by the Department of Statistics once every five years collects information on consumption expenditure by resident households, including that on private tuition and other educational courses.

#### **PRESENCE OF HALAL VENDORS AS FACTOR IN PRICE-QUALITY METHOD USED FOR HDB TENANCIES FOR PRECINCT SUPERMARKETS AND COFFEE SHOPS**

24 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Minister for National Development with regard to the price-quality method (PQM) criteria used by HDB for tenancies of precinct supermarkets and coffeeshops (a) whether including halal vendors constitute part of the PQM; (b) if so, which component of the quality score does this falls under; and (c) if not, how does HDB ensure that halal options are available for Muslim residents.

25 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Minister for National Development (a) with regard to the price-quality method (PQM) criteria used by HDB for tenancies of precinct supermarkets and coffeeshops, whether the affordability criteria initially used for determination of the award is subsequently monitored; and (b) if not, how does HDB ensure that coffeeshops that secure the winning bid will subsequently maintain affordable pricing.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** HDB introduced the Price-Quality Method (PQM) framework for all new HDB coffeeshop tenders in September 2018, and for new supermarket tenders in October 2019. By not focusing solely on price, the PQM framework enables HDB to select quality tenants to better serve residents, with an emphasis on good track record, productivity and community initiatives, as well as the provision of affordable food and grocery options.

As part of their tender bids, new coffeeshop operators have committed to offer budget meal options, typically around \$3, with one option at each stall. Meanwhile, new supermarket operators have committed to provide budget-priced options in 20 different essential grocery categories.

The provision of these budget options is monitored by HDB through regular on-site inspections and engagement with the operators. After the initial three-year tenancy, HDB will review whether to renew the tenancy based on factors such as compliance with the tenancy agreement and whether the operator continues to serve the local residents well, including through the provision of affordable options.

To ensure that halal food options are available for Muslim residents, new HDB coffeeshop operators are required to provide at least one halal food stall within their premises. This requirement was introduced in 2005.

#### **EFFECTIVENESS OF CANING AS DETERRENT TO SERIOUS CRIMES**

26 **Dr Tan Wu Meng** asked the Minister for Home Affairs (a) whether and, if so, what studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of judicial caning as a deterrent to serious crimes such as rape and sexual offences against young children; and (b) to what extent such application of judicial caning has shaped (i) public confidence in the criminal justice system and (ii) the public's sense of safety against such serious crimes.

**Mr K Shanmugam:** Caning in Singapore serves two functions – deterrence, and proportionate punishment for the crime. Both are equally important.

For the serious crimes cited by the Member – rape and sexual offences against young children – they have been punishable by caning ever since they were introduced as offences in the law.

The public understands that caning is part of a set of penalties, and generally applicable to very serious crimes. At the same time, MHA is mindful that laws have to keep pace with societal mores and values.

Its relevance and necessity is something that MHA regularly reviews.

#### **IMPOSITION OF CANING FOR CRIMES COMMITTED BY OFFENDERS ABOVE AGE 50 AGAINST CHILDREN**

27 **Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim** asked the Minister for Home Affairs with regard to sexual offences or violence cases involving young children, whether the Ministry is considering the imposition of judicial caning for offenders who are above 50 years old at the time of sentencing but were below 50 years old at the time of the commission of the offence or arrest.

**Mr K Shanmugam:** Under section 325 of the Criminal Procedure Code, we cannot carry out the punishment of caning on men who are above 50 years old at the time of caning.

The question of whether to make changes to the statutory age limit for caning has been addressed previously. This was during the Second Reading of the Criminal Law (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill in September 2021, in response to a similar suggestion to remove the age limit for the caning of serious sexual offenders.

The reasons given were: First, the number of men above the age of 50 at the point of arrest for serious offences that attract the punishment of caning, was significantly lower than that of men aged 50 and younger; second, where an offender was not eligible for caning, the Court had the discretion to impose in lieu, an additional imprisonment term of up to 12 months.

The data does not show that there is a high number of people who commit offences eligible for caning just prior to turning 50 years of age.

#### **OFFENDERS WHO COMMITTED SERIOUS CRIMES BUT SPARED FROM CANING ON ACCOUNT OF AGE**

28 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Home Affairs (a) over the past 10 years, how many offenders who committed serious crimes such as rape and sexual offences against young children have been spared from caning on account of their age; and (b) whether the Ministry will consider other factors, such as the offenders' health condition, rather than age, to determine if someone is fit for caning for such serious crimes.

**Mr K Shanmugam:** The data for the period of the last 10 years as requested by the Member is not readily available.

Based on available data from January 2020 to July 2022, 70 male offenders above 50 years old at the time of sentencing were convicted in the State Courts of serious sexual and serious hurt offences which attracted the punishment of caning, such as rape, sexual assault, sexual penetration of minors, voluntarily causing grievous hurt, and culpable homicide. From January 2020 to 22 December 2022, there were 37 such offenders convicted in the High Court.

For offenders who are not caned because they are above the statutory age limit for caning, the Court has the power to order an additional imprisonment term of up to 12 months in lieu of caning, to compensate for the lost deterrent and retributive effect of caning.

On whether MHA will consider other factors, rather than age, to determine if someone is fit for caning, I had addressed this earlier in the question raised by Mr Zhulkarnain.

#### **REVIEW OF GIFTED EDUCATION PROGRAMME ON ITS RELEVANCE**

29 **Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan** asked the Minister for Education (a) whether the Gifted Education Programme (GEP) extends into Secondary school; and (b) whether there will be a review of the GEP to consider if it is still relevant and useful in schools today.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing:** The Gifted Education Programme (GEP) is a three-year programme that is offered at the Primary level, for identified Primary 4 to Primary 6 students. At the Secondary level, MOE continues to stretch our high ability students through diverse programmes that cater to different interests and needs. These include the School-based Gifted Education Programme, which replaced the GEP, as well as centrally-organised programmes such as the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Programme and the Science Research Programme.

The GEP, like other MOE programmes, is reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that we continue to meet the developmental needs of our students and prepare them well for the future. For example, as part of a recent review, MOE introduced mixed form classes to all primary GEP centres so that GEP students have common educational experiences with other peers in the school.

#### **TIME-LIMITED RENTAL SUBSIDY FOR APPLICANTS WHO QUALIFY FOR PARENTHOOD PROVISIONAL HOUSING SCHEME AND PUBLIC RENTAL SCHEME**

30 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for National Development whether the Government will consider providing a time-limited rental subsidy for rental flat applicants who qualify for the Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme and Public Rental Scheme respectively, provided that they are unable to find alternative temporary housing arrangements and have been unsuccessful in obtaining a flat from HDB after a pre-defined time period.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** For the Public Rental Scheme, all applicants who meet the eligibility criteria will be placed in the queue and allocated a flat when their turn is due. HDB will expedite the allocation for applicants who are in urgent need of a flat, such as those with medical grounds or other exceptional circumstances.

The Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme (PPHS) provides an additional temporary housing option for households awaiting key collection for their new HDB flats. While we are progressively increasing the PPHS supply from 800 units in 2021 to 1,800 in 2023, the supply remains limited.

Currently, families looking for temporary housing may turn to the open rental market. Providing subsidies or grants for renting flats in the open market is likely to induce demand and drive up market rents, which would compound rather than help solve matters. As such, we have no plans to provide such rental subsidies.

For low-income households with no family support and no other temporary housing options, HDB may offer them Interim Rental Housing on a case-by-case basis.

### **PROCEEDS PAID BY HDB FOR LAND FOR PUBLIC HOUSING**

31 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance with regard to the proceeds paid by HDB to the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) for public housing development (a) whether there is any net revenue collected after land costs are paid; and (b) if so, what is the average net revenue collected per year over the past five years.

**Mr Lawrence Wong:** State land is protected as past Reserves. When state land is sold, for example to HDB for the purpose of public housing development, it is a conversion of a physical asset to a financial asset. The land sale proceeds are therefore protected as past reserves and are not revenue that can be spent in the Budget. There is therefore no "net revenue" available for spending when proceeds are paid by HDB for public housing development.

### **ADJUSTMENT OF WORKLOAD FOR TEACHER-COUNSELLORS TO ALLOW THEM TO BALANCE TEACHING AND COUNSELLING DUTIES**

32 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Education how does the Ministry monitor whether schools have appropriately reduced the teaching or CCA duties for teacher-counsellors to ensure that such teachers are able to balance their teaching and counselling workloads.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing:** Guided by MOE, schools have the flexibility to reduce the teaching or other duties of teacher-counsellors to provide them more time to counsel students with moderate needs. For example, some have reduced classes or committee work. The training and deployment of teacher-counsellors is monitored at both school and Ministry levels to ensure they are adequately supported.

### **HOUSEHOLDS IN ARREARS OF HDB LOAN REPAYMENTS**

33 **Ms Sylvia Lim** asked the Minister for National Development (a) for the last two years, how many households are in arrears of HDB loan repayments; and (b) whether there is an over-representation of households in arrears where flat owners are over 55 years of age.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** As at end 2022, 16,200 households who were servicing their HDB loans were in mortgage arrears of three months or more. This represented 6% of all households with outstanding HDB loans. The corresponding figures as at end 2021 were 18,200 and 6.5%.

Of these households in mortgage arrears, about half had at least one flat owner aged 55 years and above. Nevertheless, about three-quarters of households with at least one flat owner aged 55 years and above have fully paid off their housing loans.

To help households in mortgage arrears, HDB provides one-to-one financial counselling and may assist them through measures such as allowing them to temporarily reduce or defer their loan instalments, or extend their loan tenure to reduce their monthly instalments. HDB may also refer households in financial hardship to other agencies for financial aid or other support services. For those with prolonged financial difficulty, HDB will help them explore long-term solutions, such as including working adult children as joint owners to help with the loan instalments, or right-sizing to a flat within their means. We encourage flat owners facing financial difficulties to approach HDB early, to explore options for support.

### **RANGE OF FEES CHARGED BY LASTING POWER OF ATTORNEY CERTIFICATE ISSUERS**

34 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development (a) whether the Ministry has data on the current average, upper and lower quartile costs that Lasting Power of Attorney (LPA) certificate issuers are charging today and, if so, what are they; (b) whether there are plans to implement fee guidelines to discourage LPA certificate issuers from overcharging; and (c) whether the Ministry will consider providing subsidies for the cost of applying for an LPA.

**Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M:** The Certificate Issuer plays the important role of ensuring that no undue pressure is used to induce the donor to create the Lasting Power of Attorney (LPA), and that the donor understands the purpose of the LPA and the scope of authority conferred under it.

MSF does not prescribe the fees charged, nor do we collect exhaustive data on such fees. However, to guide the public, MSF publishes the fees of the frequently-visited Certificate Issuers. As of July 2022, the fees of the top 10 most-frequented accredited medical practitioners range from \$25 to \$58, that for the top 10 most-frequented lawyers range from \$80 to \$300, and that for the top 10 most-frequented psychiatrists range from \$145 to \$442.

For financially needy persons, there are not-for-profit organisations, such as Potter's Place Community Services Society and Mount Alvernia Outreach Medical Clinic @ Enabling Village, that provide low-cost or even free services.

I would like to address the concern that Certificate Issuers may overcharge. Firstly, with the wide range of Certificate Issuers and fees, donors can choose the option that best meets their needs. Each donor's situation and mental state is different. It is also possible for an LPA to be subsequently challenged by other parties. Hence, higher fees may reflect the higher care and professional judgement required of the

Certificate Issuer in certain cases. Finally, I would echo the sentiment of a member of public, who had written to The Straits Times Forum Page pointing out that the cost of making an LPA is worth the while because obtaining deputyship in the absence of an LPA is many times more expensive and tedious.

### **APPLICATIONS TO INCLUSIVE BUSINESS PROGRAMME IN SUPPORT OF EMPLOYMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

37 **Mr Murali Pillai** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development (a) how many businesses successfully applied for the Inclusive Business Programme to support the employment of persons with disabilities at HDB shop spaces; and (b) what steps have been taken to promote the provision of more employment opportunities for such persons at the HDB estates where they live.

**Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M:** HDB and SG Enable launched the Inclusive Business Programme (IBP) in 2019 to support businesses who commit to having persons with disabilities make up at least 20% of their hired workforce, through the direct allocation of HDB shop spaces. In addition, Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) businesses supported under the IBP enjoy a 20% rental discount, for their first three years of tenancy. Since 2019, two businesses have applied for the IBP and both businesses were successful in their applications.

The Government also supports the employment and creation of persons with disabilities through a suite of employment measures. This includes job placement and job support services and grants under the Open Door Programme, as well as wage support through the Enabling Employment Credit. MSF is also developing Enabling Business Hubs (EBH), to better enhance employment support and opportunities at the regional level, closer to where persons with disabilities and caregivers live. EBHs will offer employment training, employer engagement as well as on and offsite employment for persons with disability.

### **PUBLIC SECTOR JOBS LOST DUE TO OUTSOURCING OF GOVERNMENT FUNCTIONS**

39 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Prime Minister for each year since 2000 (a) what is the estimated number of full-time public sector jobs that have been lost due to the outsourcing of Government functions to the private sector; and (b) what is the percentage of contract workers among public sector employees.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing (for the Prime Minister):** The public sector generally outsources specific services or functions when the private sector is better placed to provide these, due to its deeper expertise or greater efficiency. This approach allows the public sector to tap into the private sector's capabilities and capacity, while the public sector focuses resources on key public services and functions.

Outsourcing by the Public Service does not necessarily result in job loss for any person per se, as the work remains to be done. Impacted public officers may choose to be transferred to the outsourced entities, or be retrained and redeployed within the same agency or across the wider public service. Where functions are corporatised, officers typically continue employment with the corporatised entity on comparable terms.

As at 31 December 2021, approximately 0.66% of public officers were employed on contracts of less than a year in duration. They may be employed on contract due to various reasons such as manpower augmentation.

### **ENFORCEMENT AGAINST PMDS THAT ARE MODIFIED AFTER REGISTRATION**

41 **Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye** asked the Minister for Transport (a) how does LTA enforce against personal mobility devices (PMDs) that have been illegally modified after the device has been registered; and (b) whether an update can be provided on the number of enforcement actions taken against those who modify or sell illegally modified PMDs in the past three years.

**Mr S Iswaran:** LTA deploys enforcement officers daily to detect and enforce against active mobility offences on public paths, such as using non-compliant personal mobility devices (PMDs). LTA also conducts targeted operations against retailers who display non-compliant devices, including illegally modified ones, for sale. From January 2020 to November 2022, 295 riders were caught riding registered PMDs that were non-compliant, while 70 violations were detected from operations against retailers. Non-compliant devices are immediately seized and enforcement actions are taken against errant users or retailers found to have contravened the law.

In addition, since April 2020, e-scooters are required to undergo inspections every two years to ensure their continued compliance with regulations. E-scooters that are found to be non-compliant are automatically deregistered and are no longer allowed to be used on public paths. Since May 2022, about 4% of e-scooters undergoing periodic inspection failed the inspection and were automatically deregistered.

We will continue to press on with our enforcement and public education efforts. I urge PMD businesses and users to play their part in complying with device regulations, for their own safety and the safety of those around them.

### **REDUCING NUMBER OF FOREIGN INTERNAL COMBUSTION ENGINE VEHICLES ENTERING SINGAPORE**

43 **Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong** asked the Minister for Transport what are the Ministry's plans to gradually reduce the number of foreign internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles entering Singapore over the next few years, including goods and commercial ICE vehicles, as well as those used by foreign workers when travelling to Singapore for work.

**Mr S Iswaran:** To safeguard Singapore's air quality, the Government stipulates emission standards for foreign vehicles entering Singapore, similar to the practice for local vehicles. For instance, foreign motorcycles and passenger vehicles are not to emit any smoke or visible vapour. From 6 April 2023, foreign motorcycles will be required to meet the same minimum in-use limits on carbon monoxide and hydrocarbon emissions as local motorcycles. Foreign commercial vehicles are not to emit smoke with opacity exceeding 40 Hartridge Smoke Units. Motorists found to be non-compliant with the above regulations will be issued with composition fines.

They may also be turned back at the checkpoints if they accumulate outstanding composition fines for various offences, including non-compliance with vehicular emission standards.

The Government will continue to work with neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia, to encourage the adoption of cleaner energy vehicles and to address cross border vehicular emission issues. We are already doing this through various bilateral platforms, such as the Joint Ministerial Committee for Iskandar Malaysia and sectoral mechanisms on environmental protection.

### **CHILDREN INJURED OR KILLED IN TAXIS AND PRIVATE HIRE CARS**

44 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Home Affairs in each year for the past five years, what is the number of children under 12 years old who are injured or killed respectively in (i) taxis and (ii) private hire cars.

**Mr K Shanmugam:** Between 2018 and 2021, and from January to November 2022, no children under 12 years old were killed in taxis and private hire cars.

The number of children under 12 years old who were injured in taxis was 28 in 2018. This figure fell to 13 in 2019, eight in 2020, seven in 2021 and six from January to November 2022.

The number of children under 12 years old who were injured in private hire cars was 21 in 2018. This figure rose to 25 in 2019, and fell to nine in 2020, four in 2021 and four from January to November 2022.

### **INCREASING LOW-INCOME FAMILIES' TAKE-UP OF INTERNET ACCESS SCHEME**

45 **Dr Tan Wu Meng** asked the Minister for Communications and Information for each year in 2021 and 2022 (a) how many Home Access 3.0 applicants are required by the Internet Service Provider to put up a cash deposit as a precondition of service provision; (b) what is the range of amounts for these cash deposits; and (c) what measures are available to help low-income families who find a cash deposit requirement an obstacle to taking up the scheme.

**Mrs Josephine Teo:** The Home Access 3.0 programme provides eligible low-income households with affordable home internet connectivity through a two-year subsidised fibre broadband subscription. The assistance packages include options for a 500 megabit per second (Mbps) broadband plan and 1 Gigabit per second (Gbps) broadband plan provided by M1 and MyRepublic respectively. Over 92% of beneficiaries are on the 500 Mbps plan, which can support a typical household's digital needs such as Internet surfing, video calls and video streaming.

A security deposit is not required for M1's 500 Mbps plan, while MyRepublic's 1 Gbps plan requires a refundable security deposit of \$250 from some beneficiaries based on the company's assessment of the customer's profile. This deposit will be refunded if there are no arrears, and the contract is not prematurely terminated. Of the 19,500 beneficiaries on the Home Access 3.0 programme, about 2% had to pay the security deposit.

Alternatively, applicants may opt for M1's 500 Mbps plan which does not require a security deposit.

The Infocomm Media Development Authority reviews its schemes regularly and works closely with telcos to ensure that needy households can be supported in obtaining digital access.

## **WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

### **DETAILS ON NEXT POLITICAL SALARIES REVIEW**

1 **Ms Hazel Poa** asked the Prime Minister (a) whether he has appointed a committee to carry out the five-yearly review of political salaries, given that the last committee was appointed in 2017; (b) if so, what are the terms of reference given to the committee and when can the public expect the report from the committee; and (c) if not, when is this committee expected to be appointed and what are its expected terms of reference.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing (for the Prime Minister):** The 2012 White Paper on Salaries for a Capable and Committed Government had recommended that an independent committee be appointed every five years to review the salary framework for political appointment holders.

In 2018, the Government provided its response to the latest review of political salaries by an independent committee. The committee had concluded then that the salary framework remained relevant and sound, and its recommendations included adjusting the salary levels of political appointment holders to match the updated benchmark. The Government decided not to make any changes to political salaries, since the economy was still in transition. The Government indicated then that it would review the matter again after five years, or when it becomes necessary.

The next political salaries review is targeted for 2023 and we will share more details in due course.

### **REMUNERATION OF JUDGES UNDER JUDGES REMUNERATION ACT 1994**

2 **Ms Hazel Poa** asked the Prime Minister (a) what are the fixed and variable non-pensionable pay components, allowances, and benefits accorded to Supreme Court Judges under the Judges' Remuneration Act 1994; (b) what are the rates at which the retirement and death gratuities are accrued for these judges; and (c) whether the remuneration of judges is benchmarked against that of political office holders.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing (for the Prime Minister):** The annual salary package of Supreme Court Judge consists of six components: gross monthly salary, Annual Variable Component, Non-Pensionable Annual Allowance, Performance Bonus, National Bonus and Judiciary Allowance. The gross monthly salary comprises both fixed and variable components. Except for the Judiciary Allowance and the fixed monthly salary components, the other components may vary depending on economic conditions and individual performance. This structure is the same as civil servants of the equivalent substantive grade.

The types of leave and medical benefits, including the retirement and death gratuity rates, are the same as civil servants of the equivalent substantive grade.

The remuneration of judges has its own separate benchmark and is not linked to that of political office holders.

### **SUSPICIOUS TRANSACTION REPORTS RECEIVED BY COMMERCIAL AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT**

3 **Ms Sylvia Lim** asked the Minister for Home Affairs (a) what is the average number of suspicious transaction reports (STRs) received annually by the Commercial Affairs Department for the past three years; and (b) what percentage of these STRs resulted in prosecutions for money-laundering and terrorism-financing offences.

**Mr K Shanmugam:** The Suspicious Transaction Reporting Office (STRO) of the Commercial Affairs Department received an average of 37,000 suspicious transaction reports (STRs) annually between 2019 and 2021.

The STRO does not track the number of STRs by prosecution outcomes.

About 20% of the STRs disseminated to domestic law enforcement agencies between 2019 and 2021 led to commencement of investigations or supported investigations.

### **BREAKDOWN OF GOVERNMENT LAND SALES REVENUE BY USAGE**

4 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Minister for Law in each of the past five years, what proportion of Government land sales revenue is attributable to (i) commercial (including hotel and white sites) (ii) industrial (iii) private residential and (iv) public residential (HDB), respectively.

**Mr K Shanmugam:** The sale of state land to the private sector for development is primarily conducted through the Government Land Sales Programme (GLS). HDB, JTC Corporation and URA are appointed as the Government's land sales agents.

From FY2017 to FY2021, sales proceeds of state land from GLS averaged \$5.5 billion annually. This includes GLS sites for commercial, industrial<sup>1</sup>, private residential, mixed-use (such as mixed commercial and residential developments) and other uses. The historical data on tender prices for GLS sites and their specific uses can be found on the HDB, URA and JTC websites.

Sale of state land to HDB for public residential development does not fall under GLS. For information on proceeds to SLA paid by HDB for the purchase of state land, the Member may refer to HDB's annual financial statements reports, which are published on HDB's website.

As explained before in this House<sup>2</sup>, state land is part of past reserves. When land is sold, no wealth is created. The physical land, which is part of the reserves, is converted into money which goes into the reserves. The proceeds from the sale of state land thus go to the past reserves. The Government cannot use these monies.

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Note(s) to Question No(s) 4:

<sup>1</sup> Refers to sale of State land by JTC under the Industrial GLS programme.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Singapore Parl Debates; Vol 95, Sitting No 73; 7 November 2022.

### **EXPECTED CHANGE IN OUTPUT OF NON-SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTS IN JURONG ISLAND FROM 2019 LEVELS**

5 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Trade and Industry based on the definition of "sustainable products" in the Sustainable Jurong Island report, what is the expected change in output of non-sustainable products in Jurong Island from 2019 levels (i) by 2030 and (ii) by 2051.

**Mr Gan Kim Yong:** The Sustainable Jurong Island strategy aims to increase the output of sustainable products manufactured on Jurong Island to 1.5 times 2019 levels by 2030 and four times 2019 levels by 2050<sup>1</sup>. This growth is expected to exceed that of all other products, as companies seize green growth opportunities and pursue their emissions targets.

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Note(s) to Question No(s) 5:

<sup>1</sup> Actual production levels will however depend on global demand, the feasibility of sustainable production pathways and the competitiveness of production in Singapore.

### **PROPORTION OF HOUSEHOLDS OWNING TWO OF MORE CARS**

6 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Minister for Transport what is the current proportion of households that own two or more cars and which are (i) HDB households (ii) condominium households and (iii) landed property households respectively.

**Mr S Iswaran:** As of 30 November 2022, about 15% of car-owning households own two or more cars, and the number of such households is roughly the same across HDB, condominium and landed property.

**USE OF LOW-NOISE ROAD SURFACING PAVEMENT MIXES ALONG SELETAR EXPRESSWAY INTERSECTING  
ESTATES OF SENGKANG AND PUNGGOL**

7 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Minister for Transport in light of successful trials on low-noise road surfacing pavement mixes, whether there are any plans to utilise the technology for the stretch of road along Seletar Expressway that intersects the estates of Sengkang and Punggol.

**Mr S Iswaran:** LTA will continue to evaluate and implement measures to reduce noise along stretches of expressways near residential areas. For the stretch of Tampines Expressway that intersects the estates of Sengkang and Punggol, LTA has plans to implement the low-noise pavement mix in 2025.

**DOLLAR AMOUNT AND PERCENTAGE INCREASE OF 25 VEHICLE-RELATED FEES FROM 19 DECEMBER  
2022**

8 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for Transport with the increase of vehicle-related fees from 19 December 2022 (a) for each of the 25 raised fees, what are the respective dollar amount and percentage increases; and (b) what is the expected annual revenue increase arising from each fee increment.

**Mr S Iswaran:** Many of LTA's vehicle-related fees have been unchanged over many years. The 25 fees have not been increased in at least five years, and in some cases more than 10 years. However, operational requirements, such as enhancing data security measures, have increased. Fees therefore have to be adjusted to ensure that we are able to recover the administrative costs of providing these services.

The full list of services with adjusted fees is available on OneMotoring. The dollar increases range from \$1.07 to \$130, with most fees experiencing about a 10% to 40% increase, depending on the base rate of the fee. The details are as follows.



S/N	Service	Previous Rate*	Revised Rate*	Dollar Increase	% Increase
1	Vehicle Registration	\$220.00	\$350.00	\$130.00	59%
2	Processing Fee for Vehicle Registration at LTA Counter	\$26.75	\$27.82	\$1.07	4%
3	TCOE or PARF/COE Rebate Transfer	\$15.00	\$20.00	\$5.00	33%
4	Admin Fee for eBidding	\$10.70	\$18.19	\$7.49	70%
5	Vehicle Lay-Up	\$17.12	\$23.54	\$6.42	38%
6	Amendment Fee	\$32.10	\$41.73	\$9.63	30%
7	PARF/COE Rebate Split	\$16.05	\$21.40	\$5.35	33%
8	Application for Special Purpose Licence / Autonomous Vehicle Authorisation	\$25.68	\$28.89	\$3.21	13%
9	Issue of Duplicates (General Licence and Special Purpose Licence)	\$16.05	\$53.50	\$37.45	233%
10	Search for Vehicle Insurance (Online)	\$7.49	\$26.75	\$19.26	257%
11	Search for Deregistered Vehicle Details / TCOE Details (Online)	\$7.49	\$18.19	\$10.70	143%
12	Vehicle Type Approval (Motorcycle)	\$128.40	\$141.24	\$12.84	10%
13	Vehicle Type Approval (Other Vehicles)	\$385.20	\$423.72	\$38.52	
14	Extension to Type Approval / Facelift / Re-certification (Motorcycle)	\$42.80	\$53.50	\$10.70	25%
15	Extension to Type Approval / Facelift / Re-certification (Other Vehicles)	\$128.40	\$141.24	\$12.84	10%
16	Batch Vehicles Approval (Motorcycle)	\$89.88	\$107.00	\$17.12	19%
17	Batch Vehicles Approval (Other Vehicles)	\$256.80	\$269.64	\$12.84	5%
18	Registration				

	Inspection (with VE Approval)	\$64.20	\$70.62	\$6.42	
19	Registration Inspection (without VE Approval)	\$32.10	\$35.31	\$3.21	10%
20	Drawing Approval	\$385.20	\$423.72	\$38.52	
21	Change of Vehicle Particulars (with VE Approval)	\$64.20	\$70.62	\$6.42	
22	Change of Vehicle Particulars (without VE Approval)	\$25.68	\$28.89	\$3.21	13%
23	Vehicle Accessory Approval / Extension to Vehicle Accessory Approval	\$214.00	\$267.50	\$53.50	25%
24	Vehicle Recall (Notification)	\$64.20	\$70.62	\$6.42	10%
25	Search of Technical Information of Deregistered Vehicle for Export	\$42.80	\$47.08	\$4.28	10%

**\*Inclusive of GST (as at 19 December 2022) where applicable.**

The fees collected are to cover the higher administrative costs of providing these services, which would otherwise be borne by taxpayers.

#### **RISE IN PRICES OF POPULAR FOOD ITEMS IN VIEW OF LUNAR NEW YEAR**

9 **Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye** asked Minister for Sustainability and the Environment in view of the upcoming Lunar New Year festive period (a) whether the prices of popular food items, such as seafood and poultry, are expected to rise significantly; and (b) whether more public education will be done to encourage consumers to consider purchasing food items imported from non-traditional source countries.

**Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien:** Like the cost of many other items, food prices are determined by supply and demand conditions. In recent months, factors such as rising energy and production costs, supply disruptions caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, COVID-19 pandemic and policies by foreign governments and varying weather conditions have caused inflationary pressures. In addition, higher demand for popular food items such as specific types of seafood and poultry during festive periods is expected to contribute to higher prices as seen in past years.

To encourage consumers to consider different food types and forms, the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) has been continually putting out public communications and facilitating the promotion of food from alternative sources. SFA will continue to regularly remind consumers and the industry to be flexible and adaptable to different food types and forms (fresh/chilled, frozen, processed).

#### **OUTCOME OF TRANSPARENT RECYCLING BIN TRIALS LAUNCHED IN BUKIT BATOK, BEDOK AND UPPER CHANGI**

10 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment (a) what are the results of the transparent recycling bin trials that were launched in Bukit Batok, Bedok, and Upper Changi; (b) whether the Ministry has plans to expand this scheme to other parts of Singapore; and (c) what other innovations and interventions have been explored to decrease the proportion of contaminated and non-recyclable items collected and increase the rate of proper recycling.

**Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien:** The results of the transparent recycling bin trials are being compiled. My Ministry will be publishing a report on the findings in due course.

My Ministry and NEA have launched other initiatives to improve recycling behaviour. In January 2022, as part of the Recycle Right campaign, NEA introduced a new recycling mascot, Bloobin, as well as educational and user-friendly content to encourage the community to cultivate right recycling habits. A search engine has also been developed to guide residents on how to identify, segregate and clean items so that they can be properly recycled ([www.go.gov.sg/recycleright](http://www.go.gov.sg/recycleright)).

To encourage households to build the habit of recycling right at home, NEA launched the pilot phase of the Bloobox (or recycling box) distribution initiative in November 2022 in five constituencies – Fengshan, Sembawang West, Tampines North, Yio Chu Kang and Yuhua. Households from these constituencies were able to collect a Bloobox from vending machines deployed at locations such as community

centres. The Bloobox can be used to hold recyclable items at home and has prominent labels to help households identify what can and cannot be placed in the blue recycle bins. Collection for the rest of Singapore will commence in March 2023.

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes also contribute to proper recycling as they aggregate clean and high-quality recyclables. The e-waste EPR that was introduced in July 2021 has since collected 8,600 tonnes of e-waste. We also plan to implement a beverage container return scheme, where a small deposit is included in the price of the pre-packaged beverages. Consumers can obtain a refund of their deposit by returning empty beverage containers to designated return points. This will drive behaviour change and cultivate recycling habits in the community.

### **GUIDELINES FOR DEPLOYMENT OF LED WREATHS AT FUNERAL WAKES**

11 **Dr Tan Wu Meng** asked the Minister for the Sustainability and the Environment what responsibilities and precautions are required of funeral services providers so as to (i) avoid power trips and/or short circuits especially when electricity supplies at common areas are being used and (ii) ensure electrical safety, including the safety of passers-by, when LED wreaths are deployed, particularly in situations where the LED wreath is exposed to the elements including rainfall and water.

12 **Dr Tan Wu Meng** asked the Minister for the Sustainability and the Environment whether there is any requirement for LED wreaths' electrical components to be water-resistant or waterproof, when the LED wreath may be deployed at a location where it may be exposed to rainfall.

**Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien:** NEA has worked with the Association of Funeral Directors Singapore to develop guidelines for the funeral services industry and premises owners on the usage of light-emitting wreaths at funeral wakes to address potential public disamenities and safety concerns. The guidelines can be found on NEA's website.

Under the guidelines, any persons or companies who deploy or install light-emitting wreaths shall be responsible for the safe use of these wreaths at funeral wakes, and must obtain the Town Councils' or relevant authorities' written permission for the use of these wreaths and associated electrical installation works at public spaces. Where generators are used, a supply installation licence is required, and generator providers and funeral services providers must engage a licensed electrical worker to ensure that the electrical circuitry and connections are done safely.

In addition, under the guidelines, the deployment of light-emitting wreaths shall be confined to the funeral wake area and is subject to approvals from Town Councils or relevant authorities. Funeral services providers and companies shall only deploy not more than 10 light-emitting wreaths at each funeral wake area. They should not obstruct the designated pedestrian walkways and pavements, to not affect the passageway of pedestrians on foot or in a wheelchair. They should also not obstruct any fire safety provisions or be placed within five metres from any fire hydrant.

NEA will continue to work with stakeholders to implement the guidelines at funeral wakes to ensure a safe environment for all.

### **APPEALS FOR REVIEW OF 2022 PSLE RESULTS FOR MATHEMATICS PAPER AND OUTCOMES**

13 **Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan** asked the Minister for Education (a) how many appeals were received after the 2022 PSLE results were released for the Mathematics paper; and (b) how many were successful in their appeal and had their scores adjusted to a better grade.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing:** About 1.5% of the 2022 PSLE cohort appealed to review their results for the Mathematics subject.

A thorough check of the marking and accuracy of mark entries was conducted by independent senior markers for all students who had appealed for a review of their PSLE grades. One student had a change in grade in PSLE Mathematics. The rest were in order.

### **SUBSIDISED MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMMES AT AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITIES**

14 **Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim** asked the Minister for Education (a) what is the percentage of the Master's degree programmes at all six Autonomous Universities in Singapore that are currently subsidised by the Ministry; (b) what is the target year in which all such programmes are to be fully self-funded; and (c) whether there is any such programmes that have ceased for lack of funding and Government subsidies.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing:** At postgraduate level, the Autonomous Universities (AUs) decide whether to seek MOE funding for Master's by coursework programmes, based on considerations such as the viability of offering these programmes on a non-subsidised basis.

Around 20% of Master's by coursework programmes at the AUs are subsidised by MOE, including those that serve as entry requirements for certain professions such as architecture. There is no target for Master's by coursework programmes at the AUs to be self-funded.

### **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS LIVING IN PUBLIC RENTAL FLATS AT POINT OF ADMISSION INTO PLACES OF SAFETY FROM 2018 TO 2021**

15 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development for each year from 2018 to 2021, of the new admissions to places of safety and juvenile homes (a) what percentage of these children live in public rental flats; and (b) whether the Ministry intends to collect this data if such data is unavailable.

**Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M:** Children and young persons (CYPs) in need of care or protection may be referred by MSF or ordered by the Youth Court to reside in a place of safety. The two juvenile homes – Singapore Boys' Home and Singapore Girls' Home – are also places of safety.

Table 1 below provides the percentage of CYPs who lived in public rental flats based on the year of their admission to places of safety.

**Table 1: Percentage of CYPs living in public rental flats at point of admission into places of safety**

	2018	2019	2020	2021
% CYPs living in public rental flats at point of admission	40	31	39	35

**CHILD PROTECTION INVESTIGATIONS BY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES AND PERCENTAGE OF INVESTIGATIONS WHERE CHILDREN ARE DETERMINED AS ABUSED OR NEGLECTED**

16 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development in each of the past five years (a) what is the number of child protection investigations made by the Child Protective Services; and (b) how many and what percentage of the investigations are the children or young persons determined to have been abused or neglected by their parents or caregivers.

**Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M:** The number of investigations carried out by MSF's Child Protective Service (CPS) in the last five years is available on the MSF website.

About 90% of these cases investigated by CPS involved child abuse or neglect by their parents or caregivers. The rest involved abuse by siblings or other relatives.

**PROPOSAL TO CAPTURE INFORMATION ON THE PREVALENCE OF VAPING AND OTHER FORMS OF E-CIGARETTES IN FUTURE NATIONAL POPULATION HEALTH SURVEYS**

17 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Health whether the Ministry will consider capturing information pertaining to the prevalence of vaping as well as other forms of e-cigarettes in future rounds of the National Population Health Survey.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** We have included questions on vaping in the National Population Health Survey. However, due to the illegal nature of vaping products, self-reported data from a survey conducted by health authorities may not be reliable. MOH is reviewing various methods to better estimate the vaping prevalence.

**IMPACT OF ONLINE SHOPPING WEBSITES AND PLATFORMS ON REGULATION OF HEALTH AND COSMETICS PRODUCTS**

18 **Mr Saktiandi Supaat** asked the Minister for Health (a) how has the ubiquity of online shopping websites and platforms affected the Ministry's or the Health Sciences Authority's preventative regulation of health products and cosmetic products; (b) what are the lessons learnt from the recent episode where a four-year-old child was hospitalised after using a skin cream; and (c) how can Singapore residents be better enabled to discern HSA-approved products from non-approved products.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** Pharmaceutical medicines are stringently evaluated by Health Sciences Authority (HSA) before approval as they contain potent medicinal ingredients and are used in the management of medical conditions and diseases. Approved medicines are listed on HSA's website: <https://www.hsa.gov.sg/e-services/infosearch>. Complementary health products and cosmetic products do not require approval by HSA but need to meet stipulated standards for safety and quality, and the addition of potent medicinal ingredients is prohibited.

For all marketed health products, HSA conducts post-market surveillance to monitor their safety. Local websites and e-commerce platforms are monitored to detect and disrupt illegal online sales of adulterated health products.

Consumers play an important role in safeguarding themselves against potentially harmful health products. HSA regularly issues press releases on the sales of illegal health products as well as advisories on making discerning choices in the purchase of health products. HSA issued a press release advising particular caution when purchasing products for use in young children following the recent detection of an adulterated skin cream used on a four-year-old child. The case is currently under investigation. Anyone caught selling adulterated health products can be fined up to \$100,000 and/or jailed for up to three years.

**LONGER WAITING TIMES AT EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS OF HOSPITALS LOCATED IN PERIPHERAL RESIDENTIAL TOWNS**

19 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Health (a) why do hospitals located in peripheral residential towns such as Changi General Hospital, Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, Sengkang General Hospital and Khoo Teck Puat Hospital have longer inpatient admission waiting times at their emergency departments (EDs) when compared to hospitals located in the central part of Singapore; and (b) what can the Ministry do to better ease the load distribution of ED cases across all public hospitals in Singapore.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** There are two possible reasons. First, tertiary hospitals in the central region like Tan Tock Seng Hospital, Singapore General Hospital and National University Hospital were built with larger bed capacities to cater to comprehensive healthcare needs. Second, regional hospitals being located in housing estates cater to the high demand for healthcare services by residents, especially during the pandemic.

New hospital bed capacity will be progressively added with the opening of Woodland Health Campus and Tan Tock Seng Hospital Integrated Care Hub from 2023. A new hospital in the Eastern region is also being planned to meet bed demand. More importantly, our population needs to stay healthy, which is why we launched the Healthier SG national strategy.

#### **NUMBER OF PATIENTS IN RESTRUCTURED HOSPITALS WITH PROCEDURES POSTPONED OR CANCELLED DUE TO INABILITY TO PUT UP REQUISITE DEPOSIT**

20 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Health in each of the last five years, how many patients in the restructured hospitals have had their procedures either (i) postponed or (ii) cancelled, due to an inability to put up the requisite deposit before the scheduled procedure or treatment was meant to take place, as broken down into residency status.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** This question has been addressed in my reply to Question No 20 for Oral answer on the Order Paper for 10 January 2023.

#### **SUFFICIENCY OF MEDICAL SUPPLIES TO MEET DEMAND DUE TO INCREASED COVID-19 INFECTIONS**

21 **Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim** asked the Minister for Health (a) what is the current status of the stockpile for medical supplies such as oxygenators and pulse oximeters; and (b) whether Singapore has sufficient buffer to meet any increase in demand in the event of an increase in COVID-19 infections.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** This question has been addressed in my reply to Question Nos 7 and 8 for Oral answer on the Order Paper for 10 January 2023.

#### **CHILDREN DIAGNOSED WITH ACHONDROPLASIA AND FUNDING ITS TREATMENT UNDER RARE DISEASE FUND**

22 **Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong** asked the Minister for Health (a) how many children in Singapore are diagnosed with Achondroplasia in the past 10 years; (b) what are the current prospects of funding the treatment of Achondroplasia under the Rare Disease Fund; and (c) whether the Ministry will engage the manufacturers of Voxzogo to achieve more affordable access to the drug.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** Achondroplasia is a genetic condition that causes abnormal bone and cartilage growth, leading to short stature and disproportionate growth. MOH does not collect data on the number of patients diagnosed with achondroplasia, but globally, the condition affects around one in every 30,000 newborns.

The drug Vosoritide, sold under the brand name Voxzogo, is intended to increase linear growth in children with achondroplasia. Vosoritide is currently not registered in Singapore. MOH has therefore not assessed the drug for clinical and cost effectiveness, nor conducted pricing negotiations with the manufacturer.

Further, given the limited size of the Rare Disease Fund (RDF), funding support is focused on rare conditions that are life-threatening and where the treatment is effective in extending the patient's lifespan.

Vosoritide is just one example. With medical advances, there will be novel and high-cost treatments for many medical conditions. Healthcare authorities in the world are finding themselves needing to review their healthcare financing policy, including healthcare insurance system, to ensure treatments remain cost effective and affordable.

#### **PROPOSAL TO REQUIRE PRIVATE RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY DEVELOPERS TO INCORPORATE MULTI-PURPOSE HALL IN CONDOMINIUM DEVELOPMENTS**

23 **Mr Gan Thiam Poh** asked the Minister for National Development whether the Ministry will implement a rule requiring all private residential property developers to incorporate a multi-purpose hall in condominium developments that will allow their own residents to hold functions including private wakes, without affecting or causing inconveniences to other residents in the estate.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** URA has an existing bonus Gross Floor Area (GFA) scheme to incentivise private developers to provide indoor communal spaces. Today, most private developers provide communal facilities such as function rooms to cater to residents' needs. These communal spaces can be used for private wakes, if the Management Corporation Strata Title (MCST) of the private residential development allows it.

There are also other spaces available for funeral wakes, including purpose-built funeral parlours and places of worship.

#### **APPEALS FOR WAIVER OF 15-MONTH WAIT-OUT PERIOD BY DIVORCED PRIVATE RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY OWNERS**

24 **Mr Don Wee** asked the Minister for National Development (a) how many appeals have been made for the waiver of the 15-month wait-out period where the private property owners had commenced divorce proceedings prior to the announcement of the wait-out period in September 2022, with the intention to purchase a resale HDB flat thereafter; (b) how many of these appeals have been successful; and (c) what are the guidelines used by the Ministry to consider these appeals.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** As part of the property cooling measures introduced on 30 September 2022, private residential property owners (PPOs) and ex-PPOs are required to serve a wait-out period of 15 months after the disposal of their private properties before they are eligible to buy a non-subsidised resale flat. This is a temporary measure to help moderate demand for resale flats.

Between 30 September and 30 November 2022, HDB received about 120 appeals from PPOs/ex-PPOs who had commenced divorce proceedings prior to the introduction of the 15-month wait-out period, with the intention to purchase a resale HDB flat after the divorce. Thus far, 64 appeals have been processed, and about 52% of them were successful.

HDB is progressively reviewing the remaining appeals received. HDB evaluates each appeal carefully on a case-by-case basis based on the individual merits, such as whether the appellants have made some form of commitment to the purchase of a resale flat prior to 30 September 2022, or whether the appellants are in financial difficulties and would not have viable housing options.

**PLANS TO INCREASE GRANTS TO TOWN COUNCILS TO COPE WITH HIGHER COSTS**

25 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Minister for National Development whether the Ministry has any plans to increase its grant to Town Councils to cope with higher costs, including for electricity and other Town Council contracts.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** Town Councils (TCs) are autonomous legal entities formed under the TCs Act and managed by elected Members of Parliament. The TCs are responsible for their financial sustainability, through managing their income and expenses prudently.

We understand TCs face higher costs due to higher energy prices, manpower costs and costs of maintenance services. Such cost increases are not unique to Singapore and the Government has taken steps to partially cushion the impact on residents. To help TCs cope with costs, the Government provides grants such as the Service and Conservancy Charges (S&CC) Operating Grant, Lift Maintenance Grant, GST Subvention Grant and Lift Replacement Fund Matching Grant. Collectively, these grants to TCs amount to about \$239 million a year.

The Government will continue to monitor the larger macroeconomic environment, cost drivers affecting TCs, their income sources and overall financial positions, and assess if further funding support is required.

**NUMBER OF BTO FLATS WITH SHORTER WAITING TIMES LAUNCHED EACH YEAR**

26 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for National Development since the introduction of Build-To-Order (BTO) flats with shorter waiting times in 2018 (a) what is (i) the number of such flats that are launched in each year and (ii) the proportion of such flats versus the total number of BTO flats launched in each year; and (b) what is the expected proportion of shorter waiting time for BTO flats as a percentage of launches from 2023 to 2025.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** Since 2018, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) has offered close to 11,000 Build-To-Order (BTO) flats with shorter waiting times of less than three years. The number and proportion of such flats launched each year are tabulated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Supply of Flats with Shorter Waiting Time (SWT)**

Year	Number of Flats with Shorter Waiting Time Launched	Number of BTO Flats Launched	Proportion of SWT over BTO Supply for the Year
2018	1,096	15,817	7%
2019	2,560	14,591	18%
2020	2,850	16,752	17%
2021	2,522	17,109	15%
2022	1,839	23,184	8%

BTO flats with shorter waiting times are achieved primarily by starting construction works before the BTO projects are launched for sale, often about one year ahead.

To meet strong housing demand in the near-term, HDB will be launching up to 23,000 flats in 2023, with a total of up to 100,000 new flats from 2021 to 2025 if needed. Where possible, HDB will launch BTO projects with shorter waiting times. Details on flats with shorter waiting times in our sales launches will be announced at a later date.

## NUMBER OF SHORT-LEASE 2-ROOM FLEXI FLATS AND COMMUNITY CARE APARTMENTS LAUNCHED IN PAST FIVE YEARS

27 **Mr Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap** asked the Minister for National Development (a) in each of the past five years, how many (i) short-lease 2-room Flexi flats and (ii) Community Care Apartments has HDB launched for sale; (b) how many persons have applied for these flats; (c) how many persons are unsuccessful; (d) what are the main reasons for the unsuccessful applications; and (e) of those who are unsuccessful, how many were already living in 4-room or larger HDB flats.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** Between 2017 and 2021, HDB offered about 21,200 2-room Flexi flats. In 2021, HDB launched the first Community Care Apartment (CCA) pilot at Bukit Batok with about 170 units. About 18,300 seniors applied for the 2-room Flexi flats, and about 600 seniors applied for the CCAs. Seniors who are successful in their applications can select their preferred lease tenure during their flat booking appointment.

For 2-room Flexi flats, as with other flat types, application rates vary across projects depending on their locations and attributes. To maximise applicants' chances of securing a flat, HDB invites more applicants for flat booking than the available flat supply, as some applicants who are successful in the ballot may not book a flat. Overall, between 2017 and 2021, about four in five seniors who applied for the 2-room Flexi flats were successful. The remaining one in five seniors were unsuccessful as they applied for popular projects which were over-subscribed. For the CCAs, about one in two applications were unsuccessful.

About half of the seniors who were unsuccessful in their applications for 2-room Flexi flats or CCAs were already living in a 4-room or larger HDB flat at the point of application.

### PRIVATE RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY TRANSACTIONS MADE BY CITIZENS, PRS, FOREIGNERS AND COMPANIES

28 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for National Development for each of the last 10 years, what percentage of private residential property transactions are attributed to (i) Singapore Citizens (ii) Permanent Residents (iii) foreigners (iv) companies that are majority-owned by Singaporeans and (v) companies that are majority-owned by non-Singaporeans.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** Information on the breakdown of private residential property transactions for each of the last 10 years is in Table 1.

**Table 1: Breakdown of private residential property transactions**

Year	Share of units purchased by Singaporeans (%)	Share of units purchased by PRs (%)	Share of units purchased by Foreigners (%)	Share of units purchased by Companies	
				Local (%)	Foreign (%)
2013	73.7%	13.0%	7.5%	4.7%	1.0%
2014	73.8%	16.6%	8.4%	0.7%	0.5%
2015	77.3%	16.4%	5.6%	0.6%	0.1%
2016	77.9%	15.8%	5.6%	0.5%	0.2%
2017	78.6%	14.2%	5.4%	1.5%	0.2%
2018	79.2%	14.4%	5.3%	1.0%	0.2%
2019	79.4%	15.0%	5.1%	0.4%	0.1%
2020	81.8%	14.4%	3.4%	0.4%	0.0%
2021	82.6%	13.8%	3.1%	0.4%	0.1%
2022	79.9%	16.1%	3.5%	0.4%	0.0%

Notes:

- a) The figures are based on IRAS stamp duty records as of 15 December 2022. Percentages may not add up due to rounding.
- b) Local companies are defined (based on DOS' classification) as firms with at least 50% local equity.

### NUMBER OF HDB FLATS THAT HAVE NOT BEEN RESOLD BY THEIR FIRST OWNER

29 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for National Development what is the current number of HDB flats that have not been resold by their first owner.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** HDB flats are primarily meant for owner-occupation, and hence all flat owners are subjected to a five-year Minimum Occupation Period (MOP), or a 10-year MOP for Prime Location Public Housing (PLH) flats, before they can sell their flat on the open market.

As at December 2022, there are about 379,700 flats purchased from HDB that have not been resold by their first owner.

Flat owners resell their flats for various reasons, such as to purchase a larger flat to accommodate a growing family, or to right-size for their needs. They may also prefer to move nearer to ageing parents or their children for mutual care and support.

#### **DATA ON PROPORTION OF GREENFIELD AND BROWNFIELD SITES FOR PUBLIC HOUSING DEVELOPMENT**

30 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for National Development for each year over the last 10 years and for expected future HDB BTO launches (a) what is the proportion of greenfield and brownfield land sites for public housing development; (b) what is the number of greenfield and brownfield land sites; and (c) what is the number of flats in each site respectively.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** Generally, greenfield sites are land parcels that were not previously developed, while brownfield sites are land parcels that have been previously developed or are vacant, infill parcels amidst existing developments.

Approximately half of the sites used for public housing developments over the past 10 years were greenfield, for example, in Punggol, Tampines North and Tengah. The brownfield sites were mainly infill developments in mature towns, for example, Bukit Merah and Kallang Whampoa. Annually, there were about 10 to 20 greenfield sites, that yielded approximately 5,900 to 14,900 flats. For brownfield sites, there were about five to 20 sites, that yielded approximately 2,900 to 13,100 flats.

Details of future Build-To-Order (BTO) launches depend on the prevailing demand and will be shared when ready.

#### **APPROVALS TO FLAT OWNERS TO SUBLET ENTIRE PROPERTY RESCINDED DUE TO NUISANCE CAUSED BY TENANTS**

31 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for National Development in each of the last 10 years, how many HDB residential lessees have had their approvals to sublet the entire property rescinded due to nuisance caused by their tenants.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** Flat owners who rent out their flat must comply with the applicable Terms and Conditions (T&Cs). These include the need to conduct regular checks on their tenants to ensure that there is no breach of the T&Cs, that the flat is only occupied by the registered tenants and that tenants do not create nuisance to the neighbours. HDB may terminate the rental approval if flat owners fail to adhere to any of the conditions within the T&Cs.

In the last five years, HDB received a total of about 600 pieces of public feedback on nuisance caused by tenants. For such feedback, HDB generally adopts a mediative approach, and advises flat owners to remind their tenants to be mindful of actions which may cause disturbance to other residents. This approach resolved about 80% of the feedback received. Hence, the vast majority of such feedback is resolved without the need for any tenancy actions.

For the remaining cases where the nuisance persists, the flat owners took action to terminate the tenancy with the tenants.

#### **PERCENTAGE OF ACTIVESG CREDITS UNUSED AS OF 31 DECEMBER 2022**

32 **Dr Lim Wee Kiak** asked the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (a) what percentage of ActiveSG credits has been left unused as of 31 December 2022; and (b) whether the Ministry will extend the expiry date of the unused ActiveSG credits considering that many ActiveSG programmes have been cancelled and facilities closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai:** Since 2014, new Singapore Citizen and Permanent Resident members who sign up for ActiveSG membership will be given free ActiveSG credits worth \$100. ActiveSG members who utilise their credits at least once during the year could have their balance credits extended to the end of the following year. This would mean that the credits would be valid for more than a year, to the end of the subsequent year.

In addition to this, given that there were fewer opportunities to utilise the credits during the COVID-19 period, SportSG granted ActiveSG members further unconditional extension of any unused credits for further successive periods up to 31 December 2022, that is, even if no credits were utilised in the course of the year.

ActiveSG members who have utilised their credits at least once in the course of 2022, could have their balance credits extended up to 31 December 2023.

Apart from this, there will be no other extensions of credit to ActiveSG members. The credits have already been valid (and extended) for a period of time, and, since early 2022, SportSG's facilities and programmes have resumed to pre-COVID-19 norms. Members have been able to use their ActiveSG credits to book a sports facility or sign up for a sports programme. To accommodate more users, SportSG also increased its number of programmes by 70% in 2022 as compared to 2021.

As of 31 December 2022, about 639,000 ActiveSG members have remaining credits in their e-wallets.

SportSG will continue to encourage and support Singaporeans to participate widely and actively in sports and physical activities through other existing and new measures and programmes.



DATA ON TRAINING EMPLOYMENT PASSES AND TRAINING WORK PERMITS ISSUED IN LAST 10 YEARS

33 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for Manpower in each of the last 10 years (a) how many Training Employment Passes (TEPs) and Training Work Permits (TWPs) have been issued; (b) what is the average duration of TEPs and TWPs respectively; (c) how many extensions have been granted; (d) how many TEPs and TWPs have been converted to other work passes upon their expiry; and (e) what are the average and median salaries of TEP and TWP holders.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** The Training Employment Pass (TEP) and Training Work Permit (TWP) are short-term passes to allow employers to take on foreign trainees or students for training.

The TEP is for eligible foreign students or foreign trainees undergoing training in Singapore. As specified on the MOM website, TEP candidates must either earn a fixed monthly salary of at least \$3,000 or be foreign students from a defined list of institutions. In addition, for foreign students, the training attachment in Singapore must be part of the student's course of study. The TEP is valid for up to three months. MOM also works with sector agencies to grant flexibilities in certain cases, for instance, for clinical fellowship training programmes where durations are typically longer. Such flexibilities are provided judiciously, and the majority of the TEPs are issued for a validity of three months.

The TWP is for eligible unskilled or semi-skilled foreign trainees or students on practical training in Singapore. While there is no minimum qualifying salary, TWPs are subject to the Dependency Ratio Ceiling (DRC) and levies, similar to Work Permit holders. The TWP is valid for up to six months and the average duration is therefore six months.

Both the TEP and TWP are non-renewable. There is no automatic conversion of TEP and TWP to other work passes upon their expiry. Employers have to apply for a work pass should they wish to take on the TEP or TWP holder as an employee, and the TEP or TWP holder must satisfy the prevailing work pass criteria on their own merit.

Table 1 shows the historical annual average of the statistics requested for TEPs and TWPs over the period of 2013 to 2021<sup>1</sup>.

Table 1: Historical Annual Average (based on 2013 – 2021 data)

Pass Type	Number of Passes Issued	Average Salary	Median Salary
TEP	5,200	\$2,100	\$1,300
TWP	3,600	\$800	\$700

Note(s) to Question No(s) 33:

<sup>1</sup> Full-year data for 2022 is not available.

REQUESTS FOR CREDIT BUREAU RATINGS OF JOB APPLICANTS AND EMPLOYEE BY NON-MAS REGULATED EMPLOYERS

34 **Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan** asked the Minister for Manpower whether employers or companies other than those regulated by MAS can mandate, collect or demand from job applicants and employees their credit bureau ratings instead of doing their own searches.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** All employers are to abide by the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices (TGFEF), which set out accepted standards of fair and merit-based employment. As laid out in the TGFEF, employers should only request for personal information from jobseekers and employees where there is a legitimate purpose for doing so. For job roles that require a high degree of trust and integrity, and control over company resources and finances, an employer may request from the jobseeker information on credit bureau rating as it would be relevant in assessing the individual's suitability for the job.

Employers may not obtain credit reports directly from the credit bureaux. Under the Credit Bureau Act, if not for the purposes of credit assessment by a member of the credit bureau, usually financial institutions, a credit bureau licensed by MAS is not permitted to provide the credit report of an individual to any third party, including an employer, without the consent of the individual.

Jobseekers and employees who face issues can approach the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) for advice and assistance. Employers may also approach TAFEP for advice if unclear.

VERNACULAR SPEECHES

- Vernacular Speech by Mr Sharael Taha( )
- Vernacular Speech by Mr Don Wee( )
- Vernacular Speech by Dr Wan Rizal( )