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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SINGAPORE

OFFICIAL REPORT

FOURTEENTH PARLIAMENT

*FIRST SESSION*

*Monday, 20 March 2023*

*The House met at 11:30 am*

VOLUME 95

NO 93

**ATTENDANCE**

**PRESENT:**

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

Mr Abdul Samad (Nominated Member).

Ms Janet Ang (Nominated Member).

Mr Ang Wei Neng (West Coast).

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

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

Mr Mark Chay (Nominated Member).

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

Mr Cheng Hsing Yao (Nominated Member).

Miss Cheng Li Hui (Tampines).

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

Mr Chong Kee Hiong (Bishan-Toa Payoh).

Mr Desmond Choo (Tampines).

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

Mr Darryl David (Ang Mo Kio).

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

Ms Foo Mee Har (West Coast).

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

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

Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Ang Mo Kio).

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied).

Mr Derrick Goh (Nee Soon).

Ms He Ting Ru (Sengkang).

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

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

Prof Hoon Hian Teck (Nominated Member).

Mr Shawn Huang Wei Zhong (Jurong).

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

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

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

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

Prof Koh Lian Pin (Nominated Member).

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

Mr Kwek Hian Chuan Henry (Kebun Baru).

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

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

Mr Leong Mun Wai (Non-Constituency Member).

Mr Liang Eng Hwa (Bukit Panjang).

Mr Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten).

Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang).

Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied).

Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang).

Ms Mariam Jaafar (Sembawang).

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

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

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin (Ang Mo Kio).

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon).

Ms Ng Ling Ling (Ang Mo Kio).

Miss Rachel Ong (West Coast).

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

Ms Joan Pereira (Tanjong Pagar).

Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied).

Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng (Jalan Besar).

Ms Hazel Poa (Non-Constituency Member).

Ms Poh Li San (Sembawang).

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

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

Mr Saktiandi Supaat (Bishan-Toa Payoh).

Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade).

Dr Shahira Abdullah (Nominated Member).

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

Mr Sharael Taha (Pasir Ris-Punggol).

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

Mr Sitoh Yih Pin (Potong Pasir).

Ms Hany Soh (Marsiling-Yew Tee).

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

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

Ms Carrie Tan (Nee Soon).

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

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

Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong (Hougang).

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

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

Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong).

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

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

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas (Nominated Member).

Ms Tin Pei Ling (MacPherson).

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

Mr Vikram Nair (Sembawang).

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

Mr Don Wee (Chua Chu Kang).

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

Mr Alex Yam (Marsiling-Yew Tee).

Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang).

Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye (Radin Mas).

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

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang).

**ABSENT:**

Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling (East Coast).

Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis (Sengkang).

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

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

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

Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman (Marine Parade).

Mr Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap (Aljunied).

Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok).

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

Dr Tan Yia Swam (Nominated Member).

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer).

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

Dr Wan Rizal (Jalan Besar).

Mr Xie Yao Quan (Jurong).

Ms Yeo Wan Ling (Pasir Ris-Punggol).

PERMISSION TO MEMBERS TO BE ABSENT

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

Name	From	To
	(2023)	(2023)
Mr Desmond Lee	07 Mar	07 Mar
Ms Sun Xueling	07 Mar	12 Mar
	14 Mar	16 Mar
Mr Derrick Goh	08 Mar	11 Mar
	12 Mar	14 Mar
Mrs Josephine Teo	08 Mar	15 Mar
Mr Gan Kim Yong	10 Mar	14 Mar
Mr Sitoh Yih Pin	10 Mar	16 Mar
Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong	11 Mar	19 Mar
Mr Kwek Hian Chuan Henry	11 Mar	18 Mar
Mr Shawn Huang Wei Zhong	11 Mar	15 Mar
Mr Desmond Tan	12 Mar	14 Mar
	17 Mar	19 Mar
Dr Koh Poh Koon	12 Mar	15 Mar
Mr Tan Kiat How	12 Mar	14 Mar
Mr Liang Eng Hwa	13 Mar	17 Mar
Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M	13 Mar	16 Mar
	18 Mar	18 Mar
Dr Vivian Balakrishnan	13 Mar	13 Mar
Mr Edward Chia Bing Hui	14 Mar	17 Mar
Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim	14 Mar	17 Mar
Mr Chee Hong Tat	15 Mar	18 Mar
Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan	15 Mar	24 Mar
Dr Wan Rizal	15 Mar	23 Mar
Mr Alvin Tan	16 Mar	17 Mar
Mr Yip Hon Weng	16 Mar	20 Mar
Mr Chan Chun Sing	18 Mar	18 Mar

Mr Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap	18 Mar	25 Mar
Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling	19 Mar	21 Mar
Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis	20 Mar	24 Mar
Ms Low Yen Ling	20 Mar	22 Mar
Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman	20 Mar	22 Mar
Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman	20 Mar	20 Mar
Mr Murali Pillai	20 Mar	22 Mar
Dr Tan Yia Swam	20 Mar	21 Mar
Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam	20 Mar	28 Mar
Mr Xie Yao Quan	20 Mar	22 Mar
Ms Yeo Wan Ling	20 Mar	22 Mar

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**[Mr Speaker in the Chair]**

## REARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Leader.

**The Leader of the House (Ms Indranee Rajah):** Mr Speaker, I beg to move, "That, pursuant to Standing Order 10(2), the order of business for today's Sitting be varied, such that after the Introduction of Government Bills, the items of business be taken in the following order: first, Motion on Singapore's COVID-19 Response; second, Second Reading of the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill; third, Second Reading of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Bill; and fourth, Second Reading of the Resource Sustainability (Amendment) Bill."

Mr Speaker, we will be debating the Motion on Singapore's COVID-19 Response later today. Our healthcare and frontline workers had been at the forefront of the battle against COVID-19. We have thus invited representative healthcare and frontline workers to attend Parliament when the Motion is moved, so that we can acknowledge their efforts and put on record our gratitude and appreciation to all the healthcare and frontline workers in their presence.

Under the current Order of Business in the Order Paper, the commencement time of the Motion is variable, depending on the duration of the speeches and clarifications in the Second Readings of the three Bills. It would also likely start only in the evening. As such, I am moving to revise the Order of Business as stated earlier, to provide certainty in timetabling and not inconvenience these healthcare and frontline workers, many of whom may have had to take time off to attend. Mr Speaker, I beg to move.

Question put, and agreed to.

Resolved, "That, pursuant to Standing Order 10(2), the order of business for today's Sitting be varied, such that after the Introduction of Government Bills, the items of business be taken in the following order: first, Motion on Singapore's COVID-19 Response; second, Second Reading of the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill; third, Second Reading of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Bill; and fourth, Second Reading of the Resource Sustainability (Amendment) Bill." – [Ms Indranee Rajah].

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Questions for Oral Answer. Mr Saktiandi Supaat.

## ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

### SINGAPORE'S LONGER-TERM INFLATION EXPECTATIONS

1 **Mr Saktiandi Supaat** asked the Prime Minister given the new normal of endemic COVID-19 and shifts in global inflation dynamics (a) whether Singapore's long-term inflation expectations are well anchored; (b) whether there is the risk of de-anchoring of inflation returning to our long-term target in a timely manner under current challenging global macroeconomic and supply conditions; and (c) whether there is also a risk that our current estimates of long-term inflation have risen.

**The Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth and Trade and Industry (Mr Alvin Tan) (for the Prime Minister):** Mr Speaker, Sir, available measures indicate that Singapore's longer-term inflation expectations remain well anchored. The five-year ahead inflation forecasts of economists and professional forecasters have been broadly unchanged over the past two years. While households' longer-term inflation expectations picked up in late-2021 to early-2022 alongside the rise in global and domestic inflation, the latest survey from December showed that expectations have fallen to close to their historical levels.

The stabilisation of households' longer-term inflation expectations occurred alongside a similar outturn in actual inflation in late 2022. Year-on-year, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) Core Inflation remained unchanged at 5.1% in the fourth quarter of 2022 compared to the third quarter, after rising continuously since the first quarter of 2021. On a month-on-month basis, the pace of increase in core prices has trended down over the second half of 2022.

MAS, like other central banks, will continue to focus on stabilising near-term inflation and price expectations, as these weigh heavily in the formation of longer-term inflation expectations.

As the Member observed, multiple factors will influence the path of global, regional, and domestic inflation over the longer term. These include, for instance, demographics, technological advances that impact productivity, future trends in globalisation and central banks' commitments to ensure low and stable inflation in their economies. These factors can potentially boost or dampen inflation. There is therefore uncertainty and a significant diversity of views among central bankers, academics and analysts on the likely inflation trends in the long term.

I would like to reassure Members that MAS is closely monitoring and assessing these developments, and is unwavering in its objective of securing price stability for sustainable growth.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Saktiandi.

**Mr Saktiandi Supaat (Bishan-Toa Payoh):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would like to thank the Minister of State for his answer to my question. I have two supplementary questions. My first is in regard to the assessment of the long-term inflation by MAS and the Government. How often would MAS or the Government assess the long-term inflation estimates, taking into consideration the changes in dynamics in commodity prices, global shifts and inflation dynamics?

The second question is related to what has happened overnight and things that have happened in the financial sector globally. How does financial stability play a part in our exchange rate policy considerations and also long-term inflation? If the Minister of State can also briefly share about the latest developments on financial stability, given overnight happenings, what impact do those have on inflation and Singapore's financial sector as well?

**Mr Alvin Tan:** Sir, I thank the Member for his supplementary questions. The longer-term inflation expectations are proxied by five-year ahead forecasts for inflation, both looking at professional forecasters as well as household expectations. The household expectations survey, the DBS-SKBI SInDEx (Singapore Index of Inflation Expectations) Survey, as I mentioned, has shown that five-year ahead inflation forecasts have stabilised over the June and September surveys, and fell in the latest survey in December. So, it is a mixture of both professional forecasters as well as household expectations.

With regard to the Member's second supplementary question, I will frame the context in terms of how that would be impacted by or affecting longer-term inflation. As Members know, MAS' monetary policy is medium-term focused to achieve low and stable inflation as the basis for Singapore's economic growth. MAS has tightened monetary policy since October 2021 and will continue to closely monitor global and domestic economic developments in the run-up to the scheduled policy review in April 2023, where it will take into account the implications for inflation as well as growth.

By themselves, near-term shocks such as the recent developments in the international banking industry would not have direct implications for the long-term path of inflation and the Singapore Dollar Nominal Effective Exchange Rate (S\$NEER). As I mentioned in my earlier response, these depend on longer-term structural factors such as demographics, technology advances that impact productivity as well as future trends in globalisation.

But as the Member also observed, there have been developments overnight and earlier this morning, and I would like to point Members to the statement that MAS had issued this morning and other statements related to developments in the international banking sector on 16 March 2023 as well as 13 March 2023.

Allow me to make a few quick points. First, Credit Suisse Group AG will continue operating in Singapore with no interruptions or restrictions following the announced takeover by UBS Group AG or UBS. Customers of Credit Suisse will continue to have full access to their accounts and Credit Suisse's contracts with counterparties remain in force.

The takeover is not expected to have an impact on the stability of Singapore's banking system.

Second, Singapore's banking system remains sound and resilient. The Singapore dollar money market and foreign exchange market continue to function well. The Singapore banking system has insignificant exposures to the failed banks in the US and Singapore banks have confirmed that exposure to Credit Suisse is insignificant. Banks in Singapore are well-capitalised and conduct regular stress tests against credit and other risks. Their liquidity positions are healthy, underpinned by a stable and diversified funding base.

MAS will continue to closely monitor the domestic financial system and international developments and stands ready to provide the liquidity through its suite of facilities to ensure that Singapore's financial system remains stable and financial markets continue to function in an orderly manner.

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

**Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang):** Just a quick follow-up on the question about inflation expectations. I wonder if the Minister of State can elaborate on whether MAS has observed any evidence of inflation pressures actually passing through to wages, in particular? And if so, what kind of mitigation mechanisms does the MAS have in terms of dealing with the possibility that this could become more entrenched?

**Mr Alvin Tan:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. As MAS has also communicated, MAS Core Inflation is expected to ease more discernibly over the second half of 2023. This reflects a combination of base effects and also moderating external and domestic labour cost pressures. What does this entail? It actually suggests that longer-term inflation expectations are unlikely to persistently increase. Of course, we are looking at this and monitoring this very closely.

But more broadly, wages in Singapore are not tightly indexed to inflation. Over the years, our tripartite wage-setting institutions have ensured that wage outcomes remain in line with productivity growth. For these reasons, we assess that the risk of a wage-price spiral remains contained at this point. But we will closely monitor developments as they go.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Leong Mun Wai, next question.

**NAMING OF MR LEE HSIEN YANG AND MRS LEE SUET FERN WHEN BEING INVESTIGATED FOR GIVING FALSE EVIDENCE IN JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS WHILE KEPPEL OFFSHORE & MARINE SENIOR STAFF WERE NOT NAMED**

2 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for Home Affairs why Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Ms Lim Suet Fern are named and disclosed while being investigated for giving false evidence in judicial proceedings when the names of the six former management staff of Keppel Offshore & Marine Limited were not publicly disclosed while they were being investigated.

**Mr Leong Mun Wai (Non-Constituency Member):** Mr Speaker, Sir, this question, I have originally directed —

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Leong Mun Wai, you are supposed to pose the question and allow the officeholder to respond. Thank you.

**Mr Leong Mun Wai:** But I can talk more about the context of the question.

**Mr Speaker:** No.

**Mr Leong Mun Wai:** I have actually posed a question to the Senior Minister.

**Mr Speaker:** If there is a Parliamentary Question (PQ), it will be posed. As a response, if you have a supplementary question, you can pose after that.

**Mr Leong Mun Wai:** Yes, I understand. Your office has decided that, right? So, okay —

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Leong Mun Wai, can you please sit down and allow them to respond, please? Thank you.

**The Minister for Home Affairs (Mr K Shanmugam):** Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will also deal with the question that has been asked by Mr Leon Perera, which is scheduled for a subsequent Sitting, on the same topic.

**Mr Speaker:** Please proceed.

**Mr K Shanmugam:** The general approach is that law enforcement agencies do not disclose the names of individuals who have been, or are being investigated.

This general principle is subject to exceptions.

One example when names have been disclosed is where the offender has absconded or left the jurisdiction while investigations are ongoing. For example, Members may recall the case relating to Pi Jiapeng and Pansuk Siriwipa. The couple was involved in a series of alleged cheating cases involving luxury goods. They fled Singapore last year, in 2022, while investigations were ongoing. The Police released their details.

A second example would be where the facts which constitute the alleged offences and the individuals who may have committed the alleged offences, are already publicly known – for example, as a result of findings made by our Courts, and there is some public interest in disclosing that investigations are underway. Such disclosure has to be weighed against possible prejudice to the individuals concerned.

A case in point would be where, following the judgment of the High Court in Parti Liyani's case in 2020, the Police commenced investigations against her employer's son, Karl Liew, based on the High Court's observations that he had given dishonest evidence under oath. I informed this House of those investigations during the debates relating to the case.

However, this does not mean that Police will automatically publish the names of the individuals under investigations, if their names had been made public in other, earlier proceedings. The context in which the names had been published in other proceedings, the nature of those proceedings, the nature of the offences being investigated and the connection of the offences under investigations to the original proceedings and whether the agencies have taken the view that subsequent criminal proceedings are or are not possible – all of these are relevant.

An assessment of all the facts and the context has to be made, in considering the public interest, as to whether to disclose the names.

Yet another type of example, where names have been published, is the case of Chew Eng Han. He had been convicted of several offences. He was then arrested when attempting to flee Singapore. Police made public the arrest on the day he and his accomplices were arrested, and their identities were released. After investigations, Chew and one accomplice were charged.

A fourth example relates to Alex Yeung. Alex Yeung stated publicly that his passport had been impounded, in respect of some conduct. Police then issued a media statement explaining that Yeung was assisting the Police but had not been arrested.

A fifth example would be where Police are investigating a case and there is a lot of misinformation. Police might then make public the accurate facts relating to the case to dispel the falsehoods – and we have done that in the past.

As can be seen, there are a wide variety of situations where it may become necessary to make public the fact that a person is under investigation, has been arrested or is assisting in investigations. We have to assess the facts and the public interest involved.

The circumstances relating to Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern straddle the first two examples that I have mentioned.

The discussions surrounding No 38 Oxley Road are of significant public interest. One might say they are of at least as much interest as in the case of Parti Liyani, if the two can even be compared. The Oxley Road matter was debated extensively in this House, following the Ministerial Statements on the subject.

The findings by the Disciplinary Tribunal (DT) and the Court of Three Judges, in the disciplinary proceedings against Mrs Lee Suet Fern, and their findings on Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern are matters of public record.

Both the DT and the Court of Three Judges found that Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern had lied under oath. And let me remind Members of what both tribunals said.

The Court of Three Judges said that Mrs Lee Suet Fern lied under oath, and I quote:

(a) "...[W]e agree with and affirm the DT's finding that Mr Lee Hsien Yang was not telling the truth when he said that he was the one who had forwarded the draft last will to the respondent. For the same reasons, we also agree with and affirm the DT's findings that the respondent's evidence on this issue, which echoed Mr Lee Hsien Yang's, was similarly untrue and to be rejected.";

(b) The respondent also claimed in her Affidavit of Evidence-in-Chief (AEIC) that after she received a draft last will from Mr Lee Hsien Yang...she did not even open it... [W]e agree with the DT that it is implausible and ultimately incredible...";

(c) [W]e note that after the disciplinary proceedings were initiated, the respondent adopted the position, which the DT rejected and which we too have rejected as false...";

(d) [T]he respondent did act with a degree of dishonesty in the disciplinary proceedings..."

Mr Lee Hsien Yang lied under oath – "...Mr Lee Hsien Yang was not telling the truth..."

If you go to what the DT said at various parts:

(a) "In essence, an elaborate edifice of lies was presented, both on oath (through Mr Lee Hsien Yang and the respondent's affidavits and on the witness stand), and through their public and other statements (which were referred to and relied upon during the disciplinary proceedings). The affidavits were contrived to present a false picture. Several of the lies were quite blatant."

(b) "Considered in totality, the respondent's conduct was quite dishonest. Mr Lee Hsien Yang's and her conduct demonstrated a calculated attempt to: (i) ensure that Mr Lee executed the last will as quickly as possible without due regard for Mr Lee's wishes, and (ii) hide their wrongdoing in having done so."

(c) "Having procured the last will through these improper means, she and Mr Lee Hsien Yang then fabricated a series of lies and inaccuracies, to perpetuate the falsehood that Mrs Kwa Kim Lee had been involved in the last will, and hide their own role in getting Mr Lee to sign the last will and their wrongdoings..."

(d) Mr Lee Hsien Yang and the respondent tried to explain away their conduct... Their explanations ranged from the improbable to the patently contrived to the downright dishonest."

(e) "The respondent was a deceitful witness... Before us, she lied or became evasive whenever she thought it was to her benefit to lie or evade. Mr Lee Hsien Yang's conduct was equally deceitful. He lied to the public, he lied to the Ministerial Committee, and he lied to us... He had no qualms about making up evidence as he went along. We found him to be cynical about telling the truth."

(f) "...In plain language, the effect of what they said is this: Mr Lee Hsien Yang may make untrue statements in public and in private whenever there is no legal penalty for telling untruths. His public and private statements cannot be relied upon to be accurate... We do not find their explanations credible."

(g) "Mr Lee Hsien Yang's explanations for the untruths in his posts were not credible...Mr Lee Hsien Yang knew the true facts. He admitted that some of his statements were inaccurate."

(h) "Mr Lee Hsien Yang lied to the public about how the last will was drafted. He admitted to us that some of his statements were inaccurate. He said his public statements could be inaccurate because they are not sworn statements and thus, he may not look at them carefully... That was dishonest."

The DT in essence said that Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern had combined to mislead and cheat the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Police investigations were commenced, based on the findings of the DT and the Court of Three Judges. Police did not make public at that time in October 2021, that the couple was being investigated.

A question was asked in this House earlier this month, about some public statements which had been made relating to Oxley and the judgments of the DT and the Court of Three Judges. Members can look up the Question and Answer. The Question required discussing the accuracy of those public statements in the context of the judgments of the DT and the Court of Three Judges, and it required dealing with the honesty or otherwise of Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern.

That there were ongoing Police investigations, arising from the findings of the DT and the Court of Three Judges, was in that context relevant and necessary to be disclosed, to give an accurate and full Answer. It was also accurate to give a complete answer to mention that Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern had not cooperated with the Police investigations after saying that they would.

The reasons for disclosing that Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern were under investigation, are broadly similar to the reasons why it was disclosed that Mr Karl Liew was being investigated for perjury. Except that in the case of Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern, they have, in addition, absconded from jurisdiction. In Mr Karl Liew's case, we were discussing his conduct and the conduct of other family members and the Court's findings in this House. We thought it necessary to disclose in that context that Mr Karl Liew was being investigated. He cooperated with the investigation; he has since been charged.

Some Members may also recall – that I had said in this House when we were discussing the Parti Liyani case, that if any judgment or decision issued in the course of any legal proceedings contains findings, that there may have been perjury or other serious offences, that is something that we will take seriously. We mean what we say. I do not recall any Member expressing a different view, that such lying on oath in Court proceedings should not be taken seriously.

That was the situation with Mr Karl Liew, and that is the situation with Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern. But as I said, with the added fact that they have also absconded.

To summarise, the DT and the Court of Three Judges had said Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern were lying. They had been found to be dishonest and more. All of that is public. They have also essentially absconded from jurisdiction. We take this seriously. And those facts were disclosed so that this House can have a full and complete picture, when a question had been asked which related to their conduct. If we cannot or should not answer the question in part or full, then, we would also have said so.

In deciding whether we make public that investigations are ongoing, one factor which is considered is prejudice to the person being investigated. If the investigations show that the person is innocent or an assessment is made that his guilt cannot be established in Court, and if his name had been publicised earlier, a cloud would have hung over him until he was cleared. Thus, the general position is that names are not disclosed.

Whether names should be released in a particular situation is a matter of judgment on what public interest requires. The examples I gave earlier illustrate the exceptions when names were made public.

For example, if you take the case of Mr Karl Liew, what is the prejudice to him? In Mr Karl Liew's case, the High Court had taken the view that he was not telling the truth. The prejudice to him in disclosing that he was under investigations for that finding of lying, is marginal if any and has to be weighed against the public interest at stake, in disclosing the facts when the matter is being discussed in Parliament.

The same applies to Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern. Members who are not lawyers may not know this but when a DT says that a person is guilty, it can only do so if it is satisfied beyond reasonable doubt on the guilt. Likewise for the Court of Three Judges in disciplinary proceedings. The statements in Parliament about Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern do not materially add to any cloud the couple may already be under based on what the DT and the Court of Three Judges have said.

If the facts are different, then the position will be different. For example, say a name had been published in other proceedings and the Court had made some findings. But if our agencies are not able to prosecute the individual based on the earlier Court findings – because they assess that despite the earlier Court findings, substantial new facts have to be proven and that relevant evidence is not available and that relevant witnesses are not available, then there can be arguments both ways, on disclosure, and an assessment has to be made on the specific facts and a judgment has to be made.

But the cases of Mr Liew, and the Lees are quite different; and as I have said in the case of the Lees, they have also absconded.

I can tell Members that there is another case where the highest Court had made observations that a couple of persons had lied on oath. That matter is also being investigated. If there is a relevant question or issue about that matter, I can see that we will also set out the facts and say that Police are investigating. But just like with Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern initially, when investigations had first commenced, Police had not volunteered the information. But Police will respond with the facts if there is a need to – for example, if questions are raised in Parliament.

Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee Suet Fern will have every right to provide explanations, on the matters being investigated if they eventually decide to do the right thing and cooperate with the Police. It is their choice whether they want to be fugitives from justice, or whether they come and explain why they say the Courts were wrong to say that they had lied.



The case of Keppel Offshore & Marine Limited (KOM) is quite different. It does not fall within the different examples I have set out.

Members may not know this, but it was KOM which had made the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) report. The CPIB had conducted as thorough an investigation as it could with the information and powers that it possessed. It turned all the stones it could – and assessed the evidence together with the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC). They concluded that they could not sustain any charges in Court: the conduct had taken place overseas, key witnesses are not available, key documents are not available. We received some information from Brazil, but it was not adequate to mount any criminal charge. There were no admissions which could be relied upon to cross the evidentiary requirements. The documents between the US authorities and KOM and the DPA, also do not meet the evidentiary requirements. They go some way, but they do not cross the threshold in respect of those who were being investigated. The CPIB, for good reasons, has the reputation for being able to ferret out the truth. But even the CPIB cannot get something out or proceed with charges when there are no documents or other evidence which cross the evidential threshold, and which can be used to break down the interviewees' defences.

In these circumstances, the general policy of not disclosing the names of individuals who have been under investigation, applies.

However, if any Member feels that this general policy should be changed and that law enforcement agencies should name all individuals who are being investigated, regardless of the circumstances and even if they are not abscondee from jurisdiction, and even if no charges are likely to be brought in the end, then please let me know. We can then debate that.

I would be surprised if anyone says that.

If everyone agrees that persons under investigations should in general not be named, then the only question is the circumstances under which nevertheless names will be disclosed.

And I have explained some examples of when names have been disclosed. The fact that no one raised any issues with Mr Liew being named, or when names of other abscondees had been disclosed, shows that no one in this House took issue with this disclosure.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Leong.

**Mr Leong Mun Wai (Non-Constituency Member):** Speaker, I thank the Minister for the explanation. I have three supplementary questions to ask.

**Mr Speaker:** Can you keep it to two supplementary questions so that others can ask as well? I will come back to you if there is time.

**Mr Leong Mun Wai:** Okay. The issue here is really about fairness before the law whether we have the rule of law in Singapore or not. The Minister has shared that some of the exceptions involve the offender having absconded. May I ask the first question then – did the Police specifically issue a written order for Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Ms Lim Suet Fern to attend to the investigation at the Police station?

Secondly, he mentioned the difference between the KOM case and this case. But is the KOM case not also a matter of very wide public interest? A lot of people are very interested in the names of the six individuals. I do not understand the legal process very well but under the stern warning letter, is there a paragraph that says that these six individuals of KOM are guilty but the prosecutor decided or the CPIB decided not to pursue the case because of some other reasons.

So, we have a situation here that for a KOM case – actually it is a more serious case – they are actually guilty and we have the names in the foreign jurisdiction documents already – this is one point. Second point is that the KOM case is actually of deep public interest. So, why is there a double standard?

**Mr K Shanmugam:** Sir, I took some care to explain the difference between the KOM case and the case of Mr Liew and the Lees. As I understand the Member, he says that the KOM case is a case of public interest, people are interested to know their names, so why is there a double standard?

Did the Member listen to the explanation on the difference between the KOM case and the case of the Lees and Mr Liew? Perhaps the Member can go into a little bit of detail, based on the explanation I have given on the differences and tell us, which part of the explanation he disagrees with before he alleges double standards. Get to the facts, I have set out what the differences are. Tell me which part the Member does not understand or disagrees with.

And on his first question, did the Police issue a written order – they were given an email, they promised that they will come and agreed to give an interview. They then left the jurisdiction and they have said both to the Police and in public that they will not cooperate with the Police. They will not even come back into the jurisdiction. That is why I said they are essentially abscondees from justice.

But, for the record, I have made it very clear why the disclosure here is consistent with the disclosure in the Karl Liew's case.

And Sir, through you, I would also like to ask Mr Leong, if Mr Leong did not see any problem when Mr Liew's name was mentioned in similar circumstances – in fact, he took part in the debate and wanted a commission of inquiry. Why then this extraordinary concern suddenly about the Lees that he did not show for Mr Liew? And perhaps he can explain why his approach shows double standards?

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Leong.

**Mr Leong Mun Wai:** Minister, there you go again. I asked you a question and you framed it in a different context —

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Leong, Mr Leong, if you can address it through me and lower the temperature.

**Mr Leong Mun Wai:** Yes, he addressed it in a different context and then asked me a question. But can he answer my question first? Did the Police issue a written order to Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Ms Lee Suet Fern?

**Mr K Shanmugam:** Sir, I answered the question.

**Mr Leong Mun Wai:** On email, okay.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Leon Perera.

**Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir. I thank the Minister for his reply. Just one supplementary question on the general principle behind when these disclosures of ongoing investigations are made.

When the Government decides that it is in the public interest to make a disclosure about an ongoing investigation, what are the safeguards put in place to make sure that that disclosure into the public domain does not prejudice in some way the conduct of due process and subsequent trial and so on that may happen later on?

**Mr K Shanmugam:** I thank Mr Perera for that question. That is in fact the key point. In fact, one could say that that is the key point in making a decision on going public. And that is why you need to look carefully at the facts.

So, if you look at the facts relating to Mr Liew and the Lees, what has happened? The High Court has said that, in the case of Mr Liew, perhaps in less clear language; in the case of the Lees, very direct language, which I have taken you through — that at least Mr Liew as well as the two Lees were not telling the truth.

The investigation relates back to that very point on which the Courts have taken a view as to whether they lied or did not lie. That is why I said the prejudice is very marginal, if any.

As for the other aspect of prejudice that people will think less well of them the fact that we repeat in this House what the Courts have already said about them, is not going to increase the cloud as it were.

So, these are factors in the prejudice that you should take into account. Both the legal prejudice of fair trial as well as public perception prejudice, you should consider even before you release. You do not try and recover ground after that and shore up as it were.

You make these calculations before — what is the extent of prejudice? And you release the information, but always bearing in mind, sometimes public interest may require disclosure, even if it means some degree of prejudice. So, that is an assessment and it is an assessment we have to make.

In this case, in the case of the Lees, I have explained why I think the prejudice is pretty much non-existent because we are simply repeating what has been said and saying that the Police are investigating that matter. Which everyone would expect us to do anyway, because I have said in this House we will investigate these matters. So, what is the prejudice?

But there may be other cases potentially where the prejudice could be a little bit more. So, we have to assess public interest and that is why we have Parliament and when somebody takes a different view on prejudice, we will have to answer the questions.

And they will obviously be entitled to their full rights to give their version of events and they will be entitled to defend their position in Court.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Sylvia Lim.

**Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied):** Thank you, Speaker. I have one supplementary question for the Minister to aid understanding of what he said earlier.

I think the question was posed to him by Mr Leong about whether the Police had actually issued an order to Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Mrs Lee to attend the interview. And his answer was that they were emailed, and they said that they would cooperate. Do I read from that that actually, the Police had not gotten to the stage when an order under the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) was actually issued to them?

**Mr K Shanmugam:** That is right, Sir. A specific order under the CPC was not issued. The Police normally would not issue such an order. They would first contact, then speak with and then send the written document. And if a party says that they will cooperate, the Police would assume in good faith that that is how they will proceed. That is what was done and the next thing the Police heard was another email from the couple saying that they will not cooperate. But by then, they had already — as I said — essentially absconded from jurisdiction.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Hazel Poa.

**Ms Hazel Poa (Non-Constituency Member):** I thank the Minister for his reply. The Minister mentioned that the Disciplinary Tribunal (DT) and the Court of Three Judges have found them guilty of lying under oath. But exactly what lies these are, were not mentioned. Can the Minister share with us what exactly are the lies they were found to have said?

Secondly, there is much chatter that the investigation and the timing of the release of this information is linked to the interview with Bloomberg where Mr Lee Hsien Yang actually said that he might consider running for President. Would the Minister like to clarify on the situation?

**Mr K Shanmugam:** On the first point as to exactly what the lies were, I would invite the Member to read the Disciplinary Tribunal's judgment and the Court of Three Judges' judgment. The relevant extracts are also in Senior Minister Teo's answer as an Annex. When we give answers in Parliament, we expect Members to read them, and I do not think we want to waste Parliament's time with me going through that again.

On the second point, can I invite the Member to make it clear? Is the Member suggesting that there is a connection between the Bloomberg interview and the disclosure in Parliament? Because we do not repeat rumours from outside. Is the Member suggesting that? I would like to know that before I answer.

**Ms Hazel Poa:** No, I am not suggesting that, but I am aware that there are such speculations going on and it is quite prevalent. So, I am merely asking if the Minister would like to take this opportunity to clarify.

**Mr K Shanmugam:** If that is not being suggested, then I would ask, Sir, through you, that the Member withdraw that part of her question and I would answer the rest of the question.

**Mr Speaker:** Are there any further questions, Ms Hazel Poa? There are many rumours swirling about outside on many other issues. We do not necessarily bring them in.

**Ms Hazel Poa:** If that is the situation, then I would withdraw the question.

**Mr K Shanmugam:** You do not have to withdraw the question; I will answer the question.

I am trying to now recall, but my recollection is that the Bloomberg interview came after the answer given by Senior Minister Teo. And therefore, even the prescience of this Government could not have foretold that Mr Lee Hsien Yang was going to give such an interview. I stand corrected, but that is my recollection of the sequence of events.

And if a question is asked in Parliament, we answer. The debate for us is, I have explained the reasons why the answer was given. No one took issue when I disclosed that Mr Liew was being investigated. I assume that everyone accepted the principle and I have explained how that principle applies here. If anyone challenges us on that, I am prepared to debate. But the principle is the same.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Sylvia Lim, your next Parliamentary Question.

### **IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS BY 2021 NATIONAL WELLNESS COMMITTEE ON JUNIOR DOCTORS**

3 **Ms Sylvia Lim** asked the Minister for Health whether any of the recommendations of the 2021 National Wellness Committee on Junior Doctors have been implemented so far and, if so, whether an elaboration can be provided.

4 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Health with regard to the 2021 National Wellness Committee on Junior Doctors that was set up during the COVID-19 period (a) whether the recommendations of the Committee have been updated to reflect the shift towards a post-COVID-19 environment; and (b) if so, how does the Ministry intend to improve the attrition rate of junior doctors.

**The Senior Minister of State for Health (Dr Janil Puthucheary) (for the Minister for Health):** Sir, may I take Question Nos 3 and 4 together?

**Mr Speaker:** Please do.

**Dr Janil Puthucheary:** Sir, my response will also cover matters raised in the question by Dr Wan Rizal<sup>1</sup> scheduled for a subsequent Sitting. I would invite Dr Wan Rizal to seek clarifications today if need be and if the question has been addressed, it may not be necessary for him to proceed with the question for the future Sitting.

Sir, the attrition rate of doctors in the public healthcare sector has remained stable in the last three years, ranging from 3% to 5%. Nevertheless, we continue to make efforts to improve the well-being of our doctors and to retain them in public service, including the formation of the National Wellness Committee for Junior Doctors (NWC-JD) which has been studying initiatives to promote and improve the well-being of junior doctors in the public healthcare system.

The committee is conducting a series of in-depth small group discussions with junior and senior doctors. Through these, we have sought to validate the approach to key concerns such as the need to improve career pathways, address work hours and improve work conditions. The committee is concluding its engagements with stakeholders and finalising its recommendations.

Early initiatives already in place include the appointment of Chief Wellness Officers in our public healthcare clusters. These officers have a responsibility to enhance the well-being of all healthcare staff. We have also begun to expand and refine career pathways, such as the introduction of the Hospital Clinician scheme to provide doctors with more diverse career options.

Sir, the worst of the pandemic is over and patient numbers have reduced. However, all our healthcare workers remain busy serving the healthcare needs of Singaporeans. The committee continues to review the working hours, working conditions and well-being of junior doctors. It will take some time to study these matters and make appropriate further recommendations.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Yip Hon Weng.

**Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Senior Minister of State for his reply. Just one short supplementary question. Will the Ministry of Health (MOH) consider initiatives, such as reducing paperwork and streamlining some of the admin processes, to make a more conducive work environment for our junior doctors?

**Dr Janil Puthucheary:** Sir, the committee is indeed reviewing these matters as well as the issues of night calls and duty hours. We are doing electronic logging and surveys to monitor the workload of junior doctors.

However, the issue goes beyond just the simple redistribution of workload or the simplistic hiring of more manpower. Both may be necessary, but the changes will impact the overall optimisation of our system in our current multidisciplinary model. It is a complex subject, and this part of the review will take some time to study and work out and recommendations will be made.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Sylvia Lim.

**Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied):** Thank you, Speaker. Two supplementary questions for the Senior Minister of State. Earlier, he mentioned that the junior doctors were being consulted as part of this review, but could I ask him whether there are any junior doctors on the committee itself, the National Wellness Committee?

And the second question is some doctors who had spoken publicly earlier have mentioned two key areas to be reviewed, which are mandating rest days and also to move away from 30-hour calls. So, I would like his confirmation that these areas are being looked at with some priority.

**Dr Janil Puthucheary:** Sir, I thank the Member for the supplementary questions. The answer to both questions is yes.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Leon Perera.

**Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied):** Sir, one quick supplementary question. Is the Government looking at the cap of 80 hours per week, I believe, that is still in place? Previously in the House, I have mentioned that there is evidence from other jurisdictions that you can get the same training outcomes with the cap of 70 hours per week, so will that be reviewed by this committee?

**Dr Janil Puthucheary:** Sir, the committee is indeed looking at the issue of working hours for the junior doctors.

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Note(s) to Question No(s) 3-4:

<sup>1</sup> To ask the Minister for Health what is the current assessment of concerns raised by junior doctors in Singapore regarding their worklife balance and career prospects.

**SECOND-HAND SHOES COLLECTED IN PROJECT FOR RECYCLING TO CREATE RUNNING TRACKS  
EXPORTED FOR OVERSEAS RESALE**

**5 Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong** asked the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth under the shoe recycling programme by Sport Singapore (a) why are donated shoes designated for recycling to create running tracks found by the press not to be recycled as planned; and (b) what is the Ministry doing to strengthen oversight to ensure proper implementation of such programmes.

**6 Dr Tan Wu Meng** asked the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (a) how many second-hand shoes have been wrongfully misdirected and exported for overseas resale after being collected from the public for recycling into sports infrastructure, amidst the collaboration between Sport Singapore and Dow; (b) whether the collection contractor and subcontractors have clearly specified contractual requirements for the handling and disposition of shoes collected under the collaboration; (c) whether the contracts provide for liquidated damages; and (d) whether any criminal offences have been disclosed.

**7 Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim** asked the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth besides the shoe recycling programme by Sport Singapore (a) whether there are any other programmes that the Ministry is collaborating with other partners to promote recycling and sustainability efforts; and (b) what are the Ministry's oversight measures over such partners to ensure that they achieve the programmes' intended objectives.

**The Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai):** Mr Speaker, Sir, with your permission, my response will also address Parliamentary Questions for oral answer, besides Question No 5, 6 and 7 in today's Order Paper, Written Question No 25 and 26 in today's Order Paper and also Mr Yip Hon Weng's<sup>1</sup> Parliamentary Question for the Sitting of 21 March 2023.

**Mr Speaker:** Please do.

**Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai:** I also understand that there is a request made for clarifications to be taken collectively, after the Minister of Sustainability and the Environment (MSE) answers Question No 8 through to Question No 10 on today's Parliamentary Order Paper.

**Mr Speaker:** We can do so.

**Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai:** Mr Speaker, the shoe recycling project is a joint initiative set up in 2021 by Dow and Sport Singapore (SportSG). Other partners, such as BT Sports and Alba-WH, are also involved in the project and play various roles in the process chain.

Dow's role is to manage the integration of the respective roles and promote the use of safe and sustainable materials. SportSG promotes the use of these materials to install sports infrastructure and set up shoes collection points at its ActiveSG sports centres.

Alba-WH is the appointed collection partner responsible for collecting shoes and delivering them to BT Sports, which manages the facility to grind the recycled shoes into granules for use as building materials.

This facility is Singapore's first grinding facility, which is able to grind recycled shoes into granules for use as building materials. It was set up by BT Sports with the assistance of a grant from Government. SportSG pays only for the recycled granules which it receives from this facility and uses it for installation at public sports facilities.

In January 2023, the project partners were alerted about Reuter's observations that shoes put into recycling bins in Singapore and intended for the shoe recycling project were being diverted for resale. An investigation was immediately commenced by the project partners to look into these observations.

Alba-WH, as the party responsible for the collection of the shoe recycling bins, had engaged Yok Impex, another company, to do so for selected parts of Singapore. These bins were brought to and then sorted at Yok Impex's premises, before being sent to Alba-WH's warehouse for registering and weighing. They were subsequently delivered to the grinding facility.

The investigation found that the shoe recycling bins at Yok Impex's premises were not properly segregated from other sorting activities, resulting in some shoes which were meant for recycling being exported to other countries for resale. Alba-WH has since terminated the services of Yok Impex.

The project partners have also taken steps to tighten the process chain. These steps include appointing only contractors and subcontractors that are not involved in any second-hand trading of textiles or shoes. Secondly, transporting all collected shoes to Alba-WH's premises without any aggregation or sorting at an intermediary premises; and thirdly, conducting regular spot checks and inspections at contractors' and subcontractors' premises.

We will share these learning points across other recycling projects that the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and other Government agencies undertake in partnership with like-minded stakeholders keen to work on initiatives that protect our planet.

To date, Sir, the project has otherwise been running well. Ten thousand kilogrammes of shoes have been processed and used in sport infrastructure, such as the running track at the Kallang Football Hub that has already been installed and an 888-metre jogging trail currently under construction in Jurong Town. The remaining recycled granules are planned for use at our Sport Centres, such as in Serangoon, Bukit Canberra and Punggol, as well as other jogging tracks, fitness centres and also playgrounds around Singapore.

Sir, I hope that this episode will not deter the public from supporting such initiatives as these are important and impactful in protecting our environment. This initiative has also led to more environmentally friendly materials being used in the construction of our public sports infrastructure. We assure the public that MCCY and the Public Service remains committed to the Singapore Green Plan 2030 efforts to support the national sustainability agenda.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Dennis Tan, please move Question No 8; we will take the clarifications later.

Note(s) to Question No(s) 5-7:

<sup>1</sup> To ask the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth regarding the sports shoe recycling project by Sport Singapore and other commercial partners (a) what is the percentage of shoes collected that were used for the intended purpose of constructing running tracks and playgrounds in Singapore; (b) what steps have been taken to hold the parties accountable for the unauthorised export of donated shoes overseas; (c) how is the selection of programme partners being undertaken; and (d) what are the measures taken to ensure that credible partners are selected.

**STEPS TAKEN TO ENSURE RECYCLABLES COLLECTED IN GOVERNMENT CAMPAIGNS ARE NOT MISUSED**

**8 Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment (a) what are the mechanisms for overseeing recycling programmes by state agencies and vendors to ensure that recycling is completed as promised; and (b) whether there will be a review to strengthen the system in light of news reports on issues with implementing such a programme.

**9 Mr Gan Thiam Poh** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment (a) how does the Ministry ensure that recyclables collected are properly recycled according to the intended objectives as published; and (b) how many cases of collected recyclables being misused have been reported in the past five years.

**10 Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment how does the Ministry overcome challenges that may prevent more regular and public reporting on the efficiency and effectiveness of sustainability programmes that it implements through third party vendors.

**The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment (Mr Baey Yam Keng) (for the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment):** Mr Speaker, may I have your permission to take Question Nos 8, 9, 10 and Question No 10 for Written Answer on today's Order Paper in a combined reply?



**Mr Speaker:** Please proceed.

**Mr Baey Yam Keng:** Thank you. Mr Speaker, Singapore's recycling landscape includes both national programmes led by the National Environment Agency (NEA) and non-governmental programmes led by corporations and community organisations.

Under the National Recycling Programme, Public Waste Collectors licensed by NEA are required to send collected recyclables to licensed materials recovery facilities for sorting, processing and recycling. Recycling facilities are licensed by NEA and must meet requirements, such as ensuring that their operations do not endanger public health, only receiving and processing the waste stream approved in its licence and submitting records to NEA on the amount of waste received and processed.

Under the Extended Producer Responsibility scheme for e-waste, NEA requires the scheme operator to send the collected e-waste for proper treatment at licensed e-waste recycling facilities. The recyclers contracted by the scheme operators are not allowed to transfer e-waste collected under the scheme overseas unless they are able to demonstrate that the foreign recycler is able to treat the e-waste to a similar or better standard. They must also submit regular reports to NEA on the amount of e-waste received and processed.

Under the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, which Singapore is a party to, it is illegal to export hazardous and other wastes as defined by the Basel Convention, without Prior Informed Consent from the state of import or transit. Relevant permits are also required from NEA under the Hazardous Waste (Control of Export, Import and Transit) Act.

For the export of recyclables that are not covered by the Basel Convention, such as sorted streams of ferrous, non-ferrous metals and textiles, companies would have to adhere to the relevant domestic regulations of the importing countries. The companies would also have to be accountable to the organisers of the recycling programme and the donors of the recyclables, based on contractual agreements and conditions that were agreed upon.

All segments of society have a part to play in recycling right to achieve our vision of a zero-waste nation. We need to strike a balance between ensuring appropriate levels of regulation and governance, and not imposing overly onerous requirements which would inadvertently discourage voluntary recycling initiatives.

My Ministry and NEA will continue to monitor our recycling landscape and strengthen our processes as necessary.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Dennis Tan.

**Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong (Hougang):** I thank the Minister of MCCY Mr Edwin Tong and Senior Parliamentary Secretary Mr Baey Yam Keng for their answers. I have one supplementary question for the Minister. The Minister mentioned that there will be regular checks conducted on the premises. Can I just ask how regular will these checks be?

And I have two supplementary questions for Senior Parliamentary Secretary Baey. One, can the Government encourage more private sector participation to recycle items like sports shoes, like in this case, so that we can minimise the volume of shoes actually being thrown away and being incinerated or in the case of being disposed of overseas, being dumped in landfills? Number two, will the Government consider giving more incentives to companies to attract them to take part in such recycling programmes?

**The Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai):** On how regular such checks should be made, I am not going to be able to tell Mr Tan with accuracy as to how much time, how many days or how many weeks and so on. But you have got to leave some discretion to the project partners and if Mr Tan heard my answer earlier, Yok Impex was actually a subcontractor engaged by one of the partners. It is not an entity that SportSG deals with directly.

At the same time, the degree of regularity should also depend on the extent to which the number of shoes collected and aggregated at the various centres reach a certain level that makes commercial sense for the partners to then go and collect it.

So, I would say, we leave the precise engineering of the timetable to the partners to deal with, but I would like to assure Mr Tan that one of the learning points from this is precisely to also conduct these checks often and unannounced, so that there will be not just a check itself but also the whole framework and a system, to deter activities that do not comply with the contractual scope of the obligations.

**Mr Baey Yam Keng:** As part of our Zero Waste Nation vision, we would like to encourage all consumers and users to reduce, reuse and recycle. So, we do welcome companies or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to promote to every one of us to do more of reducing, reusing and recycling.

So, that is why NEA looks at supporting local capabilities, for example, in recycling. Grants are provided for facilities to build our capabilities, like in this case, we supported BT Sports, one of the project's partners, in building the facility to convert the sport shoes into granules for use in rubber flooring.

On top of that, we also have funds like the SG Eco Fund that will provide financial resources for both corporate as well as community organisations to promote environmental sustainability and the likes of rubber shoe recycling would certainly be something we would be happy to support. Corporations and organisations are welcome to apply or talk to NEA and the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment (MSE) about their interest, and we can see how we can facilitate that.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim.

**Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang):** Thank you, Speaker. Sir, I am a former member of Sport Singapore (SportSG) board in the last term, and I welcome the efforts that SportSG has done to support our sustainability effort. I hope this episode would not deter our Sport Singapore from doing such efforts.

I understand that investigations are still ongoing, and this is a question for Minister Edwin Tong. The Minister mentioned about tweaking, fine-tuning and tightening the process downstream with the subcontractors. Are there any contractual mechanisms that Sport Singapore can impose on its partners to similarly have such monitoring mechanisms or tightening of that process downstream on the subcontractors?

**Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai:** I thank Mr Zhulkarnain, first of all, for his encouragement for this project to continue. And I think that is important because much as there has been an infraction at the process level, at the end of the day, this is a project that allows us to use materials that we would otherwise have really no use for. And the number of shoes that are discarded everyday amounts to a substantial number. Which is why we have been able, since the project started, to collect 10,000 kilogrammes of shoes and have already deployed them into the existing facilities that we have. We intend to continue with this – whether it is at playgrounds or other sports facilities.

Mr Zhulkarnain knows from our masterplan that there are plans to install sporting facilities in, as far as possible, every town that we have. So, many of these facilities will take advantage of and use these sustainable materials.

On Mr Zhulkarnain's point about having tighter contractual mechanisms, it is possible. So, some oversight, some checks, some unannounced, some audits, and some reports can be put in place. And all these can be put into the contract and the provisions for reporting.

But, at the end of the day, I think it is also important to bear in mind that this is otherwise not a complicated contract nor a complicated arrangement. It is really for an aggregator to come and go around the different bins to collect the shoes. And it is really a question of taking the steps to ensure that there is proper segregation.

What, as we can tell from the investigation, resulted in the problems that we have seen, came from a lax system for proper accounting and not allowing them to be properly sorted in segregated sections. That was the real problem. And so, steps have been taken to correct this between Alba and its various other sub-contractors – those that it may appoint in place of Yok Impex. But we will certainly see the extent to which we can impart into these sub-contracts some other mechanisms that tighten the process without being overly burdensome, which then in turn increases the cost of collection.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Yip Hon Weng.

**Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. My question is for MCCY. Learning from this incident, how will the Ministry strengthen the process, such that credible partners will be selected for future recycling projects?

**Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai:** Sir, I think I have explained how we intend to strengthen the process and the steps that we have taken and intend to take. The point I will make is we do want partners to come forward with the assurance and confidence in the project that the shoes that are collected for a recycling project like this will, in fact, end up being the granules that we use for our sporting infrastructure.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Pritam Singh.

**Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. My question is directed at Minister. This is pertaining to the Reuters report, which I think, really, was addressing the prospect of greenwashing, or at least the concerns of greenwashing.

I do not really have any objection to the principles behind why this initiative was carried out by Sport Singapore. I think sustainability initiatives ought to be encouraged. But my question pertains to whether Sport Singapore or MCCY made an assessment as to the conversion of sports shoes into rubber granules as being more green or more environmentally sustainable than the existing method which, as I understand also, uses this recycled tyres, for example. So, the question then is, does this initiative move the needle, or is it just a conversion of one recyclable material for another?

**Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai:** The short answer is yes, there was such an assessment made. And to take Mr Singh's comparison, without overly going into technical details, the rubber density of old tyres is quite different from that of the shoes that you see and the extent to which we want a certain density at the running track and on the playgrounds, they rely better and use better the materials from the shoes rather than old tyres.

**Mr Pritam Singh:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. My understanding from people in the industry is a lot of these materials are then actually compressed together – tyres are used with rubber soles as well. Because each layer of the surface of a running track is made of different materials. I would not get into the technicalities of it, of course, but I think the principle point remains with regard to ensuring that the method that SportSG adopts is actually more green and sustainable to ensure that programmes like this succeed.

**Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai:** I would not get into a debate over the efficacy of which material is best used for playgrounds and sports grounds and so on, but I will ensure that the point that you have raised is fed back to the relevant engineers so that they will study this.

But I will put to Mr Singh this – at the very least, this method does use the shoes as a further source of materials, when the shoes would otherwise be disposed of. So, if nothing else, the grinding facility provides an additional avenue for waste material. And I have said earlier in my answer, the number of shoes that are discarded, provides an avenue for these shoes to be reused in public infrastructure facilities.

**Mr Speaker:** Dr Tan Wu Meng.

**Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong):** I thank the Minister and Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the answer. I have got two supplementary questions. The first is on the description of lax sorting at the downstream contractor Yok Impex. Looking at the Reuters article of 25 February 2023, I may stand corrected, but there is a phrase that says, "none of the 11 pairs of shoes donated by Reuters were turned into exercise paths or kids' parks in Singapore". In view of this, what is the Ministry's assessment of how lax the sorting was, given that, none of 11 shoes donated by Reuters actually went to the intended purpose?

The second question is, do the authorities' investigations plan to look into whether any sub-contractor or their employee received inappropriate direct or secondary gains or even inappropriate gratification in conjunction with the redirection of these shoes that were meant to be recycled?

**Mr Speaker:** Dr Tan, did any of the shoes belong to your Clementi residents? Sorry, I just had to ask.

**Dr Tan Wu Meng:** I should declare, Mr Speaker, that I do have Clementi residents who have donated shoes.

**Mr Speaker:** Okay, point taken. Thank you. Minister.

**Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai:** To Dr Tan's second question, investigations are being done by the contractor which engaged the sub-contractor and they are currently ongoing, and I will leave the investigation as they were. If there are any other findings that are material, then we can raise this again in this House.

As to Dr Tan's first point, the way in which the system was working previously, was for Yok Impex, the sub-contractor, to collect from designated areas around Singapore and all of their collections would then be brought back to their facility for the sorting purposes. I cannot tell you nor can I glean from the Reuters' report where the shoes were deposited; whether they are all done at the same place or divided up into 11 different locations or otherwise. And so, I would not want to speculate as to why that is the case. The fact of the matter is that as far as the investigations show, it is only the Yok Impex collections that have been tainted with this finding based on information we have currently. So, the measures that Alba has taken in relation to Yok Impex would, in relation to the findings that we know so far, be sufficient to address the problem.

#### **AUTOMATIC REVOCATION OF CPF NOMINEE STATUS WHEN A BENEFICIARY BECOMES AN EX-SPOUSE FOLLOWING DIVORCE**

The following question stood in the name of **Mr Lim Biow Chuan** –

11 To ask the Minister for Manpower whether the CPF Board will introduce regulations to void a CPF nomination made by a CPF member in favour of the spouse whenever that CPF member has divorced the spouse who was nominated.

12 **Ms Sylvia Lim** asked the Minister for Manpower whether the Government will amend the Central Provident Fund Act 1953 to provide for the automatic revocation of a nomination when the beneficiary becomes an ex-spouse following a divorce.

**Mr Darryl David (Ang Mo Kio):** Question No 11.

**The Minister for Manpower (Dr Tan See Leng):** Mr Speaker, Sir, may I have your permission to take Question Nos 11 and 12 together?

**Mr Speaker:** Please do.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** The Central Provident Fund (CPF) nomination scheme provides CPF members with the option to nominate recipients of their CPF monies upon their demise and the proportion of savings each nominee should receive.

CPF nominations are currently treated in the same way as wills. They are revoked upon marriage to give the member an opportunity to make a new nomination. Like wills, CPF nominations are not revoked in the event of a divorce as we recognise that the CPF member may still intend to provide for the ex-spouse and children from the marriage. Nevertheless, the CPF Board includes reminders to all members to review their nominations in their annual statement of account. The Board also intends to remind those members who have undergone divorce to review their nominations.

CPF members should review and update their nominations when their life circumstances have changed. The CPF Board has enhanced the CPF nomination service to enable members to conveniently review their nominations and make changes securely, including via the CPF website.

The Ministry of Law is studying whether to reform the rule in the Wills Act 1838 that provides for the automatic revocation of wills in the event of marriage. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and the CPF Board will likewise study the CPF nomination rules, so that the policy remains relevant to the evolving needs and behaviours of our citizens.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Sylvia Lim.

**Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied):** Thank you, Speaker. I have two supplementary questions for the Minister.



Earlier in his answer, he mentioned that CPF Board intends to remind members who have gotten divorced to review their nomination. So, does he mean that the CPF Board will keep track of divorce orders and make sure that letters are sent to members who undergo divorce proceedings? That is the first question.

The second question is, I would urge the CPF Board to relook at this phenomenon where CPF nominations are not revoked upon divorce. One of the arguments which I hope the Board will consider is that, in a divorce proceeding, CPF funds are actually liable for distribution as matrimonial assets. So, in other words, spouses who have accumulated CPF funds during the marriage, at the point of divorce, it is up for division if the court feels it fit to award a spouse part or all of the CPF funds accumulated during matrimony of the other spouse. So, in that sense, an ex-spouse would already have his or her share of the CPF funds of the spouse at the point of divorce. So, it is actually not logical that most members would want the ex-spouse to have another legacy at the point of death when that spouse has already had the division of the CPF funds at the point of divorce. So, I hope the CPF Board will look into this as well.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** I thank the Member for her supplementary question. As I mentioned in my reply, from May 2023, that means in about a month and a half, the CPF Board intends to remind members who have undergone a divorce to review their nominations.

We are currently working with the relevant agencies for information on divorced members. Some of the points that the Member has brought up, are currently also being reviewed. So, the Member can appreciate the potential ramifications. If the Member so finds it suitable, after May, the Member can file another Parliamentary Question and we can update the Member on the status of that review subsequently.

### **SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS LINKED TO TREND OF TEENS BEING DETAINED UNDER INTERNAL SECURITY ACT**

The following question stood in the name of **Mr Mark Chay** –

13 To ask the Minister for Home Affairs with regard to the concerning trend of teens being detained under the Internal Security Act (a) whether the Ministry has identified any sociological factors that these cases share in common, such as broken homes or single-parent households; and (b) if there are similarities among these cases, whether the Ministry is doing anything to proactively address the thread of radicalisation from within this subset.

**Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang):** Question No 13.

**The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim) (for the Minister for Home Affairs):** Sir, we have not observed such common sociological factors.

A common factor, however, is the youths' exposure to online extremist content. Terrorist groups have capitalised on the developmental issues experienced by youths in their adolescence, such as their search for a sense of belonging and identity, and their proclivity for sensation-seeking and risk-taking.

The Internal Security Department (ISD) has been working with other Government agencies and community partners on upstream counter-radicalisation outreach efforts. For example, ISD has collaborated with the Ministry of Education (MOE), schools and Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) on various outreach activities, such as talks, workshops, seminars and webinars. In 2022, ISD organised close to 70 outreach events, both online and in person, for more than 2,300 participants including student leaders, educators and other school staff. These included workshops for over 350 student counsellors and student welfare officers to educate them on the radicalisation process and factors pertinent to youths, and to help them identify tell-tale signs of radicalisation. These efforts were complemented by other outreach events such as talks and youth forums organised by community partners including the Religious Rehabilitation Group and the Inter-Agency Aftercare Group.

### **CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICE'S PROCEDURES FOR SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE CASES REPORTED BY SCHOOLS**

14 **Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development for cases of suspected child abuse referred by schools to the Child Protective Service (CPS) (a) what is the procedure for investigation of such cases when the child is not attending school; and (b) in what circumstances will the CPS insist on an in-person assessment of such child or exercise its investigative powers including those under the sections 9, 10 and 12 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1993.

15 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development how does the Child Protective Service make known its services to young children who may be suffering physical or mental abuse by their parents or caregivers and may not have access to telephones, the Internet or any other persons outside their home to report the abuse.

16 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development what are the conditions or triggers that will mandate a face-to-face meeting between children and officers from the Child Protective Service, either at home or outside of home, in cases of suspected abuse by parents or caregivers.

**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, may I take Question Nos 14 through to 16 together, please?

**Mr Speaker:** Yes, please.

**Mr Eric Chua:** Thank you, Sir. The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF)'s Child Protective Service (CPS) investigates cases involving serious abuse or neglect of children and young persons in accordance with the statutory framework set out under the Children and Young Persons Act (CYPA). The threshold for CPS to exercise various powers under the Act is predicated on whether there are "reasonable grounds to believe that a child or young person is in need of care or protection". The fact that a child is not attending school is not, by itself, sufficient grounds to invoke CYPA powers. This is because non-attendance could be due to many other reasons.

To determine if a case meets the legal threshold under the CYPA, CPS will gather information from the child, family and professionals via phone or video calls. If the assessment is that there is immediate or serious safety concerns for the child, or when parents or caregivers are uncooperative, CPS will conduct an in-person assessment of the child and the family. CPS may also order a child to undergo assessments, examinations or treatments, or remove the child and commit him or her to a place of temporary care and protection or to the care of a fit person.

CPS must balance multiple conflicting interests when determining what is best for a child. CPS is careful in exercising its powers and will only remove a child if it is not possible to keep the child safe within his or her family.

For less serious cases, CPS will refer the child and family to a Child Protection Specialist Centre, Protection Specialist Centre or a Family Service Centre for follow-up intervention as necessary.

The nature of child abuse is that it is often not easy to detect. The professionals in CPS and the social service agencies work hard to intervene to prevent further harm, and the fate of every single life matters. Despite their efforts and that of others at the various touchpoints that children come into contact with, it is not possible to expect that every single case will be detected. I hope Members of this House can support the difficult work that they do in your communities and to rally your residents to play their part too.

Residents can support the Break the Silence campaign and attend domestic violence awareness training. Through these, members of the public are educated on potential signs of child abuse or neglect. Everyone can benefit from such knowledge, whether as a neighbour, a community volunteer or a grassroots leader. Those who see such potential signs are encouraged to report their concerns to the National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline (NAVH) at 1800-777-0000.

We are also educating our children on this difficult topic of abuse in an age-appropriate manner. Preschoolers are taught how to talk about their feelings and seek help from trusted adults when they feel unsafe or hurt. In schools, students learn about personal safety and safeguarding themselves against abuse through their Character and Citizenship Education lessons. They also learn help-seeking skills, including the "Signal for Help" hand gesture. They are shown the community resources and helplines for them to turn to when their safety is compromised. They are also encouraged to look out for their peers and seek help for those who display these signs of distress.

**Mr Speaker:** Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim.

**Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang):** Thank you, Speaker. I recounted the incident of an 11-year-old girl who passed away at the hands of the stepfather. It affected me because she was of the same age as my daughter.

I appreciate the good work of CPS on the ground. Having been volunteering with one of the crisis shelters dealing with domestic violence, I know the workload of CPS. But in this particular instance, the intervention by CPS could have been earlier, had the October interview been in person, at home, or in a Police station. The fatal incident happened just the next month in November.

I understand that investigations are still ongoing, but would MSF review what could have been done better – perhaps borrowing or learning lessons from other jurisdictions by using same-age peer befrienders, or even protection of liability for anonymous reporting by educators, in a suspected abuse case? Perhaps this would prevent and avert such a tragic incident from happening again.

**Mr Eric Chua:** Mr Speaker, I thank the Member for his supplementary question. As investigations for the case are currently ongoing, we cannot comment on the specific details, but I do agree on the need for us to work harder collectively to make sure that the NAVH helpline and other sources of assistance are made known to those who might be in need of such assistance.

And on that matter, just in December last year, MSF launched an online text-based channel that is accessible via MSF's website as an additional mode of reporting for NAVH to make it easier for reporting. We also find that youngsters nowadays very much prefer the online textual anonymous kind of platforms that allow them to bring to attention some of the plights and situations they are in.

So, while I cannot comment on the specifics, I think we can call upon everyone in the House and beyond to do more to raise awareness on this issue.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Gerald Giam.

**Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied):** I thank the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for his answers. Are there some specific conditions in which the CPS will forcibly enter homes to check on the well-being of children whom they suspect of being abused? Were there any instances in the past five years where these conditions were met, but the CPS did not do so? And if so, what has MSF done to ensure that such protocols are adhered to in future?

**Mr Eric Chua:** Mr Speaker, I thank the Member for his supplementary question. At the point of a case being referred to the CPS, we will perform an intake assessment. And at this point, when we do the assessment, we will make sure that we check for any signs of immediate safety concerns for the child, or whether the parents or caregivers are cooperative at a particular stage of investigations. If we find that there are instances where the child's safety is immediately found to be at risk, or if the parents are uncooperative such that the CPS officers do not get to sight the child, then the CPS officer has every right to move on to the next phase to conduct an in-person assessment.

Specific to Mr Gerald Giam's question on whether there were examples of such cases in the past five years, I will encourage him to file a separate Parliamentary Question on this if he would like to ask for the specific statistics, because I do not have them at the moment. Again, rest assured that the CPS officers, given their procedures, have the ability to step in if there is an assessed need to do so.

### **AWARENESS ON SPOTTING SIGNS OF ABUSE IN SCHOOLS**

17 **Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim** asked the Minister for Education what are the steps that teachers and school counsellors can take to educate students on (i) identifying signs and symptoms of abuse among their classmates and (ii) reporting such suspected abuse cases to the school or authorities such as the Police or Child Protective Service.

**The Minister of State for Education (Ms Gan Siow Huang) (for the Minister for Education):** Mr Speaker, the safety of our students is of utmost importance to us in our schools. Our students learn about personal safety and how they can protect themselves against abuse through Character and Citizenship Education lessons. Students are provided with resources and community helplines and are reminded to seek help from trusted adults when their personal safety is compromised. Schools have also instituted peer support structures where students are taught to look out for one another and to inform trusted adults when they observe that their peers are under distress.

The Ministry for Social and Family Development (MSF) has introduced the Sector-Specific Screening Guide (SSSG) and the Child Abuse Reporting Guide (CARG) in 2015 to help schools manage abuse-related issues. School leaders work closely with the school counsellors and student welfare officers to report suspected cases of abuse to the Child Protective Service (CPS) in MSF and continue to monitor and support their students.

### **STUDIES ON ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF IMPORTING RENEWABLE ENERGY UNDER LAO PDR-THAILAND-MALAYSIA-SINGAPORE POWER INTEGRATION PROJECT**

18 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Trade and Industry (a) what studies have been undertaken on the environmental and social impact of importing renewable energy from hydropower plants under the Lao PDR-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore Power Integration Project; (b) what are the findings from these studies; (c) what measures have been taken to mitigate any negative environmental and social impact; and (d) if studies have not been undertaken, whether the Ministry will conduct these studies and, if not, why not.

**The Second Minister for Trade and Industry (Dr Tan See Leng):** Mr Speaker, the electricity imported from Lao PDR under the Lao PDR-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore Power Integration Project (LTMS-PIP) is generated by existing hydropower plants, which have undergone environment impact assessments (EIA) in accordance with Lao PDR's prevailing policies and laws. Results from these assessments had been reviewed by the Lao PDR government before the projects were allowed to proceed. Government agencies in the Lao PDR also undertake regular monitoring to ensure compliance with the safeguards and the mitigation measures put in place.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Louis Ng.

**Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon):** Thank you, Sir. I thank the Second Minister for the reply. Could I just ask whether the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) can publish this environment impact report and also the social impact report; so, not just environment, to ensure that it does not impact the communities and the environment in Lao PDR?

**Dr Tan See Leng:** There was an EIA which was prepared by the Chulalongkorn University's Environmental Research Institute and ERM Siam Company Limited. The Lao PDR authorities shared the EIA report with the Energy Market Authority (EMA). This report states that sufficient mitigation measures have been put in place to address the environmental and the social impact of the hydropower project.

Based on the Member's suggestion, I certainly will discuss it with my team to see whether there are any sensitivities in publishing it.

12.59 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Order. End of Question Time. Introduction of Government Bills. Mr Alvin Tan.

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

### **BILL INTRODUCED**

#### **FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS (AMENDMENT) BILL**

"to amend the Financial Services and Markets Act 2022 and to make related amendments to the Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Serious Crimes (Confiscation of Benefits) Act 1992",

presented by the Minister of State for Trade and Industry (Mr Alvin Tan) on behalf of the Prime Minister; read the First time; to be read a Second time on the next available Sitting of Parliament on or after 2 May 2023, and to be printed.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I propose to take a break now. I suspend the Sitting and will take the Chair at 1.45 pm.

## TIME LIMIT FOR DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR FINANCE

### (Suspension of Standing Orders)

1.46 pm

**The Leader of the House (Ms Indranee Rajah):** Mr Speaker, may I seek your consent and the general assent of Members present to move that the proceedings on the item under discussion be exempted from the provisions of Standing Order No 48(8) to remove the time limit in respect of Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's speech?

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

Hon Members indicated assent.

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

Resolved, "That the proceedings on the item under discussion be exempted from the provisions of Standing Order No 48(8) in respect of Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's speech – [Ms Indranee Rajah]

## SINGAPORE'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

### (Motion)

**Mr Speaker:** Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance.

1.46 pm

**The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance (Mr Lawrence Wong):** Mr Speaker, I beg to move, "That this House expresses gratitude to all in Singapore who contributed to the nation's fight against COVID-19; affirms the Government's effort to learn from the experiences of the last three years; and, to that end, endorses Paper Cmd 22 of 2023 on 'Singapore's Response to COVID-19: Lessons for the Next Pandemic'."

Sir, this White Paper is a culmination of several months of review of our responses over the last three years of the pandemic.

This has been the crisis of a generation – a battle against one of the most disruptive viruses the world has encountered in recent history. The crisis upended our lives in ways we never could have imagined.

In the most acute phase of the pandemic, our economy ground to a halt and workers lost their jobs. Many key life events were put on hold. Some of us suffered the pain of losing loved ones during this difficult time. Others were separated from family members who were based overseas.

The whole experience has fundamentally challenged and shaped who we are as a people and as a nation.

Today, we have fully transitioned to living with COVID-19 as an endemic disease. The virus is still among us and no one can tell how it will continue to evolve. But, for now, the evolution seems to be plodding, with minor tweaks to its genetic code, rather than major changes that require another Greek-letter name. So, it is timely to take stock of our response so that we can start preparing for the next battle, whenever it comes.

On the whole, compared to other countries, we have done well in protecting both lives and livelihoods throughout this pandemic.

Our healthcare system, though strained, was never overwhelmed. Our case fatality rate is one of the lowest globally. Our vaccination rate is among the highest in the world.

We budgeted around \$100 billion to respond to this crisis. We eventually spent \$72.3 billion, rolled out over eight Budgets in FY2020 and FY2021. The actual amount was less than budgeted partly because we had been prudent in our spending and also because we avoided some of the worst-case outcomes we had prepared for.

Our financial resources enabled us to mount a strong public health response and to secure early access to vaccines. A large proportion of the spending – over 80% – went towards supporting workers, businesses and individuals, so as to cushion them from the worst impact of the crisis.

Crucially, we augmented the direct Government measures with a series of COVID-19 legislation that provided small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) relief from their contractual obligations and protected them from financial distress and insolvency.

Our fiscal response for the two years – FY2020 and FY2021 – included \$36.9 billion drawn from our past Reserves, with the President's concurrence and I thank the President for giving her assent to the use of the past Reserves. These resources were crucial to our COVID-19 fight.

So, all in all, this was money well spent to tackle the extreme downsides of COVID-19, to protect lives and to avoid mass unemployment. Our comprehensive and swift economic schemes enabled our resident employment and incomes to recover quickly to pre-COVID-19 levels while keeping COVID-19 deaths low.

Our policies and actions to respond to the pandemic have also distinguished us from other countries. We kept our air and sea ports open and ensured an uninterrupted flow of critical supplies. We enhanced our reputation as a trusted node that can be relied upon even when other parts of the world shut down.

We also stand out in the world because of how our population rallied together in this crisis. Through all the trials and tribulations, we held together as a society and pulled through as one united people. We kept faith with our fellow Singaporeans, took care of the non-Singaporeans in our midst and everyone did our part in the interest of the common good.

Various surveys reflect these outcomes.

According to a global survey done by Pew Research Centre, we are one of the few countries in the world where the sense of unity is higher today than before the pandemic.

Another recent survey – this one by the Edelman Trust Institute – found that trust in the Government remains high in Singapore. In fact, it is at a record high. Singaporeans, generally, trusted the Government's advice and cooperated with the measures. This is unlike many other countries where people railed against the public health measures and trust in government went down.

Importantly, Singaporeans' trust in one another increased. We supported and looked out for one another throughout this crisis. As a result, many Singaporeans felt that their relationships with their neighbours, family and friends were maintained or have become stronger. We have deepened the reservoir of trust and strengthened our social capital.

Indeed, there have been many bright spots amid the dark clouds – many stories of personal sacrifices and selfless dedication, instances where we came together as a community and as a nation to fight this crisis of a generation.

On behalf of the Government, I would like to put on record our appreciation to everyone who contributed to our COVID-19 fight. [*Applause.*]

Our workers and unions, as well as tripartite partners who marshalled resources, rolled out support and helped countless businesses and workers through difficult times.

Our companies and trade associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as community groups who came together to contribute their time and know-how to fortify our response and support the vulnerable.

Our public officers who went beyond the call of duty. Many toiled selflessly behind the scenes to plan and roll out a multitude of programmes and policies, working shoulder-to-shoulder with the people and private sectors.

Our dauntless healthcare workers and many others who operated on the frontlines of the crisis. Whether it was at our borders or in the foreign worker dormitories, in our clinics and hospitals or in quarantine facilities, they willingly assumed personal risks, over and over again, just so that the rest of us could be safe. They rose to the occasion when the going got tough, even in the darkest of times.

We are, therefore, honoured to have a small contingent of our frontline warriors join us in Parliament today. [*Applause.*]

They represent a cross-section of the wider community of individuals who fought bravely on the COVID-19 frontlines: nurses and doctors and other healthcare professionals in the hospitals and in the community; educators and social service professionals and workers who served our students and vulnerable groups right through the crisis; transport workers, supermarket and warehouse managers and other frontline workers who kept essential services going, including our ports and land links; staff in both the public and private sectors who ran critical backroom operations to maintain supply chains, care facilities and many other services; Safe Distancing Ambassadors, SAF officers and soldiers, and Home Team responders who mounted large-scale responses in support of various policies and programmes. This is just a sampling of all our frontline fighters.

Sir, I would like to invite the COVID-19 fighters who are here today to please stand. [*Applause.*]

We express a grateful nation's deepest appreciation for your contributions and courage. Your dedication helped Singapore to keep going through unprecedented and uncertain times. Your acts of duty, sacrifice and care for fellow Singaporeans uplifted our spirits, boosted our confidence and kept all of us safe.

So, once again, we would like to say a very big "thank you" to all of you. [*Applause.*]

Today, we ask ourselves – what lessons can we draw from this crisis? How can we improve our strategies and be better prepared for the next pandemic or even the next wave, if it should come?

There are no straightforward answers to these questions because COVID-19 was a very complex and wicked problem on a grand scale. Our battle with the virus was a journey with many twists and turns and with repeated surprises and disruptions along the way. The situation was dynamic and fluid, with new information and developments unfolding daily.

We had to operate in the fog of war. We always saw through a glass darkly. It was often not clear what our next course of action should be.

We had many intense debates among ourselves – political officeholders as well as civil servants – and, in the end, we had to take decisions based on our best judgement and manage the consequences as well as we could.

Even today, as we look back, there will be different perspectives on what had transpired or how certain aspects of the pandemic could have been differently managed.

Indeed, our response to COVID-19 was by no means perfect. There were areas that we could have done better. We have highlighted them in the White Paper.

We have been forthright and transparent about this so that we can learn from our experiences. The point is not to look back and critique the past with 20/20 hindsight but to unpack how and why certain decisions were made at those points, what assumptions were held then, which considerations should have been weighed differently and how we can do better the next time.

In particular, some of our initial responses fell short because we knew so little about the virus at the start of the outbreak. We operated on the basis of the best scientific assessments then, as well as the protocols from our SARS experience.

So, while SARS helped us to avoid a cold start, it also in some ways contributed to us making some wrong initial assumptions. This is an important point – that while we learn from this and past experiences, we must also have the flexibility of mind to adjust to new situations and not be trapped by fixed views of how a crisis might unfold.

For example, the initial prevailing view was that one needed to show symptoms before the virus could spread, which was the case with SARS. In fact, this turned out to be wrong with COVID-19. The virus was also spread by individuals with no symptoms.

This wrong assumption contributed to several shortcomings in our initial response.

For instance, our infection protocols in the migrant worker dormitories were insufficient and we faced a major outbreak which almost resulted in a disaster. It took a herculean effort by the Government, private firms and NGOs to bring the situation under control, and to provide migrant workers with the care and support they needed.

We never wavered from our commitment to take care of our migrant workers. We acted as quickly as possible and activated every resource we had available to control the situation. We have also learnt from this episode and taken steps to plug the shortcomings in our system – something that Minister Tan See Leng will share later in this debate.

Likewise, we started out advising the public to only wear masks when unwell. We changed this later to mandate the use of masks in public spaces when we realised that asymptomatic transmission was possible. On hindsight, we should have been less definitive in our position on mask-wearing from the outset. We should have encouraged facial coverings of some sort, including homemade masks, while we ramped up the production of surgical masks. This would have given people psychological reassurance that they could do something to protect themselves and would also have helped to slow down transmission and spread of the virus, even though the improvised masks only provided partial protection.

In some other areas, like the implementation of safe management measures (SMMs), we did the right thing. We designed measures that took into account the risk that was inherent in different settings and activities. But we allowed the perfect to become the enemy of the good. Our rules were, at times, too finely calibrated, too complicated to follow and too difficult to implement – the varying group sizes, which I am sure everyone remembers; different rules for adults and children; different sets of rules for physical activity in different settings are some examples of this.

Aggravating the problem, the rules had to be adjusted as circumstances changed, sometimes at short notice.

Again, looking back, we should have tried much harder to simplify things, and gone for more broad-brush measures that would have reduced the implementation cost and burden.

Fortunately, we did learn along the way and eventually, simplified the rules to just three health protocols and five SMMs.

One of the most difficult judgement calls we had to make was on managing our borders. Border restrictions are an important defence against the virus, but we also know that such measures only help to buy time; they cannot completely stop the virus from coming in. The question is how far do we go in tightening our borders, recognising that this will also impose a huge cost on livelihoods and on Singapore's reliance on the world for a living.

Reflecting on our experience, our sense is that, at the beginning, we should have built in a margin of safety and tightened border measures more aggressively the moment the virus showed signs of spreading across borders, even though there might have been some risk of us overreacting to these signals. This would have bought us time to understand the virus and build up our hospital capacity. Furthermore, having decided that we would allow Singaporeans living abroad to return home, we should have acted sooner to ramp up the provision of quarantine and isolation facilities for the returning residents.

At the same time, border measures can only do so much. Once the virus took hold within the community, we could have eased our border restrictions more responsively, as the main danger would no longer be from cases coming from abroad.

In particular, we took some time to resume the entry of Long-Term Pass (LTP) holders into Singapore because we had found that even with pre-departure testing, a high percentage of travellers from some countries were still testing COVID-19-positive on arrival. Our concern was that the large number of infected persons could easily overwhelm our isolation facilities and healthcare capacity.

It was a judgement call we had to make at that time, and not without reason. But we also know that the restrictions created significant difficulties for some groups of LTP holders, such as Employment Pass holders with families here but who were abroad, or vice versa. Some of them endured prolonged family separation and disruption to their work. Singapore did incur reputational cost and lost some goodwill from this segment of the community who also had their homes here. On reflection, we could have let the LTP Holders back in sooner, or at least prioritised entry for some groups, such as those with families here.

We subsequently learnt from these experiences and adjusted our border responses when we dealt with the Omicron variant in late-2021. Members will remember we swiftly implemented a not-to-land policy to travellers from certain countries and we applied a combination of hotel and home quarantine for other travellers, depending on where they came from. The quick tightening of rules created a lot of inconvenience for those returning from their vacations then, because this was in December 2021. But it was necessary. And once we learnt more about Omicron and determined that it was less severe and not of significant concern, we eased the measures quickly as well. That was one example of how we learnt from the experiences with border restrictions.

Another example came up in December last year, when China moved away from its zero COVID-19 policy. At that time, China experienced a significant surge in cases. Several countries like the US, Japan and South Korea imposed tighter restrictions on arrivals from China. But we did not do so – and the reason is because we assessed that there were no new variants of concern detected in China, and the viral strains there were already circulating around the world and in our community. Furthermore, our arrivals from China were relatively few, and only a small proportion of them had COVID-19. We were therefore confident that the Chinese arrivals would not put too much pressure on our healthcare system and we decided at that time not to tighten restrictions. That judgement proved correct.

Sir, throughout the last three years, we had to continually make such tough calls, in the midst of great uncertainty and ambiguity, often without an established playbook to guide us, nor the luxury to wait and see.

We did not get every call right. We regret the inconveniences and frustrations caused to Singaporeans and everyone in Singapore when this happened. At the same time, we are grateful for the fortitude and forbearance that everyone had shown, when we had to put in place tough measures and also when there were shortcomings and errors in our policies and implementations.

This is the nature of dealing with a crisis. We will always be faced with incomplete information. We have to judge what is the best way forward based on what we know and respond quickly, rather than wait for all the facts to come in, by which time it might be too late to act.

Indeed, there will never be a “perfect response” in a crisis that is as complex, unpredictable and fast-moving as COVID-19. In such a crisis, no policy can cater for every eventuality; no plan can be implemented perfectly, because there will always be time pressure and resource constraints. What is more important is to be honest in our appraisal of our own actions and to keep on learning and improving, and striving to do better.

That is the spirit behind this White Paper and that is how we have distilled the key lessons that Singapore should take away to be better prepared for the next pandemic. For this debate, let me focus on three broad lessons.

First, fortifying our public health system to better respond to the next pandemic.

On several occasions over the last three years, our healthcare system came under immense pressure. We had to activate the entire healthcare ecosystem to cope with surges. We called on the private and community hospitals to augment our capacity.

Testing had to be ramped up nationally, at an unprecedented scale and pace. We had to tap on both public and private sector laboratories to expand our testing capacities.

Throughout, the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) worked closely with research laboratories and infectious disease experts outside of the Government to understand the changing nature of the virus, perform epidemiological modelling and accelerate the development of diagnostics and therapeutics.

Through these collective efforts, we protected our healthcare system from being overwhelmed and averted many deaths. But this was not without significant strain on the system and on our healthcare workers, who shouldered the massive responsibility of treating and caring for infected persons.

To be better prepared for the next pandemic, we must strengthen the resilience of our healthcare system.

We will need to build on our plans to strengthen the primary care system, which we are now pursuing through Healthier SG. We will also strengthen the relationships we have established with the private sector through our COVID-19 response, so that in a future pandemic, we can support more flexible responses and faster mobilisation of resources. And while we have done well in our vaccination efforts, our vaccine resilience can be fortified further with local manufacturing capability.

At the same time, we must grow our expertise in public health and pandemic management. In particular, we need to be able to detect the spread of novel pathogens quickly through effective surveillance and develop swift response measures to control the spread of the disease.

We already have some of these capabilities, especially in the area of communicable disease control and management, which we had beefed up after SARS. These currently reside in various parts of our healthcare system, for example in the NCID, the National Public Health Laboratory and within MOH itself.

To consolidate these capabilities and expertise, we will take the next step to set up a dedicated centre for public health, similar to what many other countries have done in setting up Centres for Disease Control. This will enable us to develop stronger competence in public health and grow these capabilities over time. Later in this debate, Minister Ong Ye Kung will elaborate on these plans.

Second, enhancing forward planning capabilities. Our planning parameters for the pandemic were largely based on the SARS experience. But it quickly became clear that these parameters were not adequate. SARS was a short, regional outbreak, largely confined to hospital settings. COVID-19 turned out to be more transmissible, though less severe than SARS, and the pandemic continued for several years and not just a few months. This greatly strained our healthcare capacity and manpower.

Just as COVID-19 was different from SARS, the next novel pathogen will be different from COVID-19. With SARS, we had a pathogen that was highly severe but with low risk of spread. With COVID-19, we have a pathogen that is only moderately severe, but with higher risk of spread. The more dangerous scenario will be one where we have a pathogen that has both high mortality and high contagion risk.

We will need to broaden the range of baseline scenarios for pandemic planning and review the resources we need to respond to these different scenarios. Being prepared and making investments early can yield immense dividends, especially during a crisis.

But at the same time, realistically, we cannot plan for every possibility. Every new pathogen we meet will involve a degree of dealing with the unknown and it would be prohibitively expensive to cater for a wide range of “worst cases”.

So, we will have to strike the right balance to make good use of our limited resources. This may involve planning for contingencies that can be pivoted “just in time” to support our pandemic response, so we do not have to build layers of redundancies that may remain underused outside of a crisis but cost us a disproportionate amount of resources to maintain.

In other words, our response will have to be a combination of preparedness and improvisation. Some scrambling is inevitable and inherent in the process, as we discover more information and consider the need to adjust our posture along the way.

That is why we must dedicate resources and equip our crisis management structures with better forward planning capabilities – so we better anticipate and imagine what might happen next, be prepared for the unexpected and be ready to adapt to changing circumstances as they unfold.

By doing so, we do not have to front-load all of the investments to cater for all contingencies. But we must create a dynamic, forward-oriented organisation and process whose main mission is to anticipate and monitor risks, to keep buying insurance where needed. So, as the crisis develops, we can continue to buy more insurance and options for the future.

To be clear, we did set aside some capacity to do such forward planning during the last three years. But it was very hard to do this well, because our officers were already fully stretched, fighting the immediate fire. So, whatever forward planning capacity we had competed with operational demands for resources and mindshare.

And again, learning from this, in future pandemics, we will set up a dedicated forward planning team with the bandwidth and expertise to look ahead. This will help us better anticipate the next bound, develop our next course of action and pivot more effectively as the situation evolves.

Related to all this is the third lesson – how we can strengthen our resilience as a nation. Our COVID-19 experience has been a stark reminder of our vulnerability. As a small and open economy, we were more badly hit than others by a global disruption that was outside of our control. We found ourselves in situations where it was uncertain whether we could secure critical supplies, even when we were willing to pay a premium for them.

In the early months of the pandemic, we witnessed how other countries had started hoarding essential medical and food supplies, and we grew increasingly concerned about whether we could replenish our own stock. Significant work had to be undertaken to activate emergency procurement measures and to tap on long-standing networks to secure what we needed. We also had to design new processes to keep our port and land links open, but in a safe way.

The pandemic has underscored the importance of building up additional redundancies and buffers that we can fall back upon during a crisis. Minister Gan Kim Yong will elaborate on these efforts, including our stockpiling strategies, diversification of supply chains for essential items and expansion of local production where this makes sense.

Besides having additional buffers, resilience is also about being more adaptable. We must be able to marshal our existing assets and resources quickly, and be nimble enough to move fast when the unexpected happens.



For example, when we first managed to bring protein and meat supplies into Singapore, which we had to do, there was an issue of where to store these goods. The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) scrambled, this was under then Minister Chan when he was at MTI, and we eventually solved this by sourcing and bringing in refrigerated containers, what they call "reefers", to provide sufficient cold storage capacity and we ramped up the capacity of the power supply to support their operations.

Where possible, the Government will design facilities to be multi-use, so they can be repurposed or redeployed during a crisis. In particular, we will apply further thought into how we can enhance the resilience of our public infrastructure, especially for new major projects like the Tuas Mega Port and Changi Airport Terminal 5.

We also need to be able to convert and repurpose existing spaces at short notice into facilities that can be used to meet emergency needs in a crisis. We had faced a steep learning curve trying to do this at the start. Singapore Expo had to be converted into community isolation and care facilities, hotels into quarantine facilities, Community Centres into vaccination centres, and vacant schools and Singapore Armed Forces camps into temporary housing for migrant workers.

Each of these processes took a lot of work and learning from this experience. We will continue to build up our capabilities so that we can pivot and respond more effectively in future.

Our private sector partners are a key source of support in these efforts. Working alongside them over the course of the pandemic has showed us all that there is much more that we can do by coming together, by sharing our resources, capabilities and networks. So, we will do more to sustain and strengthen our partnerships with the private sector. For example, through cooperation agreements, to shore up our pandemic preparedness plans and to mobilise our national resources more comprehensively in times of need.

One crucial resource that enabled us to respond effectively and bounce back quickly in this pandemic was our financial Reserves. Indeed, our Reserves is an integral part of our national resilience. It shielded our economy and our people from the harshest impact of the pandemic, and it remains our best safeguard in any crisis. It is, therefore, our duty to ensure that the Reserves are used prudently and judiciously, so that future generations can continue to benefit from it.

Ultimately, what lies at the heart of our resilience is our people, because that is our most important defence in a pandemic – to be psychologically prepared, to stay united and to support one another and keep faith with each other.

Throughout this pandemic, Singaporeans were socially responsible and responded to the calls for self-discipline, with admirable fortitude and patience. We saw a strong communitarian spirit and a high level of volunteerism. Many ground projects were initiated to rally the community in support of those who needed help.

COVID-19 brought out the best in all of us, individually and collectively. Despite the pressures and fears, we did not give in, we did not succumb. We stood firmly together and left no one behind. That is a mark of our growing maturity and resilience, as a people and as a nation.

Mr Speaker, in this debate, I invite everyone to reflect on how far we have come over the last three years. It has been an emotional journey of ups and downs for all of us, in the same way that our response has had its fair share of setbacks and successes. In the end, it was the whole nation coming together that made the difference in our fight against COVID-19, allowing us to surmount the odds and face the challenges without fear.

So, the aim of this White Paper and this debate is not to rate the Government's or Singapore's performance in this pandemic. We have done our best and that is what matters. In the final analysis, the long arc of history will judge how well we have responded to this crisis of a generation and how well we have learnt and remembered the lessons of COVID-19.

Today, we are here to give thanks, for we have found our way through the pandemic and emerged from it intact and strengthened. We are here to pay tribute to all who have made countless sacrifices and worked so hard to get us through this crisis. We are here to learn, improve and be better prepared when the next pandemic comes.

I hope that we will not have to go through an episode like COVID-19 again. Unfortunately, we would have to be very lucky for my hope to be fulfilled. The next pandemic can happen sooner rather than later, and quite possibly, will be worse than COVID-19. But if it does happen, we can draw confidence and strength from what we have been through these past three years.

Let us always remember the most important lesson of COVID-19, that we are stronger when we stand and work together. Let us resolve to stay united, so that whatever the challenges ahead, we can overcome them as One People and One Singapore. Mr Speaker, I beg to move. *[Applause.]*

Question proposed.

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

2.25 pm

**Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied):** Mr Speaker, "Our workers fighting in the trenches and workers supporting the fight – from nurses to cleaners, from GP doctors to infectious disease specialists, from medical researchers to delivery persons, and those Singaporeans driving our people to hospitals and quarantine facilities – are our heroes. We should not forget our public officers too. From civil servants and teachers

to those guarding our borders and public spaces namely our men and women in uniform, we must honour them for trying to allow Singaporeans to live our lives as normally as possible while keeping us as safe. The same goes for every Singaporean involved in this fight. Thank you for your efforts and for the hard work."

Sir, I first made this statement from this table almost three years ago in reply to the Government's introduction of the Solidarity and Resilience Budgets.

Reciting this today, I feel – as I felt then – that it simply cannot adequately express the appreciation many Singaporeans continue to have, for our frontliners and public service workers, for seeing us through the last three years.

For some, the challenges took a lot out of them – public health workers, in particular are still reeling from the intensity of the last three years and it is important for us to continually consider the long-term impact of the stresses they faced.

The Workers' Party (WP) Members of Parliament will elaborate further on this and on the findings of the White Paper in their speeches. Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC) Member of Parliament, Mr Gerald Giam, will speak on healthcare capacity, including Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in future pandemic response measures, domestic manufacturing during crises and the role of Temasek Holdings.

Sengkang GRC Member of Parliament Ms He Ting Ru will speak on Government communication, the gender wage gap and the underpaying and undervaluing of work traditionally carried out by women, mental health and the implications of "long COVID-19".

Finally, Aljunied GRC Member of Parliament Mr Leon Perera will cover issues pertaining to the role of general practitioners (GPs) in future pandemics, in addition to making points on the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the situation in our migrant worker dormitories.

For my part, I will speak on the approach the WP as a political Opposition, took on COVID-19. I will make three points. First, I will speak of the role the party played to bring concerns of the public into Parliament over the last three years through our COVID-19 experience. Second, I will cover what the WP did and deliberately did not do, so as to support the national effort; and finally, I will speak on the political posture of the WP during a national crisis.

Firstly, the role of the WP in our Parliamentary system of Government. Sir, throughout COVID-19, the WP kept focused on playing our role as a responsible and loyal opposition. We did not abdicate our role of holding the Government to account, as the design of our political system demands. Even without the full suite of considerations and details that are privy to the Government of the day, we advanced concrete proposals on managing the COVID-19 crisis as part of our General Election 2020 manifesto.

Post-elections, we raised COVID-19-specific measures in Parliament covering a wide range of issues, such as the MOH's suspected adverse events report, recalibration of COVID-19 controls for Singaporeans visiting their terminally-ill family members, vaccination safety protocols for children, clarifying the Government's position on TraceTogether with regard to its applicability for criminal investigations, the inclusion of non-mRNA vaccines into the National Vaccination Programme and the reasons behind the delay in permitting migrant workers to be reintegrated into the community, just to name a few.

During my Fortitude Budget speech in June 2020, I reminded the Government that Singaporeans had a right to expect a thorough review and accounting of the Government response to the crisis. I suggested that a Commission of Inquiry, or some other independent body, be appointed to review specific aspects of the Government's response up to that point. I emphasised that whatever form such a reckoning might take, our position as a constructive opposition required us to communicate the feelings of Singaporeans in Parliament, which necessarily includes a public expectation of Government accountability.

Sir, many COVID-19 reports presented through national parliaments the world over saw witnesses called to give feedback through unvarnished testimony, consistent with the substance of government accountability. On 9 May 2022, in response to my Parliamentary Question, this House was informed that the former Head of Civil Service, Mr Peter Ho, was overseeing the COVID-19 After Action Review (AAR) process and that the Government would share the findings and lessons with the public when the AAR was completed.

To that end, the White Paper tabled before the House today states that it "was prepared by the Prime Minister's Office" and that it draws on Mr Ho's review, which included interviews with key participants in the crisis, both Ministers and civil servants. It incorporates the findings of various reviews by Government agencies as well as the perspectives of the private and people sectors.

The White Paper adds that it attempts to, and I quote, "synthesise and make sense of the breadth of perspectives gathered, weave them together with the known data and facts, and offer as balanced and objective an account as possible" of the Government's COVID-19 response. To those familiar with the study of official history, this document would be referred to as a secondary document. There is an original document from which it draws its findings and conclusions. This original document is not before the House.

While the White Paper acknowledges some shortcomings in the Government response, Singaporeans do not know what has been excluded from the original reports and reviews referenced in this White Paper produced by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Are the contents of this White Paper all the findings from the AAR that the Government is prepared to share with the public and Parliament? Presumably, Mr Peter Ho submitted a more comprehensive AAR report to the Government. Can that report be made public to Parliament

so that Members of Parliament and Singaporeans can better understand the breadth of perspectives gathered, the known data and facts, and draw their own conclusions? If there is confidential information within the AAR report that could harm national security if revealed, that could be redacted from the report.

Why did the Government decide against publishing the original review report presented by Mr Peter Ho in full? To publish the original AAR report would be consistent with the spirit of the Motion, which seeks to affirm the Government's effort to learn from the experiences of the last three years.

Let me move on to my second point. I will speak on what the WP did and deliberately did not do during COVID-19.

Sir, Opposition parties, including the WP, were not privy to the deliberations of the Multi-Ministry Task Force or taken into confidence on the Government's planning processes for its COVID-19 response. In some countries, government approaches to COVID-19 were routinely attacked by parties outside of government in order to gain political mileage. The WP did not do this. We did not ride on misinformation or contribute to misunderstandings over national policies which were either intentionally or unintentionally conveyed. On the contrary, we encouraged Singaporeans to be mindful of rumours or unverified information and to clarify their doubts through the proper channels.

For example, in the middle of 2021, Member of Parliament for Sengkang Assoc Prof Jamus Lim came out to clarify that the tragic death of a young resident was not due to COVID-19, as was being openly propagated by some individuals online, ostensibly to sow doubts about vaccine safety.

Clearly, a unity of purpose was the need of the hour.

A most worrisome medical reality of COVID-19 was that it struck hard at our seniors and elderly. We needed to protect them against the much higher risk of severe illness and even death. During our engagement with residents, WP Members of Parliament encouraged our seniors to get vaccinated. Whenever they were undecided or unsure, we encouraged them to clarify their doubts on existing medical conditions with their doctors for peace of mind.

I would like to thank former Member of Parliament Mr Low Thia Khiang for agreeing to a suggestion by some of my colleagues and I to put out a video in Mandarin and Teochew explaining his experience with vaccination and why it was important for our seniors to get vaccinated, so as to reach out to as many Singaporeans as possible. Former Member of Parliament, Mr Png Eng Huat, did the same, speaking in Hokkien and sharing his experience, convincing his 92-year-old father to get vaccinated. Sengkang GRC Member of Parliament Ms He Ting Ru shared with the public that she took her vaccination while she was still breastfeeding as there was a concern and confusion that nursing mothers could be passing something dangerous to their babies.

Hougang Single Member Constituency (SMC) Member of Parliament Mr Dennis Tan and Aljunied GRC Member of Parliament Mr Gerald Giam visited residents in clusters of blocks in Aljunied-Hougang town, where residents in entire blocks were identified for mandatory swabbing. When the news suddenly broke out of such mass swabbing, Mr Giam went door-to-door with words of support for residents while working with the Aljunied-Hougang Town Council to assist in the wipe-down and cleaning of the affected blocks, something our cleaners – predominantly migrant workers – did so many times over the last three years to keep our community safe.

Other WP members and volunteers donated generously to the Courage Fund under the National Council for Social Services which sought to provide support to lower-income households affected by COVID-19. I would like to thank them and our volunteers and supporters for playing their part in the fight against COVID-19.

Finally, I will speak on what the public can expect from the WP in future when crises such as COVID-19 strike, as they must be expected to. It seems a long time ago now, but, as early as February 2020, when the Unity Budget was announced, the WP made clear the tone we would take on the COVID-19 crisis. We called for a unity of purpose and for politics to take a backseat. In June 2020, as we exited the circuit breaker, and a few weeks before the elections, I reiterated in my speech on the Fortitude Budget, that the WP did not come in to publicly criticise the Government on its handling of an unprecedented crisis. We were determined to support, and not undermine, the national effort.

As a political party that is not in Government, the WP will continue to lead with this approach in times of national crisis.

In WP Town Councils, we implemented the necessary protocols effectively. When some residents expressed frustration at some safe management measures in common areas that came under our responsibility, such as hawker centres, playgrounds and void decks, we dealt with them with empathy and open-mindedness, but without compromising the national measures or the safety of Singaporeans.

We realised that some rules could prove problematic when operationalised on the ground, and our Town Council officers diligently submitted their feedback to the agencies concerned. We took the view that any feedback would be taken seriously by civil servants and we endeavoured to work as one Singapore. As has come to be expected of our public officers, they did not let us down.

In conclusion, the opening quote of my speech paid tribute to those in our community who played a massively oversized role in saving lives. However, there are many outside this House who played an equal part in saving livelihoods. As COVID-19 brought our economy to a near halt, many individuals saw their incomes evaporate. I will never forget my engagement with a group of private-hire bus drivers at the start of COVID-19. These drivers had mouths to feed and vehicle loans to repay, but no business to generate income. Their worries, and even fears, were palpable. These drivers, and others like them, were helped by the diligence of public officers who engaged with financial institutions to withhold the repossession of vehicles. I wish to restate my acknowledgement of these efforts.

My appreciation also goes out to the many volunteer lawyers, assessors and SMEs and all businesses that exercised compassion by providing temporary relief to Singaporeans from their contractual obligations and potential enforcement actions.

Sir, the Motion today bookends our main COVID-19 chapter. It seeks to internalise the lessons learnt from our COVID-19 journey and to improve preparedness for the next health pandemic. Doing so would honour the sacrifices made by Singaporeans and the community in our fight against COVID-19. We also stand in solidarity with Singaporeans and our non-Singaporean friends who have lost family members to COVID-19 and to those who suffer from COVID-19 or vaccine-related ailments. I hope the MOH will proactively follow-up with all individuals who have not succeeded in their vaccine injury claims and consider their circumstances and the well-being of their mental health, as appropriate, on an ongoing basis.

Finally, thank you to the Multi-Ministerial Task Force for your efforts and exertions in guiding Singapore through COVID-19.

Sir, the WP supports the Motion to the extent that it expresses gratitude to all in Singapore who contributed to the nation's fight against COVID-19 and affirms the Government's efforts to learn from lessons of the last three years.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Desmond Choo.

2.39 pm

**Mr Desmond Choo (Tampines):** Mr Speaker, thank you for allowing me to join the Motion.

COVID-19 has resulted in the loss of lives and livelihoods worldwide, including in Singapore. Many workers lost their jobs and income. The workers in the aviation, aerospace and tourism sectors were especially affected when the borders closed. Our self-employed persons (SEPs) were hit especially hard by the sudden loss of income during the circuit breaker. On the other hand, workers in essential services, such as healthcare and supermarkets, had to work significantly harder to keep the country going.

We have endured much pain as a nation. But we have also emerged stronger together. It had not been easy to get to where we are today. We are grateful to our healthcare workers. They are the vanguard in winning this battle against COVID-19. Our Public Service officers also deserve no less praise for developing new policies and dispensing assistance at breakneck speed to Singaporeans during the darkest of times. The work was intense, unrelenting and stressful. They discharged their duties with honour, passion and fortitude. Singapore owes them our deepest gratitude.

In the battle to save livelihoods, the rock of tripartism has also allowed us, as a nation, to stand strong against the crashing waves COVID-19 brought before our shores. Tripartite partners worked together to save businesses, jobs and livelihoods. The secret sauce delivered once again.

Our focus during the crisis was to cut costs to save jobs. With neither vaccine nor cure in sight, businesses and workers faced a most daunting future. Businesses needed to conserve cash but also needed to retain capabilities if and when the situation changed.

The National Wages Council (NWC) was convened twice in 2020 when the economy deteriorated rapidly. I was in both of the NWCs. I witnessed how unity prevailed where we could have succumbed easily to self-interests. The National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) worked with our tripartite partners and recommended reducing non-wage costs and guided businesses to manage excess manpower to save jobs. We also guided workers and businesses on the efficient use of Government support measures to train and reskill our workers.

When the economic problems deepened, union leaders acted swiftly to ensure that retrenchments were minimised to the greatest extent possible. Though painful, workers took pay freezes and cuts. Workers stood in solidarity with the employers. The Labour Movement stood in solidarity with the nation. We provided guidelines to ensure temporary wage cuts were implemented in a reasonable manner.

Our union leaders also sought to minimise the overall impact to workers' take-home pay. They worked with companies to manage wage costs equitably and gradually.

Our tripartite partners never took our minds off our vulnerable workers. We worked with companies to prioritise non-wage cost-cutting measures. By having higher-wage earners take deeper and faster cuts, we protected lower-wage workers as much as possible. We were able to do so because of the strong trust built over the many years.

Central to protecting workers was also in placing displaced workers to areas of need. NTUC developed the Job Security Council (JSC) in 2020 to achieve this. Managed by NTUC's e2i, it is a placement ecosystem with a network of employers that are hiring and releasing workers. At its core, the JSC aims to support businesses in coping with fluctuating manpower needs across the economic cycle while providing support to workers in need. In particular, JSC focused on engaging with at-risk or displaced workers to pre-emptively shorten the unemployment period by helping them find jobs. This proved vital in the aviation, aerospace and hospitality sectors.

Our union leaders worked hard to encourage workers to switch jobs during the pandemic.

An example of such an initiative is the JSC's Lift-and-Place programme in partnership with trade associations and Government agencies. Through this programme, workers in hard-hit sectors like aviation were deployed to the healthcare sector, transferring their knowledge by performing roles like Care Ambassadors in the hospitals.

For example, Looi Jia Wen had been flying with Singapore Airlines as a cabin crew for only one and a half months before COVID-19 struck. JSC assisted cabin crew like her to be redeployed as Care Ambassadors at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. They supported hospital care teams to carry out basic caregiving procedures for patients, like oral feeding, positioning and turning, and moving patients. Jia Wen was able to make good use of the skills she had learnt as a cabin crew and contributed to the healthcare sector.

Those in the hospitality sector were deployed to supermarkets, including NTUC FairPrice and other essential services sectors, performing roles like contact tracers. These job placements were temporary. Workers under this programme would remain employees of their company. This initiative has allowed companies to ensure that skilled manpower would be readily available in the upturn.

For example, Gina Ng, back then, she was 59 years old and she had worked for 34 years at Fairmont Singapore and Swissôtel The Stamford as a senior administrative assistant in the hotel's culinary department. The JSC worked with the Food, Drinks and Allied Workers Union (FDAWU) and RC Hotels, Gina's employer, to place her on secondment to NTUC FairPrice, where she took on a retail assistant role. Gina is one of the many workers who benefited from JSC's efforts to support at-risk workers and match them to new jobs.

Workers in these affected companies were also able to retain some pay during the height of the pandemic and return to their jobs after the crisis. NTUC's e2i has also helped to move displaced workers from affected sectors to new contract jobs arising from the pandemic, such as Safe Distancing Ambassadors and swabbers.

As of February 2023, the JSC has matched about 70,000 workers to new jobs since the pandemic started.

Unions and employers also could not have helped as many workers without important Government measures. For example, the Jobs Support Scheme (JSS) provided wage support for employers. It helped them to retain local employees during the pandemic. It was estimated that 165,000 local jobs were saved from March to December 2020 because of JSS.

For the Self-Employed Persons (SEPs), things were not as straightforward. For example, during the circuit breaker, taxi drivers and private hire drivers saw their income drop rapidly. Sports coaches, art instructors and tour guides saw their income drop near to zero or zero, during the lockdown. Unlike the employees with their companies receiving support from the Government, SEPs were not afforded such support. The mechanism used to provide support to the employees just could not work for them. The Labour Movement quickly took up their cause with the Government. The Government responded strongly with the Self-Employed Income Relief Scheme (SIRS).

With the Government stretched immeasurably on many different fronts, the Labour Movement had to step up to administer SIRS. We needed to implement SIRS quickly. The circuit breaker would leave almost all of our SEPs with no income. Our priority was to get these monies into the affected SEPs' hands as soon as possible to provide them with a lifeline during such unprecedented times. Because a sizeable proportion of our SEPs had not previously filed their income, it was operationally challenging to swiftly identify SEPs in need. With the very short lead time, the bulk of the processing of the SIRS had to be done manually. Application systems and forms had to be fine-tuned several times to better serve our SEPs. We also recognised that some of our older ones struggled with navigating online forms and faced difficulties in collating the requisite documentation. NTUC staff stepped up and helped members through every step of the process. The scheme was able to help some 200,000 SEPs to obtain \$9,000 to tide through the pandemic.

The Labour Movement's involvement in implementing SIRS provided us with valuable lessons. The greatest of which was the precarious financial situations faced by many SEPs, especially the lower-income ones. We need to strengthen their financial and career resilience for SEPs. This is especially when the next pandemic is inevitable. We need to support SEPs to improve their career resilience and flexibility through training to deepen their skills and diversify their work portfolios. During periods of business or income disruptions, SEPs also need access to short-term income support. I call upon the Government to look into developing such support which can be tied to their efforts to train and search for jobs.

The Labour Movement, through our Freelancers and Self-Employed Unit (U FSE), will be focusing our efforts on representing the collective interests of the growing pool of SEPs in Singapore. We are starting with the platform drivers and riders. NTUC has also stepped up working with associations to strengthen the income security, welfare and work prospects of our SEPs. We will actively work alongside them with relevant resources and networking opportunities vital to enhancing their career pathways. They will also enjoy access to NTUC benefits and privileges such as access to seminars, training grants and insurance.

Mr Speaker, COVID-19 will not be the last pandemic we will face. In the intensity and fog of battling the pandemic, mistakes must be expected. The lessons from COVID-19 will be key to building resilience in Singapore. New capabilities such as the JSC were also developed, showing there are opportunities in every crisis.

Our deepest appreciation goes to our workers who continued to work despite understandable COVID-19 health worries. They made sacrifices by taking pay cuts and freezes. They made sacrifices by working non-stop because the country needed them. We also appreciate our employers who stuck with workers during the trying times. This crisis has further strengthened the trust between workers and employers.

The Government, especially our Ministry of Manpower (MOM) officers, they work hand-in-hand with tripartite partners to care for workers. We must continue to strengthen this cornerstone of tripartism to prepare for the inevitable next pandemic. With this, Mr Speaker, I support the Motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Gerald Giam.

2.50 pm

**Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied):** Mr Speaker, COVID-19 was the crisis of a generation. Our frontliners, including nurses, doctors, cleaners and drivers, responded heroically in the face of an enemy that we knew little about before 2020. Words cannot repay the debt of gratitude we owe each of them.

COVID-19 also took the lives of over 1,700 people in Singapore. I extend my deepest condolences to their families for their immeasurable loss.

While I acknowledge that the Government has performed well in many aspects of its response to this pandemic, it is important that we do not get carried away, patting ourselves on the back to the exclusion of implementing the important lessons we learnt during the crisis. We need to better prepare ourselves for future pandemics, which are likely to be more frequent and severe, not least because of increasing globalisation and urbanisation.

Healthcare capacity was stretched even before COVID-19 hit. The pandemic exacerbated this capacity crunch. Many healthcare workers reported working long hours overtime, being recalled for duty on their days off and even having no time for toilet breaks. The White Paper highlighted challenges in staffing hospitals with healthcare workers, resulting in existing workers feeling fatigued and burnt out from the prolonged crisis.

We are now no longer fighting COVID-19 like before, yet the shortage of healthcare facilities and manpower still persists. For example, median waiting times for emergency cases that require hospital admission from January to September last year was about seven hours. This can spike to 50 hours during infection waves.

In October 2016, then-Minister for Health Gan Kim Yong launched the Healthcare Manpower Plan 2020, which highlighted the need for 30,000 more healthcare workers from 2015 to 2020 to look after Singapore's fast-ageing population. It is now 2023. How many of these 30,000 additional healthcare positions have been filled? During the debate on the Healthier SG motion last October, Minister Ong Ye Kung said that another 24,000 nurses, allied health professionals and support care staff are needed to operate hospitals, clinics and eldercare centres by 2030.

Recruitment alone is not sufficient. There needs to be a corresponding transformation in the remuneration of healthcare workers. The group that bore the heaviest burden of caring for COVID-19 patients were nurses. Their long working hours and lower starting pay compared to territories like Australia, Hong Kong and Canada, could have contributed to their high attrition in recent years. In 2021, the proportion of nurses resigning hit a five-year high, with 7.4% of local nurses and 14.8% of foreign nurses leaving their jobs.

Why are so many nurses leaving the healthcare sector? A study on healthcare workers conducted by researchers Celene Ting and others from the Saw Swee Hock School for Public Health, Tan Tock Seng Hospital and the NCID highlighted that healthcare workers reported burnout from being overworked, emotional exhaustion and at times feeling a lack of appreciation or support at work.

This was exacerbated by having to care for difficult and sometimes abusive patients. Nearly a third of healthcare workers witness or experience abuse each week, according to a tripartite workgroup's findings, which the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Health, Rahayu Mazam, shared earlier this month during the Committee of Supply debate.

Additionally, some healthcare workers are also drawn to work opportunities overseas, where they can receive higher remuneration and more societal recognition. For example, a nurse that CNA interviewed mentioned that after moving from Singapore to the US, he felt more highly esteemed by the public, citing an example of how his car loan was approved immediately after he said he was a nurse, despite having no credit history.

Urgent changes are needed if we are to reverse the departure of nurses and boost their numbers in Singapore.

Nurses' basic pay should be benchmarked to that of their contemporaries in other essential public services. This is a point made by Assoc Prof Jeremy Lim from the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health during a recent CNA interview. Such services could include the Police, army and the education service. The salaries of nurses in other jurisdictions like Australia, Hong Kong and Canada should also be considered in the benchmarking.

It should take into account the longer hours that nurses have to work compared to many other professions. This is to ensure that the opportunity cost of taking up nursing instead of another profession would be minimised. We also need to make the nursing profession more highly esteemed by the general public.

Another way to attract more Singaporeans to take up nursing and increase retention would be to enhance their professional development opportunities. Nurses in Singapore are often still seen as the assistants to doctors instead of being professionals in their own right. They should instead be granted more autonomy and entrusted with higher level responsibilities. In the UK, nurses run clinics, diagnose patients, take on high-level management roles and help to lead medical research. We should accelerate efforts to achieve the target of 700 Advance Practice Nurses by 2030.

Beyond pay, management culture, work recognition and working hours are also areas that need to be examined for a holistic improvement of the profession.

Next, during the pandemic, many persons with disabilities (PwDs) experienced difficulties coping with measures such as the blocking off of regular exits and entrances, shifting access points for PwDs and having to locate and scan SafeEntry codes. Many wheelchair users and people with developmental disabilities, visual impairments and autism spectrum disorder had difficulties with SafeEntry scanning. Measures such as COVID-19 swabbing and mask-wearing were difficult for some people. I recall a resident of mine who was very worried that her son, who had a mental disability, would struggle and hurt himself when made to undergo mandatory swabbing at his block when an outbreak occurred there.

While support for PwDs was eventually introduced, much of this was reactive. This could be due to an absence of meaningful participation by PwDs when safe management measures were implemented. Moving forward, it would be advisable to have at least one member of the disability community on emergency task forces so that the community's views can be adequately represented. More importantly, all policies rolled out need to take into account the unique needs of PwDs, to ensure that they are not excluded.

The next section of my speech deals with the public communication on pandemic mitigation measures.

In January 2020, the Government issued an infographic titled "Advisory on wearing masks" which highlighted that "masks are generally not needed for people who are well."

The infographic, which was also posted on social media, added that "there are sufficient masks in the warehouses and Government stockpiles."

The then-chairman of the PAP's Government Parliamentary Committee for Health, Dr Chia Shi-Lu, echoed the Government's line later that month when he told the New Paper that "surgical masks can prevent the passing of virus from a wearer, but when it comes to protecting (a healthy wearer), the masks won't protect from viruses."

The Prime Minister, in January 2020, said Singaporeans should follow doctors' advice on how best to protect themselves from the virus, which includes not wearing a mask when they are unwell.

The Prime Minister rightly pointed out though, that the "Wuhan virus" – as it was then called – was "probably more infectious than SARS, and possibly infectious even before people have symptoms." This was on 31 January 2020.

The fact that the Government knew in those early days that asymptomatic transmission of the virus could occur should have prompted them to advise everyone to wear masks when in contact with other people.

On 10 February 2020, four local doctors did just that by issuing a statement urging Singaporeans to wear masks always when leaving home, even if they were well. Dr Colleen Thomas, Dr Judy Chen, Dr Tham Hoe Meng and Dr Lim Pin Pin acknowledged the difficulties in obtaining new surgical masks every day and urged the use of creative solutions like washable cloth masks or scarves. They pointed out that these measures were better than no mask at all.

In response to the four doctors a few days later, the Director of Medical Services at MOH said that "it is not wearing masks that's most important, it's hand washing" – even though the two actions were not a binary choice. The Straits Times ran an article to "educate" the public on questions like "Is it really true that you do not need to wear a mask if you are not sick? Is hand washing better protection against viruses than a mask?"

These statements were incongruous and did not seem to be consistent with common sense. People intuitively knew that any layer preventing the spread of droplets would be better than not having one.

It took a leaked recording of a Minister at a closed-door meeting in February 2020 to reveal that Singapore was rationing masks to save them for healthcare workers.

The White Paper stated that "in hindsight...the Government could have encouraged Singaporeans to devise their own face masks while we set up manufacturing lines to ramp up production of surgical masks." This was not hindsight – it was what the four doctors advised in the first place, which the Government did not heed.

It took another three months for the Government to stop discouraging people from wearing masks by updating the guidance on 3 April 2020.

The result of this about-turn, as acknowledged by the White Paper, was that public trust in the Government was eroded. Singaporeans saw through the Government's initial statements – that the real reason why they were discouraging those who were well from wearing masks was because there were insufficient supplies of surgical masks, not because mask wearing was less effective than hand washing.

While concerns over panic buying and hoarding by the public were not unfounded, the Government had stockpiles of surgical masks for healthcare workers and should have had the power to requisition more masks from the commercial market.

This brings me to my next point – why did Singapore not have the sufficient domestic capacity to manufacture items as basic as face masks? Was the Government not able to marshal local companies to accept and prioritise contracts for the manufacture of materials deemed essential for our defence against COVID-19, including face masks and ventilators?

The White Paper mentioned that the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act gave the Government the option of mobilising civilian resources, using the Requisition of Resources Act (RORA), but it chose not to use those powers. Instead, the Government said it will leverage alternative structures, for example, through strategic partnerships or cooperation agreements, to effectively harness civilian resources for crises.

I agree that it would not have been appropriate to use RORA for the COVID-19 pandemic, given that the Act is a rather blunt tool which is meant more for wartime scenarios than a public health crisis. In any case, RORA does not appear to give the Government the authority to ask the private sector to prioritise orders from the Government, short of requisitioning the entire line of services.

For example, it is not clear the Government can ask a company to prioritise orders from the Government for the manufacturing of masks without requisitioning and running the entire mask production facility on its own.

Will the Government consider legislation akin to the US Defense Production Act, which empowers the executive to direct private companies to prioritise orders from the federal government and take actions to restrict the hoarding of needed supplies?

I now turn to the role, during the pandemic, played by one major local company – Temasek Holdings. Temasek-linked companies played an outsized role during the pandemic. Almost all the private sector partners named in the White Paper are Temasek-linked companies.

The White Paper stated that private sector companies like Temasek were indispensable sources of support during COVID-19. This may point to an over-dependence on the Temasek ecosystem. Would it be better to diversify the base of private sector partners that can support the national effort in times of crises?

During Question Time on 3 March, I asked Senior Minister of State for Finance Chee Hong Tat if the Government's total COVID-19 spending of \$72.3 billion included the amount spent by Temasek Holdings, Temasek Foundation and other Temasek-linked companies for their COVID-19 activities. The Senior Minister of State gave a rather convoluted answer, but I believe the answer was no.

This being the case, can I ask – how much did Temasek and its related organisations spend out of their own budgets on COVID-19 initiatives like face masks, hand sanitisers and oxygen concentrators, which were made available locally and overseas?

The White Paper stated that while Temasek's main goal remains to deliver long-term returns on its assets, it plays a unique role in supporting a robust portfolio of local companies that can anchor important capabilities for Singapore in a crisis.

Does Temasek have goals other than to deliver long-term returns on its assets? Is this unique role part of the Government's mandate for this Fifth Schedule company?

I appreciate the work that Temasek companies and their employees did to keep Singaporeans safe during the pandemic and the resources they spent doing so. But I think it is important for the House to know if Temasek's expenditure on COVID-19 constitutes a draw on our Reserves and, if so, whether the approval of the President was sought and obtained?

Sir, it is a truism that those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it. Notwithstanding the absence of a Committee of Inquiry, which the Workers' Party had called for, we still have many lessons to learn from in the White Paper and this debate.

For the sake of our future generations who may have to go through catastrophic pandemics like these, we have to both learn and implement these lessons. In this spirit, Sir, I support the Motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Louis Ng.

3.05 pm

**Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon):** Sir, COVID-19 was a trying time. We pulled through together as a nation. A silver lining of this difficult period is that it shone the spotlight on the invisible in our community.

One such group is our low-wage migrant workers.

COVID-19 highlighted their plight. These were very difficult times. I received desperate messages from workers confined in their dormitories, photos of poor living conditions and photos of poor quality of food.

But COVID-19 also showed how the community came together to help our migrant friends and to address many of these problems that existed for many years. I thank the many NGOs, activists, citizens and Government agencies who worked tirelessly through COVID-19 to help our migrant friends.

During the pandemic, we made great strides in improving dormitory conditions and enforcing electronic payment of salaries.

The Government and the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) have worked very hard to make these changes a reality with the support from civil society. The pandemic showed us that many things which we previously thought were impossible could in fact be done with willpower and collaboration between the Government and civil society.

The pandemic has passed. But many of the problems that our migrant workers face will not.



I want to celebrate our wins in my speech today in improving dormitory conditions and enforcing electronic payment and partnership between the Government and civil society. But I also hope that we do not take this progress for granted.

The pandemic was a painful lesson that the fight for good living conditions and electronic payments are not just issues that are good for our migrant workers. They are also good for the Government, for employers and for public health.

These were painful lessons to learn. I hope we do not unlearn these lessons and use the momentum from COVID-19 to continue our fight for a more inclusive and fairer Singapore for our migrant workers.

The first win I hope to celebrate is the progress that we have made in improving dormitory conditions. I first spoke up in 2017 about the living conditions of migrant workers. Our migrant friends leave their homes to build and clean ours. The least we can do is give them proper homes in Singapore while they are here.

Before COVID-19, there were an average of 12 to 16 residents per room. Their beds, which were usually double-decker beds, could be crammed together without any minimum spacing between beds. Each resident usually had less than 3.5 square metres of living space. Sleeping spaces and communal facilities for cooking, dining and laundry did not have to be separated. Up to 15 residents could share one set of common toilets. Imagine being confined in this space with nowhere to go for months.

I am glad this has now changed for some workers.

After a comprehensive review of existing dormitory standards, we have now improved standards for new dormitories. Our new standards include a maximum of 12 residents in a room, en-suite toilets, no more than six residents to one toilet, adequate fans, more spacious rooms, adequate space between beds and even in-room Wi-Fi.

I thank MOM for engaging with employers, dormitory operators, migrant workers, NGOs and architects in preparing these standards. I am also glad that our Foreign Employee Dormitories Act has been extended from larger dormitories with 1,000 or more workers to smaller dormitories with seven beds or more.

These are improvements that civil society has been calling for. Today, they are a reality – but only for some workers.

While new dormitories after September 2021 must comply with the new dormitory standards, existing dormitories or those before September 2021 can operate based on past standards. We reviewed dormitory conditions and decided 3.5 square metres per person and 15 residents to a common toilet is unacceptable. We cannot say these standards are unacceptable for some but continue to live with these standards for others.

I understand that MOM is looking into how existing infrastructure can be converted to meet the updated standards. I hope we can set a concrete timeline for all dormitories to meet these minimum standards. Again, I hope it does not take another pandemic for living conditions to improve further.

The second win is increased enforcement of electronic payment of salaries. Electronic payment protects low-wage migrant workers against underpayment or illegal kickbacks by creating a paper trail.

I first spoke up in 2016 for electronic payment for Work Permit holders. At that point of time, MOM's response was that electronic payments could not be made mandatory. This was because of difficulties in maintaining minimum bank balances. SMEs also faced operational challenges and costs. We were stuck at only about two-thirds of all workers receiving salaries electronically for years.

When COVID-19 struck, electronic payment was made mandatory for workers in dormitories because employers had no other way of accessing workers who were in lockdown. By January 2021, 97% of all employers were paying salaries electronically. It took a pandemic for us to achieve the last mile in electronic payment for workers in dormitories.

While we celebrate this win, let us not forget that we are only talking about workers in dormitories. What about other workers not living in dormitories?

MOM has said that electronic payments help prevent salary disputes as there are digital records for each transaction. This benefit applies workers whether or not they live in dormitories.

We have proven that it is possible for virtually all workers living in dormitories to be electronically paid. We once thought this to be impossible. Let us go the further step and mandate electronic payment for all work permit holders.

Last, the final win that I hope to celebrate is the strong partnership that we have forged between the Government and civil society through this pandemic.

Many, many NGOs and ground-up initiatives sprung up to support our workers on all fronts. Civil society truly stepped up to provide material items from masks, sanitisers, daily necessities and food to the less tangible but no less important needs such as mental wellness helplines and other initiatives to provide emotional and psychological support. Regular sharing sessions between the Government and NGOs ensured that we could work in tandem towards the common goal of improving conditions for our migrant workers.

In times of need, we saw how the Government and civil society can work as one and complement each other's efforts. It was a win-win partnership and can continue to be.

As our work for migrant workers continue beyond COVID-19, so should this partnership. I hope we maintain the channels of communication and continue the collaboration between the Government and civil society for migrant workers issues – in fact, for all other issues as well.

Sir, the progress that we achieved over COVID-19 did not happen overnight. These were issues that civil society has called for, for many years. I hope these efforts continue and we do not wait for another pandemic to further improve living conditions, enforce electronic payment for all workers and sustain partnership with civil society. I also hope that we ride on the momentum of the progress we have made and continue to improve conditions for our migrant friends. Another pandemic is too high a price for us to pay to learn the lessons again.

Let me end with a quote I have used in many speeches to remind all of us in this House that, "There is no us or them, only us, one human family connected in ways we sometimes forget."

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Janet Ang.

3.13 pm

**Ms Janet Ang (Nominated Member):** Mr Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to join this debate on Deputy Prime Minister's Motion. I declare that I am a council member of the Singapore Business Federation.

Before proceeding with my speech, I will ask us to remember for a second all who have succumbed to COVID-19. May they rest in peace. My deepest condolences to their families.

Sir, I would like to start with a moment of gratitude on behalf of the business community: firstly, for the leadership by the Government and this House throughout the 37 months from DORSCON Yellow in January 2020 to DORSCON Green in February 2023; secondly, to all of Singapore, especially our frontline workers, for doing what they do every day for the rest of us, especially through the darkest days during the pandemic; and thirdly, for everyone involved with this White Paper, which I believe will become a valuable resource of actionable insights for the nation.

The business community is glad to see that we did not waste the crisis and that the Government chose to professionally and honestly reflect and learn from the events and the actions taken, including the U-turns that had to be made along the way. The findings are objective and balanced. The frank analysis on what we did well and what could have been done better provides valuable takeaways for us as a country to handle the next pandemic. Overall, Singapore has done well in protecting both lives and livelihoods.

In an August 2022 Pew Research Center Survey involving 19 countries, including Singapore, it was found that many countries believed the pandemic has revealed weaknesses or strengths in their political systems. In the US, the Netherlands, Greece, Germany, Japan, Australia and South Korea, the majority of their people see their countries struggling to handle the COVID-19 outbreak in ways that reveal political weakness. Only in Singapore, Hungary, Israel and Sweden does the majority feel the opposite, that the way their country has handled the COVID-19 virus outbreak highlights their country's political strengths. At the end of the day, it is the high trust and confidence that Singaporeans have in one another and in our leaders that have gotten us through the crisis of a generation. And having our reserves was a real blessing.

For the rest of my speech, I will speak on the key impressions of the White Paper from the various trade associations and chambers (TAC) leaders I engaged with.

Consistently, the business community has brought up the Jobs Support Scheme (JSS) as the lifesaver for many companies, especially the SMEs. JSS was critical in keeping most businesses afloat during the pandemic and preserving jobs for workers by providing wage support for the companies to retain employees. To quote Mr Farid Khan, President of the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry: "The swift action taken by the Government in implementing this scheme has undoubtedly saved jobs and businesses."

In parallel, businesses, especially SMEs, are grateful to the Government for the quick rollout of the temporary relief measures, including rental rebates, bridging loan programmes, deferment of loan repayments, access to credit and so on. All these measures, which were urgently needed, were passed into legislation in record time. Looking back, Mr Kurt Wee, President of the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (ASME), said: "COVID-19 brought unprecedented collaboration and cooperation between SMEs and Government. Coordination with ESG was almost on a daily basis, at times, with two to three advisories being disseminated to the business ecosystem. TACs played a critical information bridge hand-in-hand with Government to usher the whole ecosystem throughout the crisis. Strong levels of trust were established. It was also an event that demonstrated the strength of the 4G team, which businesses highly recognise and appreciate."

Add to that, Government support to help businesses to pivot to e-payment to e-commerce and to reach customers online was transformational for many businesses, but, for many others, it was a lifesaver. There were several industries that were particularly hard-hit during COVID-19 and I asked three of them for their perspectives.

First up is the hotel industry. Given that, in general, 90% of hotel business comes from international travel, with the closure of our borders and subsequent border restriction measures, this industry was severely impacted. I would like to quote Ms Kwee Wei Lin, President of the Singapore Hotel Association: "Hotels are thankful to the Government for lifelines, such as the Jobs Support Scheme, which had helped to

protect the livelihoods of our local employees. This, in turn, ensured that the industry had talents to restart effectively when recovery eventually came. Additionally, the rollout of the Enhanced Training Support package by the Government worked really well for the industry as hotels could optimise the downtime to upskill and reskill their employees to cater to a post-COVID-19 tourism landscape. Additionally, the launch of STB's Singapore Rediscover vouchers in December 2020 was another scheme which helped hotels to keep the lights on and retain its local workforce. The SHA would like to record its appreciation to the Government for helping the industry stay resilient. Hence, the number of SHA hotel members has remained unchanged from pre-COVID-19 days at 160."

Hon Members of this House, many of us would recall ourselves or loved ones having to stay away from home while serving isolation, quarantine or Stay-Home Notice (SHN). Ms Kwee shared how all the hotels stepped forward swiftly to repurpose their properties into isolation facilities to help our nation fight against COVID-19. Isolation, quarantine and SHN was an important line of defence against the pandemic and, at one point, more than half of the 67,000 hotel rooms in Singapore at that time were used in our battle against COVID-19. I am sure all of us in this Chamber will join the Singapore Hotel Association (SHA) to express our gratitude to all hotel employees, especially the frontliners, who very quickly adapted to their service delivery to offer compassion and care to guests who had to undergo isolation, quarantine or SHN. Ms Kwee said: "Hotels have made good use of the crisis by enhancing manpower capabilities and adopting technology solutions to accelerate their transformation journey. With the support from the Government, the industry has emerged stronger from this crisis of a generation."

The next industry that was badly affected by COVID-19 was the construction industry. The President of Real Estate Developers' Association of Singapore (REDAS), Mr Chia Ngiang Hong, recalled the chaotic condition at the beginning of COVID-19 breakout due to the lack of direction and coordination among the various Government agencies. I quote Mr Chia Ngiang Hong: "We agree with the finding in the White Paper that the handling of migrant workers was rather disappointing. As migrant workers are a lifeline to the construction industry, the impact to the industry and consequences were quite significant, as evidenced by the long delays in many construction projects and the collapse of a few big contractors. The reopening of worksites after the stabilisation of the migrant worker situation was rather painful, with volumes of new rules and requirements resulting in painfully slow progress on sites. Fortunately, Minister Desmond Lee stepped in to personally supervise the situation. With his very regular meetings with relevant stakeholders and agencies and very frank exchanges of views and feedback, the situation recovered well and inched towards normalcy. In hindsight, much could have been done differently by everyone, and the White Paper was objective and frank in calling out the issues and the lessons learnt."

As we read in the White Paper, MOM has since set up a new primary healthcare system for migrant workers. There are now six medical centres for migrant workers across the island. In partnership with MOM, the Singapore Business Federation (SBF) foundation, with the support of our SBF members, set up MigrantWell, an IPC charity, to establish one of the centres, St Andrew's Migrant Worker Medical Centre, at Penjuru Walk. MigrantWell is also providing care gaps, for example, in dental care for pain management, rehab physiotherapy and mental wellness for our migrant workers. Mr Govindaraj Mathiyalagan, a migrant worker with BJ Harvest Services, joined us at the launch of MigrantWell and shared that he and his fellow migrant workers are thankful to Singapore for doing this for them.

The silver lining of COVID-19 is that, through the dormitory saga, Singaporeans are now more aware of the contributions of our 600,000 to 700,000 migrant workers whose lives are just as precious as our own. These are people who are here in Singapore to earn an honest living to support their families back home. During COVID-19, when the plight of migrant workers came to the forefront, Singaporeans and residents opened their hearts and their wallets with generous donations with care packs and warm meals for our migrant workers. This is the SG Cares spirit.

Third, I would like to speak about the public transport industry. During COVID-19, among the heroes of our frontline workers include our 21,000 public transport workers. Notwithstanding that I am involved with the Public Transport Council, I submit to you that our public transport workers, as do our healthcare workers and all the other frontline workers, deserve our heartfelt appreciation. The Land Transport Authority (LTA) and the public transport operators kept our buses and trains running so that our healthcare workers and essential workforce can get to where they need to get to, to save lives, to connect Singaporeans to their families even during the phases when it was only two per household allowed, to keep Singapore humming in spite of the pandemic. At the peak of the pandemic, average daily ridership dropped to less than 25% of pre-COVID-19, but it was decided that public transport must be kept available for our essential workers and bus and MRT train service levels were sustained at largely pre-COVID-19 frequencies.

Our public transport workers put our commuters before self and worked tirelessly with a smile. We salute them for that. When Malaysia announced the closing of borders, our public transport operators (PTOs) worked around the clock to find accommodation to house our Malaysian bus captains and engineers. When the vaccination programme was launched, our public transport workers were given priority access to vaccines. And when there were concerns with the mental well-being of the public transport workers, especially the foreign workforce having to be away from their family and loved ones for prolonged periods, the PTOs leaned in. The CEO of SMRT, Mr Ngien Hoon Ping, shared how SMRT stepped up their engagement with the staff and provided strong support to the team throughout to maintain high staff morale. This is the SG Cares spirit.

During the pandemic, it became also more important than ever to promote a caring and inclusive public transport experience and the PTOs leaned in. The CEO of SBS Transit, Mr Jeffrey Sim, shared how SBS Transit staff partnered Dementia Singapore and rolled out the "Find Your Way" initiative to make bus interchanges and MRT stations frequented by seniors more friendly for them. This is the SG Cares spirit.

For all the positives of how well Singapore has managed during COVID-19, there was one low light besides the dormitories that caused us a PR hit and the Deputy Prime Minister mentioned it just now as well. There were various points in time when Singapore temporarily suspended the entry of long-term passholders, who are, generally, the family members of tax-paying Employment Pass (EP) holders.

It was a judgement call not without reason. However, the implication is that many of our EP holders had to endure prolonged family separation and disruption to their work or schooling for the children. It was a painful time for them. Mr Per Magnusson, Immediate Past President of the Singapore International Chambers of Commerce, shared with me that the White Paper, having included this issue and suggested improvements to better handle this segment of the community who also had their homes here, makes the already excellent report an outstanding one. He said, and I quote: "Singapore did a great job at handling the difficult situation during COVID-19. The international community was especially impressed with the equal approach, whether Singaporean or not, to vaccinations during COVID-19. Even more importantly, it shows an open and eager attitude towards learning from what went well and what could be improved."

Last but not least, I would like to speak to what I believe has saved jobs and livelihoods and prevented lost cohorts of young people who graduated during the COVID-19 years and, that is, the SGUnited Jobs and Skills programme. It was a good thing that the National Jobs Council was already in place, pre-COVID-19, to help workers acquire new skills and competencies necessary for adapting to the changing business landscape. Amid the COVID-19 situation, MOM very quickly was able to roll out the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package, which helped local jobseekers access jobs, company-hosted traineeships and attachments, as well as training opportunities.

SBF was one of the administrators for the programme and approved and onboarded around 19,500 placements from May 2020 to December 2022, about 10% of the total placements as reported in the White Paper. The common feedback which SBF received from companies is that both the SGUnited traineeships for fresh graduates in 2020 and 2021 and the current SGUnited Mid-Career Pathways for mature individuals are useful in two ways: (1) helping companies lower their risk in taking near-fit on non-fit individuals through the six to nine months of attachment before offering them permanent jobs and (2) helping fresh graduates and mature individuals secure opportunities to get permanent jobs.

SGUnited skills have also provided very good support for Singaporeans who were displaced due to the pandemic. This is not just because of the allowance that the Government gave to the trainees who signed up for the courses, but the skills that they picked up and the employment opportunities that they secured after the course. Singapore Polytechnic (SP), which I am involved with, participated actively in supporting the SGUnited skills programmes, training about 1,200 jobseekers. SP itself hired more than 100 of the trainees under the SGUnited Traineeship (SGUT) Programme and put the trainees to work in producing online videos to support the home-based learning during COVID-19.

The SGUnited skills trainees hired by SP, in fact, contributed to SP scaling up and accelerating the transition to a more digitalised pedagogical model and ready for the post-COVID-19 hybrid model where 20% of class time in lectures are conducted online increasingly, while tutorials are still face-to-face on campus. When the traineeship was over, seven of the trainees got employment contracts with SP. And while we did not track where the rest of them went to, the anecdotal feedback from employers is that the SGUT experience is appreciated.

Over the past three years, I am sure most of us would have come across graduates or mid-career professionals who benefited from the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Programme and, even if not said, all are grateful in one way or another.

SGUnited Jobs and Skills, in my opinion, has become a brand unto itself. I believe that it is a programme which can have a long tail, even as we are now operating in DORSCON Green.

I would like to ask the Government to share some updates on the following.

One, what is the Government's assessment of the impact of SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package and tripartite efforts in mitigating unemployment and supporting the recovery of the labour market and whether we will continue to do so?

Two, how has the setting up of SGUnited Jobs and Skills Centres in every HDB town been helpful to jobseekers and do we see this as a permanent support for our workforce?

Three, the Job Growth Incentive (JGI) supported businesses and local jobseekers during COVID-19 and was very helpful for a wide pool of jobseekers, especially the unemployed and mature workers. It can be helpful even in post COVID-19 to motivate and encourage workers to enter certain industries which traditionally may not be attractive or to incentivise employers to invest in certain persons for jobs in their organisation. How does the Government plan to use tools like JGI and SGUnited Jobs and Skills to correct some of the structural employment misalignment in our industries for our Singaporean workers and also for persons with disabilities and vulnerable jobseekers?

Moving forward, the strengths of our tripartite partnerships must be further leveraged. With Budget 2023, business community is assured that the Government will continue to support businesses and workers in their efforts to recover and rebuild from the pandemic. It is crucial for the Government to continue to work closely with industry stakeholders, including TACs to develop targeted measures that address the specific needs of businesses and workers in different sectors and industries.

We are blessed to have survived COVID-19 relatively well and have emerged from the pandemic, ready to take on the opportunities ahead of us. What is before us unfortunately is not yet clear skies as we grapple with rapid inflation, supply shocks and energy price hikes from the Russian's invasion of Ukraine and the threat of global growth slowdown. The scares of a financial system meltdown sparked by the Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and Signature Bank in the US being brought down in the past weeks and quickly spiralling related or otherwise to the near failure of Credit Suisse Bank add further dark clouds looming ahead of us.

Singapore, once again can rise above these troubles if we, like during COVID-19, stand together, shoulder to shoulder, hand-in-hand, SG United and resolved to handle whatever this next crisis lies ahead of us with strength, with hope and with love for our country.

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

**Mr Speaker:** Dr Tan Wu Meng.

3.32 pm

**Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong):** Mr Speaker, I declare that I am a medical doctor in a public hospital. I will speak today on our pandemic defence and our national capabilities – our frontliners and our healthcare workers.

In a crisis, we learn something about the world around us and we learn something about ourselves too. And from the crisis of a generation, we need to learn the lessons of a generation. Because the next pandemic may be Disease X, more severe, more contagious and less forgiving.

The fight against a pandemic does not begin when the virus lands on Singapore soil. It starts in the preparation – 10 years, 20 years ahead. And that is what we must do for the road ahead as well. We must strengthen our national capabilities ahead of time, across multiple sectors.

First, our supply chains. Our supply chains are our lifeline, whether it is face masks, surgical gloves or personal protective equipment (PPE), whether it is oxygen supplies, ventilators, or medications. These are the battle armour and ammunition that our healthcare frontliners used to protect and save Singaporean lives. These supplies need to be ready and they need to be uninterrupted, going beyond just-in-time delivery and moving towards preparing for just-in-case.

We saw what happened in some other parts of the world, when the healthcare system and its supply chains broke down elsewhere, and cost lives and livelihoods and cost hope for many people in other countries. We cannot let that happen in Singapore.

So, can I ask the Minister, what are we doing to strengthen our supply chains internationally? What is the Ministry of Health (MOH) doing, to work with the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) on this? Are we mapping our supply chains carefully, not just the superficial layer, but the dependencies? Who supplies the suppliers? Are we identifying the acupuncture points, the points whereby if the supply chain comes under stress, there is disproportionate impact? Are we searching for the shatter points – the vulnerable points in our supply chains, so that we can strengthen, defend and protect ourselves better in a crisis? Because you can have three suppliers providing a tender to supply eggs to Singapore, but if the eggs all come from the same upstream source, from the same basket upstream, it is still a concentration risk for us and we need to learn from this.

On our legal capabilities, in a crisis, our ability to assess the legal situation and the rule of law around the world – that is also how we protect ourselves. For certain essential goods which Singapore needs to survive in a crisis, can we look better at the legal process of procurement? How can we defend our interests better?

I asked this two weeks ago, during the MOH debate on the Budget. I asked whether MOH is working together with the Ministry of Law (MinLaw) and the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) to study whether certain essential supplies required for our survival, whether such supplies, once the purchase is done, can these supplies be gazetted as sovereign state property at that moment, even if the items are still in the suppliers' warehouse overseas. I am sure there are international lawyers with experience in the Ministry, our agencies should be able to study this. And I encourage the Ministry to look at this as well.

On our vaccine capabilities, we saw first-hand how important vaccines are; saving Singaporean lives, saving patients, changing what could have been a fatal outcome to a severe disease, a severe disease to a mild illness and protecting fellow Singaporeans and people throughout our island. We saw how important those vaccines were.

There has been talk of "fill-and-finish" production of COVID-19 vaccines. "Fill-and-finish" means filling the containers and vials with vaccine and then finishing the packaging and process for distribution. But we must ask ourselves, is this good enough or can we aspire to more? If there needs to be a new vaccine against a new COVID-19 variant or a new pandemic, does Singapore have the capability to research, develop, produce the vaccine on shore, either through our own companies or through international partners working with us, based on Singapore's soil?

I called for this two years ago, during the debate on the 2021 Budget. Can the Ministry give an update? Because this capability would be good for Singaporeans, good for Singapore and good for the region and the world.

On our scientific capabilities, how might we get better at understanding new pandemics, better understanding to make better policy? For example, in testing for COVID-19, what tests and how often? One key early decision was whether to go with ART or PCR tests and in what situations? Whether a frequent ART swab with instant results, compared to a PCR test that is harder to do which may need a healthcare facility and which cannot be done as often as frequent ART tests at home. It is an important difference – a test which is less sensitive but done very often at high frequency, compared to a more sensitive test which can only be done one at a time, less frequently.

The concept of frequent rapid ART tests at home to supplement PCR tests in healthcare institutions was already being discussed in expert journals such as the New England Journal of Medicine as early as September 2020. Could Singapore, with hindsight – and hindsight is always 20/20 – have moved earlier on this? How could we have opened our assessments and minds more in advance? Or for that matter, studying how a new virus is transmitted – is it by droplets or airborne? Is it something we can detect in the surfaces we touch or the air that we breathe?

International organisations like the World Health Organization (WHO) play an important role. They advise countries on whether masks are needed and other such safety measures. But we must still develop our own capability, in-house, in Singapore, to research and understand new diseases, test the evidence and draw our own conclusions as well.

On pandemic surveillance, we need to get better at detecting new germs in the environment. Not just what we know but what we do not know. And importantly, to learn about what we do not know and about what we do not yet know. One such technology is metagenomics.

In October 2021, I asked MOH on the use of metagenomics. You take samples from the environment – whether it is surfaces, sewage and so on – you then sequence all the DNA, both what is known and unknown, and if the pattern of that metagenomics study, if the pattern of DNA in the environment and the sewage changes at the same time as many people are falling ill, that could be an early indicator of a new pandemic.

The Minister in his 2021 reply mentioned technical challenges, such as the complex mix of germs in the environment, complex microbiome. But we should keep on exploring these new technologies. This kind of hard work on sewage – I do not think Speaker will allow me to use the Hokkien phrase – this kind of hard work on sewage research can help save Singaporean lives.

This brings me to biomedical research capability. It is 20 years since Biopolis opened – big investment, biomedical research. There were naysayers back then. But the investments created jobs and helped Singaporeans to build up skills and knowledge so that when a new virus came, we could understand it faster, sequence the genome faster, and develop our own tests, kits and equipment faster.

Some R&D is about short-term commercial results. Safe and conventional; everyone agrees it should be done, the market already thinks it should be done. But there can be market failure. We know this, especially when planning for what is over the horizon, beyond a five-year plan, but looking at 10 or 20 years into the future. We need to make sure that our R&D, our research projects include a diversity of approaches, including research which might not bear fruit straightaway, but which might be useful in 10 to 20 years' time. Research that can build skills or act as an insurance policy if we face new and unusual challenges in the future.

We also need to strengthen Singapore's artificial intelligence (AI) capability. AI is no longer a niche technology. It is everywhere today. It will change how we work, how we analyse data, even how we do research and shape public policy. Five years ago, during the 2018 Budget debate, I called for Singapore to make a big push towards AI because, for certain key capabilities and skills, it is not good enough to depend on the private sector or outsourcing. We want to build in-house capabilities, suited for Singapore's needs and to build these skills in-house as well.

In the five years since then, the world of AI changed as well. We now have ChatGPT and GPT-4 has come out. It is moving very, very quickly. Computing power has increased with lower energy cost. We must continue investing in AI to see how it can help us prepare for the next pandemic and strengthen our healthcare system.

Sir, I want to talk about our frontliners and our healthcare workers. Our frontliners made many sacrifices during the pandemic. I remember a young healthcare worker, a young mother, married to another healthcare worker. She had just given birth, newborn baby, born during the pandemic. But because of concerns about COVID-19 transmission between the husband's healthcare workplace and the wife's healthcare workplace, the husband had to move out of the home right after his wife had given birth, in order to keep her and her colleagues safe. It was a big sacrifice.

There were nurses who were kicked out of their homes, evicted at short notice by landlords who were consumed by fear about this new and unusual virus. And some frontliners were outsourced workers, worried about falling between the cracks because they were not sure who would take responsibility for their care and support, because although they work in a frontline role, their job contract was with an outsourced company and not the frontline organisation.

So, we must learn from our people's stories. See through the eyes of our people and prepare ourselves better to support our people through the next pandemic.

I want to speak on outsourced workers in hospitals. Our hospital cleaners and healthcare attendants are part of the frontline, together with our medical, nursing, allied health staff, facing COVID-19 together. Our hospital cleaners helped clean the COVID-19 ward, the toilets of a COVID-19 patient in the ward.

Our healthcare Ah Ma's – the uncles and aunties, the attendants – they helped transport COVID-19 patients' samples during the pandemic. They were part of the frontline, too.

In years gone by, these brothers and sisters were hired directly by the public hospitals. Today, many are outsourced. Same job, same workplace, same COVID-19 risks, different contracts and now outsourced to a service provider.

But, sometimes, outsourcing leads to unintended outcomes. Again, 20/20 hindsight is always clearer. But looking back, in 2020, the then Finance Minister had stated in the Budget debate round-up speech, "The Government will award public officers on the frontline who are directly battling with the COVID-19 disease up to one additional month of special bonus. This will include many healthcare officers in MOH and the restructured hospitals."

But as I pointed out in Parliament in February 2021, there were Clementi residents and brothers and sisters in the Labour Movement who found that some cleaners serving in restructured hospitals did not qualify for this bonus because their contracts were outsourced.

In the era before outsourcing, these workers would have been direct hires and qualified for the bonuses and support which in-house staff received.

Later that year, in November 2021 and in reply to my January 2022 Parliamentary Question and my March 2022 questions to MOH during the Budget debate, the Minister for Health confirmed that the subsequent COVID-19 Healthcare Award for "all staff of public healthcare institutions" would include frontline healthcare workers from outsourced service providers serving at public healthcare institutions.

This was an important step forward, but the deeper lessons from COVID-19 remain.

In a pandemic, nobody is safe till everybody is safe. Migrant workers, outsourced workers, gig economy platform workers, informal workers – no one is safe till everyone is safe.

Second, on the pandemic frontline – same job, same workplace means same risk, even if the contract looks different and says the worker is outsourced. And, importantly, every worker matters, including outsourced workers, because the COVID-19 virus, a pandemic virus, does not ask to read the terms and conditions of your job contract before infecting you, and we need to learn from these lessons of COVID-19.

As I highlighted during the MOH Budget debate in 2021, the policy reasons for outsourcing hospital cleaners and hospital attendants are not compelling policy reasons. The demand for hospital cleaners and attendants is not seasonal. It does not fluctuate that much throughout the year. In a COVID-19 world, it is better for the healthcare team to be all based within the same healthcare institution rather than moving between different hospitals, as may happen with an outsourced arrangement.

Outsourced cleaners already receive protective gear from public hospitals, recognising they are part of the same workplace. And it also sends a message when our cleaners and hospital attendants are in-house staff. It sent a message that you are part of the same team, you are shouldering the same risk as everyone else, you are one of us, and we are together. We need to send that message.

So, I call upon the Government to look seriously at this as part of the post-COVID-19 review and the lessons from COVID-19 for governments around the world because it is part of how we think, how we think beyond pure efficiency, "just in time" towards resilience "just in case".

Mr Speaker, I have said this before during the debate on MOH's Budget in the Committee of Supply (COS). With your permission, may I say, once again, through you: thank you to our frontliners, our healthcare worker brothers and sisters, our public officers. Your courage, contributions and sacrifice made the difference, got us through this, saved so many lives. In Mandarin.

*(In Mandarin):* [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] Many thanks to our frontliners, healthcare workers, public officers. Through your contributions and sacrifices, we have today's reopening and sunny skies after the storm.

*(In Malay):* [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] Thank you so much to our public officers, healthcare workers and frontline workers. As a community caring for one another, as a community united, as a community of friends from multiple races, languages and religions, we were able to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic.

*(In English):* In Tamil. எங்கள் மனமார்ந்த நன்றி or thank you very much.

Our sincere thanks for all that you have done and all that you continue to do.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, seven years ago, in my maiden speech in this House, I spoke of the "outside context problem", when a society encounters a life-or-death existential crisis that it did not foresee. So, we must continue exercising our imagination, having the imagination to see what challenges may come ahead from over the horizon. So, we must imagine the unthinkable and prepare to confront the unexpected, preparing not in fear, but with imagination, resolve and togetherness, so that no matter what happens in a dangerous world for small countries, nothing and no one will ever knock Singapore down. I stand in support of the Motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Hazel Poa.

3.52 pm

**Ms Hazel Poa (Non-Constituency Member):** Mr Speaker, Sir, first and foremost, I wish to express my greatest appreciation to all the healthcare and other frontline workers whose hard work enabled our lives to continue throughout the pandemic. Without them, we would not have been able to pull through this crisis. I hope we will not forget that and will recognise their contribution by improving their remunerations and working conditions.

The White Paper has laid out a self-appraisal of our handling of the pandemic. I wish to add on in areas that I felt had not been addressed or insufficiently addressed.



Firstly, was the \$72.3 billion in COVID-19 packages well spent? Based on what is written in the White Paper and the two occasional papers from the Ministry of Finance (MOF) on the COVID-19 Budget measures, what is missing is an assessment on whether each of the different measures was a good use of funds. In future crises, should they be deployed and, if so, should they be modified?

In particular, I feel that the support given to businesses should have been more discriminate. For example, \$30 billion was distributed to businesses in wage support. As this was a broad-based measure, even companies that continued to be highly profitable throughout the pandemic were included. It is difficult to understand why companies who can afford to continue paying millions of dollars in executive pay should be receiving wage support from taxpayers. Thirty billion dollars is a big amount and equivalent to a GST collection of 17%. The Deputy Prime Minister has told us that the \$40 billion draw from our past Reserves is unlikely to be paid back. I think greater scrutiny is merited on whether we had spent our Reserves prudently.

We can learn from the experience of other countries in past crises when banks had to be bailed out, when assistance was given in the form of equity purchase which, subsequently, recovered in share prices, and restrictions were placed on executive pay.

If the need for swiftness is paramount, we can, nonetheless, incorporate clawback provisions that will allow us to recover payments made to non-qualifying companies after the crisis is over. Companies that remained profitable throughout the pandemic, those that turned profitable after the crisis and those who paid excessive executive remuneration should return the grants given. Why were there no such clawback provisions? We should use our Reserves more prudently.

The second point I wish to bring up is inclusivity. Being an inclusive society means that we need to respect decisions that may be different from ours and protect the freedom of choice, especially medical choices.

There remains a significant segment of our population sceptical about vaccinations and, in particular, the mRNA ones. From a full vaccination rate of over 90% to the 60% up-to-date vaccination rate, we can see the true level of reservations on vaccination.

In the interest of inclusivity and unity, we should respect the choices and decisions made by individuals and continue to engage them. However, some of the policy decisions have instead alienated a segment of our population and caused a division.

For example, a definite preference for mRNA vaccines was seen when traditional vaccines were approved later and not given the same financial support initially. I recognise that the Government had good intentions in pushing for the mRNA vaccines. Initial clinical data showed that mRNA vaccines are more efficacious than traditional vaccines, so, it was justifiably a better use of public funds to use them in the national vaccination campaign.

However, since mRNA vaccines are new to many people and not without health risks, especially myocarditis, there are understandable concerns, and adopting a forceful approach would instead foster mistrust and make some people more susceptible to fake news and rumours.

Some of the vaccination-differentiated safe management measures (VDS) were too harsh and disproportionate, particularly the ban on the unvaccinated from going back to their workplace even if they tested negative, which threatened many livelihoods. This is a point I have raised before in an Adjournment Motion in January 2022. I urge the Government to look into the circumstances of those who had lost their jobs due to their unvaccinated status. They have paid a heavier price than average in the country's efforts to get the pandemic under control and I think special consideration in the form of employment assistance and financial compensation is in order.

Even today, when VDS have been lifted, many unvaccinated Singaporeans still feel discriminated at the workplace. For example, a recent recruitment advertisement from the National University of Singapore (NUS) for an Administrative Executive stated that "Applicants are strongly encouraged to have themselves fully COVID-19 vaccinated to secure successful employment with NUS".

I continue to feel strongly that an individual's medical choice should not jeopardise their livelihoods. Where there is no occupational requirement for vaccination, it should not factor into the employment decision or even appear in a recruitment advertisement. This should be addressed as soon as possible. I hope we can uphold the principle that any policy or strategy to tackle a national emergency should unite our people and not divide them.

Lastly, I believe that our efforts to engage the public on the response to the pandemic would have benefited from a more visible involvement from a team of medical experts, instead of a panel comprising mostly of politicians. If policy decisions on vaccination, COVID-19 treatment and quarantine measures were fronted and explained by a team of doctors and medical experts, it would have lent greater credence and depoliticised the situation.

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

4.00 pm

**Ms He Ting Ru (Sengkang):** Mr Speaker, three long years of pandemic living was announced to be at an end just last month and many of us heaved a sigh of relief that the remaining measures of our pandemic response were finally behind us.

Given the serious and uncertain nature of the pandemic, it was a testament to the hard work, dedication and resilience of our nation, especially our frontline workers, that we pulled through.



We have, before us, the Government's internal review of our response being debated today, from which we all hope to be able to better inform our actions and decisions when facing the next public health crisis. While we have comments about the way the review has been conducted, I do believe the report is helpful in identifying the lessons we can take away to build back stronger.

First, I will touch on some comments and observations about the communications surrounding our pandemic response before speaking about where I feel our focus should be as we move forward to build our resilience as a nation and as a people.

The White Paper states that effective communication and high levels of public trust were crucial in handling the crisis.

Indeed, many of us remember being glued to our screens each time the Prime Minister spoke or a press conference was held by the task force, wondering what the latest updates would be and what changes were awaiting us. Yet, I think it is worth reiterating some observations that I made in my speech in this House in July 2021, just after the second Heightened Alert phase was announced.

It may seem like a distant memory today, but it was a time of great difficulty, especially for our businesses. The spread of the Delta variant from the breach of our barriers at Changi Airport, along with the Jurong Fishery Port and infamous KTV clusters, meant that our businesses and our restaurants, in particular, had to constantly change plans at short and sharp notice, lurching from trying to adapt their operations to cater from one highly complicated set of rules to the next. It was also a source of great frustration for businesses and organisations that they often had to wait a few days for rules that were specific to their sector to be announced.

I, therefore, believe the call we made in July 2021 is still relevant and that we should ensure that we develop a roadmap for future use, clearly laying out support measures pegged to specific restriction levels. It would also be important to share how the authorities weigh up various factors in deciding what restrictions to impose, along with the level of support that will be meted out to individuals.

While we all acknowledge that it is difficult to set these matters in stone, having more information and understanding about how decisions are made would be important for both businesses and individuals to plan forward and be psychologically prepared for the various ups and downs that come with any large-scale pandemic, like the one we have just come through.

Still on communications, one area which we perhaps could look into is to work out a system of improving our existing structures to ensure that our agencies are able to more smoothly integrate the information they have and to be efficient in processing this.

I make this comment after receiving feedback from residents and friends who were subject to quarantine orders, who told me that they often received numerous calls from different departments of various Ministries, each asking them for the exact same information which they had already provided. One even told me that an officer turned up at his house to issue a quarantine order the day after he returned to Singapore, after he had spent much time on the phone with and sending documents to various departments and was already cleared from needing to quarantine earlier that same morning due to being a recently recovered patient.

The shift to home-based quarantines, otherwise known as the Home Recovery Programme, rather than quarantine in dedicated facilities, likewise, also resulted in much confusion and jammed hotlines as worried Singaporeans tried to find out more about the new protocols.

One area which we also feel warranted more attention in the review and also our future plans has been the impact that COVID-19 has had on the mental well-being of our population and the development of our children.

As I mentioned in the recently concluded Budget debate, we appear to be reporting increased feelings of isolation and loneliness and this has a direct impact on our life and healthy life expectancy. Also, many educators have said that they have noticed our younger children appear to be struggling more with mental health and developmental issues and that the Singapore Youth Epidemiology and Resilience Study found high numbers of youth have reported mental health symptoms.

Just yesterday, The Straits Times reported the findings of a Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) poll that while most Singaporeans believe they emerged from the pandemic in good shape, more households with children and elderly reported drops in quality of life, compared with the general population. Likewise, 38% of youths aged 15 to 19 reported drops in the quality of life, compared with 28% for the general population.

Yet, there has been scant mention of well-being and mental health in the White Paper. The pandemic led to job losses, business failures, school closures and families spending extraordinary amounts of time together indoors, which have, in turn, led to unprecedented stress and pushed our coping mechanisms to breaking point. On top of everyday anxiety over catching an unknown and possibly fatal illness, individuals, families and businesses have had to cope with movement restrictions and ever-changing rules relating to what we can or cannot do.

I hope that the promised protocols and provisions for mental health for Healthier SG will be made available as a matter of urgency and that they will sensitively take into account the after-effects of COVID-19 and the findings of the Mental Wellness Taskforce.

Even as we move forward from COVID-19, we must not forget to pay special attention to the gaps that were exposed by the pandemic.

A 2021 paper by the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) stated that residents in the lower-income groups were more disproportionately hit by lockdown and movement restrictions and that Malay respondents to the study were more likely to report adverse economic effects as a result of the movement restrictions. These areas bear special attention, as such groups may have fallen further behind, particularly in the wake of the high inflation we have been experiencing over the last year.

Additionally, as I mentioned in my speech during the Government's White Paper on Singapore Women's Development, I asked about the effect the pandemic has had on the gender wage gap and the effect of the chronic undervaluing and underpaying of work – paid and unpaid – that is traditionally done by women. This is despite this work being deeply important and essential, as all of us learnt first-hand during the lockdown days in particular.

While we have seen some wage adjustments to various sectors from education and care work, this does not address the hard work that needs to be done to ensure that our structures reflect the great value that we must place on the work that these often invisible and overlooked workers do.

These points have also been backed up by studies and data, such as the United Nations' (UN) findings on the disproportionate adverse effects that COVID-19 had on women and girls, including the negative impact on economic, physical and mental well-being. There was also concern that women and children were being exposed to higher levels of domestic violence and, indeed, in Singapore, there have been findings that family violence has increased from 2020 to 2022.

I also hope that attention can be given to the still little-known phenomenon that we often refer to as "long COVID". This is what happens when survivors of COVID-19 find themselves being plagued with a variety of effects long after they have recovered from the acute phase of the illness. These can range from gastrointestinal problems, fatigue, respiratory symptoms like shortness of breath to cognitive impairments, alongside psychological conditions, such as depression and anxiety.

While findings are mixed, some studies have even suggested that women, older people and those of minority ethnicities appear to be more severely affected. There is natural concern about economic and health impact, adding to the hidden toll of the pandemic that we must not forget.

Indeed, a recent meta-analysis published in The Lancet even seems to have found a worrying 45% of patients, regardless of hospitalisation status, still suffer from unresolved symptoms four months post-infection. Indeed, The Lancet also recently estimated, too, that approximately 65 million people worldwide are estimated to struggle with "long COVID" and that one in 10 people with "long COVID" stop working. This results in an extensive economic loss.

Given that we have reported more than 2.2 million COVID-19 cases, even a small percentage of this would be significant. While I acknowledge that the condition is poorly understood, complex and variable, the Ministry of Health (MOH) stated in April last year that it did not track the incidences of "long COVID".

This is a missed opportunity, not only because it means many recovered patients, particularly those for whom these after-effects may not be severe, may be suffering in silence, and it affects their productivity, both at home and at the workplace. They also do not have access to the treatment and care that they need to have a better quality of life.

It also means we are not capturing data about whether certain groups are more adversely affected. We are, therefore, missing the chance to be able to provide more efficient, targeted measures of support and education for these groups, to be given the timely and adequate levels of help that they need. This has implications on the physical and mental well-being of our population, with an impact on our recent moves to a different approach to health and the expected increased care cost burden as our population ages.

Equally alarming, too, is the finding by Mercer Marsh Benefits that Singapore ranks lowest in Asia for help given by employers to make adjustments to the job to cater to employees suffering from "long COVID". Additionally, many people I speak to would mention that they are not quite the same after coming down with COVID-19 but are either unaware of or do not understand what "long COVID" is.

How do we ensure that sufferers are seeking both treatment and help, particularly for those whose livelihoods and abilities to either work or study have been affected by poorer or sub-optimal health?

There is also a sense that weakened immunity post-infection, coupled with the removal of social interventions to curb the spread of COVID-19, has also led to the circulation of more cases of infectious illnesses like upper respiratory tract infections (URTIs) and I hope that we can be mindful of this as we track workplace and educational performance for these affected individuals.

I would also like to seek a clarification. Now that we have fully shifted to living with COVID-19, I understand and appreciate that the full subsidies previously offered to patients suffering from COVID-19 are being stepped down. In particular, COVID-19 antivirals, such as Paxlovid, will remain fully subsidised for clinically eligible patients in outpatient settings. I further understand that hospitals will now start to charge for these important medications.

Would the Minister be able to confirm that this is, indeed, the case and to explain the rationale behind such a move? After all, the drugs are meant to be prescribed to high-risk patients who are more likely to be seen in hospital settings.

Finally, to close on a personal note, I would like to record my deep gratitude to the dedicated individuals who pushed through their stress and fatigue to provide high standards of care for all of us who were in the hospitals and other care settings. This included my then-one-year-old when he was warded at KKH after suffering from a COVID-19-related emergency just a little over a year ago.

Your compassion, kindness and understanding never wavered towards a bewildered and confused pandemic baby unused to strangers and foreign environments despite him crying through the night at 15-minute intervals. I am forever thankful for how you cheerfully suited up each time so that you could hold him and try to calm him while I snatched precious moments, seconds, to use the toilet.

We owe our post-pandemic freedoms today to our everyday heroes and I hope that we do right by them in repaying the debt that we owe them by valuing them in concrete ways and also by ensuring that the sacrifices made and lessons learnt along the way are implemented in any future public health crisis that we face. For that, I support the Motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Yip Hon Weng.

4.13 pm

**Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang):** Mr Speaker, Sir, I wish to start by expressing my appreciation to all our frontline workers who have made sacrifices and worked extremely hard to get Singapore through the pandemic to emerge stronger.

This COVID-19 After Action Review (AAR) process provides us with an opportunity to learn and improve for the next pandemic.

My clarifications on the White Paper will focus on the areas of health and manpower, given my roles in the two Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs).

First, Mr Speaker, Sir, on healthcare-related measures, it is important to acknowledge the roles of international bodies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), in shaping our pandemic response.

We adopted many WHO-recommended measures, including mask-wearing and border restrictions. But every country has different traits, such as demographics, population density, geography and so on, that require different approaches to managing pandemics. Therefore, our response should be tailored according to Singapore's unique traits.

It is, thus, essential to ensure that we have access to independent data and research to make informed decisions that align with our best interests. We should not blindly follow the advice of international bodies. Such advice can serve as a general guideline but may not apply to individual countries' interests.

Likewise, the recommendations may only be announced after an incident has happened, making it difficult to implement them in a timely manner. Can a Ministry explain how we can develop access to such independent data and research, especially from overseas?

How do we develop the capability to evaluate global data and guidance critically, with a view to adapt them to our local context? How can we pre-emptively develop our own guidelines to shield our population from the next pandemic?

Another area of concern is vaccine approvals, given there were many types of vaccines to tackle COVID-19, for instance, mRNA versus non-mRNA, each manufactured by different pharmaceutical companies. How can Singapore further hasten the process of vaccine approval for future pandemics, learning from the COVID-19 experience?

How can we also support our local research and developments, like the COVID-19 vaccine that was developed by Arcturus Therapeutics and Duke-NUS?

Next, Mr Speaker, Sir, I would like to raise several manpower-related questions.

Firstly, was the implementation of vaccination-differentiated safe management measures (VDS) necessary in the workplace in January 2022? Looking back, were safe management measures (SMMs) and mandatory mask wearing sufficient in managing the risk of COVID-19 spreading through the workplaces?

How were the measures enforced at workplaces? Were the efforts deemed successful? I believe that implementing SMMs can help prevent the spread of diseases in the workplace. However, their effectiveness depends on both employees and employers following them diligently.

It would, certainly, be too intrusive and resource-intensive to monitor workers to ensure that they wear masks at all times and keep the recommended distance between them. So, how can we strike a balance in future pandemics to ensure that everyone takes responsibility for good personal hygiene and follow SMMs?

Secondly, there were employees who lost their jobs due to VDS. What was the assessment of the support given to these employees? How did the tripartite partners provide guidance to employers through advisories, like the tripartite advisory on managing excess manpower and responsible retrenchment? Were these advisories sufficient and effective?

How did the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) ensure compliance or should we have done more, like move legislation, to ensure that retrenchments were necessary and done as a last resort?

Lastly, due to the pandemic, numerous businesses had to downsize, shut down entirely or pivot operations, which led to retrenchments. How did the Government assist workers who were retrenched, particularly older workers, who face challenges in finding new employment?

What were the lessons learnt and how can we apply these lessons as we move ahead to promote senior employability in the workplaces? By addressing these issues, we can improve our approach to manpower management in future pandemics. It is already challenging enough to navigate a pandemic and we should strive to prevent additional job losses and financial insecurity.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, Sir, the key question is what if the next pandemic strikes tomorrow? Three years have passed since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Yet, many aspects of how we should respond should a novel virus emerge and spread remain uncertain and fiercely debated. How do we get our population vaccinated as quickly as possible, without knowing the full side effects and safety aspects of new vaccines?

How do we build stronger supply chains without overspending, in order to improve our resilience? Most importantly, how does the Government instil trust whilst making hard policy decisions with little details when the next Disease X hits us?

COVID-19 brought out tremendous resolve, scientific innovation and individual and collective steadfastness. But, even so, millions across the globe died and economies were set back around the world. Disease X could be a similar threat like COVID-19. It also could be far worse.

So, the question remains: what if the next pandemic happens tomorrow?

Our experience taught us that things happen quickly with little information. Our Government must have the gumption to make hard policy decisions swiftly, as each decision has huge ramifications on our people, Singapore and for the costs of the pandemic.

This was how it was like in the early days of COVID-19; it is also how it will be like for future pandemics.

To me, this boils down to one thing. We must build and maintain the trust that Singaporeans have in our Government to do the right thing and to do things right. And we must do that by learning from past pandemics and preparing for our pandemic response now.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Leon Perera.

4.20 pm

**Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied):** Mr Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic put our society to the test in every way. It tested our healthcare workers, our companies and small businesses, our workers, our Government and politics, our NGOs and, indeed, every citizen.

The costs and sacrifices were borne unequally, as is the case everywhere in the world that this pandemic touched. For example, in the business sector, some companies prospered exceptionally while many SMEs struggled or closed. But what we can say today is that all the key stakeholders in our system, on the whole, pulled together and acted in the best interest of all. This is what history will remember. When we were tested, we rose to that call. If we had not, the losses and the scars would be far worse today.

On that note, I would like to register, alongside all Members of this House, a profound debt of gratitude that we all owe to the frontline workers who toiled at the coalface of this crisis – healthcare workers and many other frontline staff – without whose sacrifice we would have, collectively, paid a much higher price.

Mr Speaker, Sir, my speech will touch on four aspects of the post-COVID-19 review, namely, the role of general practitioners (GPs) in the pandemic response, the approach we take to migrant workers, the role of NGOs and some observations on the COVID-19 White Paper itself.

Firstly, on the role of GPs, Sir. There are about 1,800 GP clinics in Singapore providing around 80% of primary healthcare services to our citizens. Under the newly-launched Healthier SG, the role of GPs will be enhanced to become more proactive on the preventive healthcare front.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, a great deal of public funding was deployed to engage private healthcare companies to administer vaccinations and to conduct telehealth check-ins and surveillance of quarantine orders and so on.

No doubt, at the time, it may have been problematic for GPs to have played more of a role in this effort, at least at the initial stage, due to the very slender staffing and administrative resources that most GPs have. But given the enhancements to the role of GPs that will come about due to Healthier SG, which should see GPs enhance their access to IT and data, for example, I wonder if, in case there is a future pandemic, could GPs play more of a role in the initial response, in terms of vaccination and surveillance?

Why do I ask this? It is for a few reasons.

Firstly, GPs are locally based across the island. Citizens would have to travel less, be inconvenienced less and interact less with large crowds of people at collective vaccination centres if they obtain vaccinations at GP clinics.

Secondly, GPs may be familiar with patients personally, and that familiarity may facilitate better communication and education and a better and less anxious patient experience.

Thirdly, anecdotally, it would seem that many GPs are not fully utilised throughout the day in terms of doctor consultation time, though, of course, this is uneven. But I suspect many would have the capacity to take on more of this sort of a role at certain times a day.

It could be argued that GP clinics lack the manpower and equipment to play such a role. However, manpower and equipment could be deployed to these clinics from a central pool, as needed. It could also be argued that GP clinics lack the physical space to handle large crowds. However, could this not be addressed through scheduling systems that could be run off a centralised IT backbone?

Of course, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we did not have the time to put in place all of these systems and processes to enable GPs to play more of a role in the initial phase. But for future pandemics, and given the changes we will make for Healthier SG, could we give some thought to how our GP clinics could play more of a role vis-à-vis private healthcare companies?

Mr Speaker, Sir, next, let me move on to the subject of our migrant workers. All Singaporeans ought to recognise the vital role migrant workers play in our society and all of us should be in favour of treating them with the respect and dignity that should be owed to all workers. In fact, I believe many, if not most, Singaporeans these days strongly favour such principles.

The COVID-19 outbreak in the migrant workers' dormitories in Singapore will remain a blight on the report card in the way Singapore managed the pandemic. Our health protocols for the next pandemic must include protecting the most vulnerable communities among us. They must not be an afterthought in the next health crisis.

On this note, I am glad that the COVID-19 White Paper does recognise some of these issues. And I quote from the White Paper: "In retrospect, the early precautions we took in the dormitories were insufficient. Given the communal living environment, the dormitory outbreak had every possibility of becoming a major disaster. We should have probed deeper and conducted better and earlier ground surveillance, such as by doing dipstick testing on sample populations to make the most of limited testing resources. We also had to make a difficult judgement call on when and how to relax movement restrictions on migrant workers living in dormitories. We could have eased some of the restrictions earlier, especially after most of the workers had been vaccinated and boosted... In the end, we decided to act with an abundance of caution to keep the workers and the broader community safe. But the extended restrictions did take a toll on their well-being."

Before I go on, I should acknowledge that it was good that the White Paper recognised the room for improvement on the migrant worker front. I also acknowledge Prime Minister Lee's video message to migrant workers during the pandemic, which was helpful.

Widespread infection of the workers could have been mitigated if the Government had taken more decisive action earlier. The light of the oncoming train was flagged out by the NGO Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) as early as 23 March 2020. In its letter to The Straits Times Forum, TWC2 said, "We call on the Government to announce in advance what plans they have to rehouse workers should clusters break out in dorms. This would give reassurance to the resident and non-resident community."

The outbreaks at the migrant worker dormitories exposed the cramped conditions that they lived in to many members of the general public for the first time and many Singaporeans were shocked. Despite the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) announcing improved standards for dormitories, anecdotes from migrant workers on the ground show that there is uneven enforcement for the smaller dormitories and there is no timeline yet for the purpose-built dormitories which meet these standards.

As an example of the cost to migrant workers of these measures, here is an excerpt from The Guardian newspaper, 17 April 2020, relating to migrant workers in Singapore: "The restrictions, an attempt to reduce further transmission, have left the dormitories even more crowded than usual as only essential workers are permitted to leave. One construction worker, from Bangladesh, told The Guardian there were long queues to use shared bathrooms..."

Also, migrant workers lived under prolonged lockdowns when others in the wider Singaporean community could already move freely, despite their vaccination rate already being higher than the average for Singaporeans, affecting their mental health. All movement restrictions were only wound down for migrant workers on 1 March this year. It is good that the White Paper acknowledges that this could, perhaps, have been done sooner.

A study conducted by Yale-NUS in 2020 concluded that migrant workers under lockdown conditions in dormitories suffered from higher levels of stress and anxiety. A report in the media outlet TODAY in August 2021 read: "The large number of mental health symptoms reported among workers under complete restrictions suggests that while isolation of whole facilities may be expedient for limiting COVID-19 transmission, this comes at the cost of an increased mental health burden, researchers said."

Hence, I would like to ask what is the timeline for the improved standards in migrant worker dormitories to be rolled out nationally, including the role of NEST? And will the Government build on this unfortunate experience to develop a clear plan to manage a major infectious disease outbreak in migrant worker dormitories, with all of the massive logistical challenges that will entail?

I also hope that the COVID-19 episode with migrant workers serves as a powerful reminder to all of us to take the well-being and dignity of workers seriously. In particular, enforcement of rules and norms over all kinds of matters like food quality and access to bank accounts and payslips, for example, and hotlines to aid in enforcement, should be in place and be seen to be working properly by the migrant workers themselves. In this House, I recently called for rewards for migrant worker whistle-blowers who expose genuine safety lapses.

There are, potentially, many such ideas through which we can improve the system. And the best generators of ideas are those NGOs who have been working tirelessly and fruitfully to bring migrant worker issues to the forefront of public debate – groups like HOME, TWC2, HealthServe and many others. I hope the Government will lend an active listening ear to such groups, so that, in future, they will not again become like the mythic Greek princess Cassandra, who was fated to utter true prophecies which no one believed and who had to see her prophecies realised.

For at the end of the day, taking care of migrant workers is an urgent question of social justice and fairness. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members." But there is more to it than that.

By taking care of our migrant workers, we may be able to attract the more effective workers to come and work in Singapore, those who have more experience and a track record and who are capable of becoming more productive and perhaps innovative workers and supervisors. After all, there is competition for migrant workers from other countries, like the Gulf states for example.

A robust migrant workers' rights regime will help us attract workers who can become more skilled and productive and thus help us to reduce the size of the migrant worker population in Singapore, thereby lessening overall population pressures.

And, as I have argued a few times in this House, very skilled tradesmen and technicians from among this migrant worker population should be given an accelerated pathway to Permanent Resident (PR) status and eventually citizenship, so as to strengthen the Singaporean Core in such trade fields.

Next, Mr Speaker, Sir, I would like to touch on the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). I spoke of the migrant worker NGOs who played such a valuable role in the COVID-19 crisis. A more general point I would like to make here is that in future pandemics, there can be a stronger role for NGOs as partners, working with the Government to execute initiatives, but also to inform and critique policies and decision-making, and to disseminate accurate information to their communities.

The COVID-19 White Paper refers to the role played by some food aid charities, migrant worker charities, PEERS as well as organisations under the People's Association (PA) umbrella. However, these organisations were, for the most part, referred to as partners in the execution of projects and workstreams.

If a future pandemic or other national crisis happens, I hope the Government can assign a more institutional capacity to involving NGOs who are close to their various constituents on the ground, not only in executing projects but also in formulating and refining policy approaches and in making decisions. I had earlier referred to the pertinent advice that TWC2 had publicly aired back in March 2020, and I believe earlier as well, which we would have done well to heed at that point.

One area where NGOs could play an important role is mental health – something my colleague, Sengkang Member of Parliament Ms He Ting Ru referred to. The COVID-19 pandemic took a heavy toll on the mental health of many Singaporeans and people around the world. Due to the general fear and anxiety level, the economic devastation felt by some groups of people even as others prospered and having to work from home and learn from home for prolonged periods.

I am aware that the Health Promotion Board (HPB) is developing a national portal for mental health resources to be curated by experts and hosted on HealthHub.

In future pandemics and crises, mental health-related NGOs should be empowered, resourced and given information to reach out and persuade those at risk to use the helping resources available, which is not always an easy task and may best be handled by non-state agencies.

One area also where we can boost our mental health care capacity for future crises is in terms of our population of psychologists. In reply to a Parliamentary Question from Sengkang Member of Parliament, Ms He Ting Ru, the Government revealed that our number of psychologists per 100,000 of our population is 9.7. This compares to around 30 in the US and 49 in Canada and France, for example. The same ratio for psychiatrists places Singapore under five, versus, for example, 15 for Canada and 24 for Finland.

Government scholarships are one tool to increase the number of trained psychologists in the public sector. Training to be a clinical psychologist takes as long as that for medical doctors. Currently, the Healthcare Graduate Studies Award is open to post-graduate courses for Clinical Psychology as one of the 10 other courses of study, such as Audiology, Health Economics and Epidemiology. By contrast, the PSC Scholarship for Medicine and Dentistry targets applications for study only in Medicine and Dentistry. So, the number of post-graduate scholarships dedicated to clinical psychology is probably not as high as for medicine and dentistry and there is no clearly targeted number for clinical psychology alone, for the reasons I explained. This should be addressed.

And lastly, Mr Speaker, Sir, let me conclude with some observations about the COVID-19 response White Paper itself.

The White Paper appears to be a public communication document. In terms of format, evidence of academic and analytic rigour as well as granularity of detail, it stands in stark contrast to a different paper that was published in 2010 by academics on Singapore's H1N1 pandemic response. That paper was entitled "Influenza A (H1N1-2009) Pandemic in Singapore – Public Health Control Measures Implemented and Lessons Learnt." The authors were academics Joanne Tay, Ng Yuek Fan, Jeffrey Cutter and Lyn James. No doubt that was an academic paper rather than a Government White Paper, but that paper seems, at the very least, more detailed and, if I may, more clinical in how it marshals facts and uses them to build conclusions. That paper was also authored by independent academics who drew on interviews with MOH and other officials but did not represent the views of MOH. And it has a much fuller methodological note.

In the spirit of these observations and to reiterate the arguments put forth by the Leader of the Opposition on this very same point, I hope the Government would consider making public the original internal AAR report developed by Mr Peter Ho and his team, with redactions as regards any matters pertaining to national security or which have commercial sensitivities. This would serve the purpose of greater transparency and a fuller and better-informed public debate on what should be the lessons we learn.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, Sir, the pandemic was a terrible crisis that exacted an awful price in lives, livelihoods and peace of mind. But Singapore did not fail the test when called upon to exert ourselves and come together for the greater good. That should inspire the current and future generations with a true story of what we can do if we put our minds and hearts to it.

**The Chairman:** Order. I propose to take a break now. I suspend the Sitting and will take the Chair at 4.55 pm.

*Sitting accordingly suspended*

*at 4.36 pm until 4.55 pm.*

*Sitting resumed at 4.55 pm.*

**[Deputy Speaker (Mr Christopher de Souza) in the Chair]**

Debate resumed.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Miss Rachel Ong.

4.55 pm

**Miss Rachel Ong (West Coast):** Mr Deputy Speaker, the overwhelming scale and speed at which COVID-19 unfurled in the migrant worker dormitories caught Singapore off guard, but because of the selfless and immediate contributions of our first responders, medical workers, volunteer groups, individuals, public sector agencies and their collaborative work with the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), Singapore was able to react swiftly to care for our migrant workers.

As the dormitories went into lockdown in April 2020, the Inter-Agency Taskforce supported migrant workers and dormitory operators in the large purpose-built dormitories that each housed several thousands of workers. They ensured timely access to food and medical services and looked into the hygiene and cleanliness of each dormitory.

Despite the mammoth task of having to secure and distribute food to tens of thousands of workers on extremely short notice, several misses in food quality, cleanliness at the beginning, the gaps were promptly addressed.

At the same time, our medical workers dived in full on. Doctors from various specialisations closed ranks all to serve migrant workers in Accident and Emergency (A&E) wards and mobile clinics, risking their own lives for the migrant workers as they fought a then unknown virus.

Concurrently, NGOs came in to support the well-being of those in the smaller Factory Converted Dormitories (FCDs) across Tuas, Jurong, Kranji, Woodlands and Ubi. These amazing organisations include HealthServe, Migrant Workers' Centre, COVID-19 Migrant Support Coalition, Alliance of Guest Workers Outreach and Crisis Relief Alliance.

Volunteers took the effort to walk the grounds, talk to migrant workers to identify where the FCDs were and searched out those with limited access to daily essentials.

NGOs supplied food to these FCDs where employers did not and went the extra mile to cater to early morning food deliveries during Ramadan, which fell during the lockdown period. Apart from care packs, some provided SIM cards with data plans so that migrant workers could occupy themselves and stay in touch with their families.

The NGO volunteers also unexpectedly served as community mediators. Under lockdown conditions, tensions rose in some dormitories between workers across different faiths and nationalities. I understand from one of the NGOs, that without the volunteers' intervention, one of these conflicts would have led to bloodshed as weapons had been involved.

We must also remember individuals such as Ms Sudesna Roy Chowdhury, then a fresh graduate from medical school. Within eight hours from the breaking news of widespread infection in the dormitories, she produced a website to provide the English-Bengali translations for clinical consultations.

We shall also not forget the many individuals who have stepped forward to serve as interpreters in medical, formal and informal service settings. The selfless and collaborative spirit between the Government, medical workers, NGOs and members of the public in the early days saved lives. Thank you.

Over time, we saw MOM move to make further improvements to the well-being of our migrant workers – updates to accommodation standards, quick and prioritised vaccination roll-outs for migrant workers and the quick development of the FWMOMCare app that gave workers access to prompt and accurate information, including medical services.

MOM also worked with employers to give workers online access to salary accounts and remittance services, a service that is greatly valued by the migrant workers even till now.

Meanwhile, NGOs continued to support the mental well-being of our migrant workers by organising social activities, celebrations, outings and the provision of tele-counseling services. Their commendable work continues today.

Mr Samuel Gift from Alliance of Guest Workers Outreach shared that one positive outcome of this crisis response has been a greater trust in the migrant community for our authorities. This is credit to MOM's Assurance, Care and Engagement (ACE) Team, who showed up meaningfully for the migrant workers when they needed help.

One migrant worker shared that they used to worry that if they spoke of any regulatory lapses in the dormitories to MOM, they would lose their jobs. But because the ACE officer attending to their case took time to build trust, they felt safe to freely share their concerns, knowing that their identities would be kept anonymous. To the ACE officers who have laboured much on the ground to care for our migrant workers, what a tremendous difference you have made in the lives of our migrant workers.

For all the good work that was done, I understand that the Government's motivation for the White Paper is not so much a pat on the back, but to bring light to blind spots so that Singapore will bounce back stronger in our next crisis.

I wish to highlight five lessons and actions for consideration from the migrant workers' dormitory crisis, with a focus on the smaller FCDs that house a third of the 300,000 workers staying in the dormitories.

First, enforcement of regulations in FCDs. The COVID-19 crisis in the dormitories was perpetuated due to the poor living conditions. This is most evident in the smaller FCDs that were not regulated by the Foreign Employee Dormitories Act (FEDA).

However, the call to improve living conditions in FCDs had been made years before the pandemic started. In July 2016, the Migrant Workers' Centre had published photos of the poor housing and hygiene conditions of some of the FCDs and flagged the issue to MOM. In response, MOM announced new and improved living conditions that must be met by FCDs, starting from 1 January 2017.

The four conditions include: (a) the provision of feedback channel for workers to report issues related to the housing conditions of FCDs; (b) provision of personal locker for each worker; (c) provision of at least one sick bay in the FCD – alternatively, the operator can develop a contingency plan to deal with cases of infectious diseases; and lastly (d) provision of Wi-Fi within the FCD.

As NGO volunteers have witnessed while supporting the FCDs during the crisis, many FCDs did not fulfil the above conditions stipulated by MOM. If a contingency plan for infectious diseases was indeed in place, could the COVID-19 crisis have been better dealt within the FCDs? It appears then that there has been a lapse in the monitoring and enforcement of these new conditions that FCD operators were supposed to have met since 2017.

MOM had also launched the DormWatch app in 2018, with the intention for it to be used by migrant workers to give feedback to dormitory operators on issues faced at the dorm. However, NGOs reflect that few migrant workers used the app as many were concerned that reporting issues would cause trouble to their employers and hence also put their jobs in jeopardy.

As I understand, the DormWatch app was eventually evolved to be used by dorm operators to manage their list of residents for MOM reporting and will be discontinued later this month in March. I believe the original intention of the DormWatch app remains relevant today and would serve the migrant workers and dorm operators well.

In leveraging the trust the ACE team has built with the migrant workers since then, may I propose that the ACE team conduct a survey with the migrant workers to better understand how feedback on dormitory issues can be received from them in a manner that they feel safe to provide? If an app remains the best means for the workers to give feedback, it could be integrated in the FWMOMCare app that the workers already use on a regular basis.

To summarise, as FEDA kicks in for the FCDs on 1 April 2023 for the safety and long-term resilience of our migrant workers and Singapore, we must learn from the lapses of 2017 and its impact during the pandemic.

It is encouraging that we have set in place new regulations and standards. But as we have observed, what is needful is the ongoing monitoring and enforcement of regulations over the FCDs as they tend to be most prone to lapses in living conditions and require greater support. I trust MOM will do the needful.

Second, accountability by employers of migrant workers residing in FCDs. As mentioned earlier, at the start of the pandemic, NGOs stepped in to serve migrant workers in FCDs that were left by their employers to fend for themselves. Some migrant workers had been without food for two to three days before the NGOs found them. Meals were supplied to the FCDs for an extended time period between eight and 12 weeks before NGOs put a hard stop to food supply after informing MOM, calling for employers to be responsible for their workers.

The question begs – why did it take so long for employers to step in to care for the workers?

Some employers reflected, given the pandemic and lack of business income, that they were financially unable to support the costs of providing food for their workers. However, employers could have taken ownership to work with MOM or the NGOs to support the migrant workers in other ways, especially in maintaining lines of open communication, updating the workers with key information or providing assurance of income. This, instead of leaving the task to NGOs or going off the radar, as it was the case in some FCDs.

I would like to ask MOM whether and how these employers have been held accountable for their unacceptable act of leaving their workers without food access during the height of the pandemic.

I would also like to ask MOM two further questions relating to our crisis response moving forward. First, what are the available means by which employers with genuine needs could flag for help during a crisis so that workers are not left to fend for themselves due to cost pressures? Second, how will errant employers be held accountable in the event they abandon care for their workers as they did in this last crisis?



Third, including migrant workers in crisis communication. One of the greatest challenges faced at the start of the crisis was communicating with migrant workers who spoke different languages. Even NGOs struggled with this, as some were not resourced with volunteers that spoke different languages.

Without a crisis communication system that incorporated the workers' native languages, there was much confusion as quarantine measures saw frequent changes and workers moved from one place to another. Some workers were uncertain if having COVID-19 meant certain death and if they would be left to perish.

With the dearth of information in their native tongue, workers sought information from alternative news sources from their home country, which may not have provided accurate reflection of the situation here in Singapore.

The missing communications also negatively impacted the migrant workers' health-seeking behaviours during the onset of the pandemic. Some workers who felt ill would not seek medical help and continued to head to work, out of fear that their income would be affected.

Clear communications in their native language providing assurance of their income and jobs despite contracting COVID-19 would have made a difference.

I am glad to hear that now, through the FWMOMCare app, essential health information and MOM advisories are now disseminated in the various native languages of the migrant workers.

This recent crisis is a reminder that we must include our migrant worker population in crisis communication, especially when it concerns public health. I trust we will continue to leverage the app to provide centralised and timely communication to our migrant workers in our next crisis.

Fourth, identifying multinational representatives within dormitories. As workers from different nations do not always enjoy friendly relations with each other, NGOs have found that in migrant workers' communication, it was helpful and important to have a representative from each nationality staying in each dormitory. Where this was missing, NGOs faced situations where food or resources were not evenly distributed to workers from other nationalities in the same dormitory, leading to even greater tensions.

Moving forward, MOM could consider the nationality profile of each dormitory and then identify representatives for each nationality. These representatives can help with the prompt dissemination of information and fair distribution of resources. This will support the work of dormitory operators in times of crisis.

Fifth, the coordination of NGO resources. Given the scale of the dormitory crisis, many NGOs and informal groups stepped forward to serve the workers in whatever way they could and wherever they saw need. However, the NGOs had observed that this led to some dormitories being overserved and others underserved as there was no coordinating body across the NGOs.

May I propose for the Government's consideration for MOM to provide a platform or coordinating body that could support a more even distribution of resources provided by NGOs or informal groups in times of crisis?

To close and summarise, my speech calls for five things for us to learn from and act on: first, MOM's enforcement of regulations to improve living conditions in FCDs; second, accountability of employers of migrant workers residing in FCDs; third, inclusion of the migrant worker community in crisis communication; four, identifying multinational representatives within dormitories; and fifth, coordination of NGO resources during crises.

We all know that infectious diseases are no respecter of persons. They do not discriminate between nationalities, social or work pass statuses. In a war against all or any pandemic, Singapore is positioned to win when we secure the safety of those most vulnerable among us. Let us close the health and safety gaps of our migrant workers and see Singapore win in the next pandemic.

Mr Deputy Speaker, once again, I am grateful to our Government, first responders, medical workers, NGOs and volunteers for giving your best in our fight against COVID-19. May we never forget the good you have shown to our people in Singapore.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Leader.

## **TIME LIMIT FOR MINISTER FOR MANPOWER**

### **(Suspension of Standing Orders)**

5.10 pm

**The Leader of the House (Ms Indranee Rajah):** Mr Deputy Speaker, may I seek your consent and the general assent of Members present to move that the proceedings on the item under discussion be exempted from the provisions of Standing Order No 48(8) to remove the time limit in respect of the Minister Tan See Leng's speech.

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

Hon Members indicated assent.

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

## SINGAPORE'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

### (Motion)

Debate resumed.

5.11 pm

**The Minister for Manpower (Dr Tan See Leng):** Thank you, Leader, and thank you, Deputy Speaker. Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, Members of the House, the past three years of the COVID-19 pandemic have been a long and arduous journey, fraught with many uncertainties and challenges. The struggles faced by many were heart-wrenching. There were countless difficult decisions and tradeoffs made in the fog of war.

But right from the start, we had one overriding objective and that is to protect lives, jobs as well as livelihoods. We were determined to emerge with a strong and resilient economy and to shield our workers from the full economic brunt of the pandemic.

We pulled through on both counts. We also made a concerted effort to safeguard our migrant workers' health and thankfully, despite the scale of the outbreak in the dormitories, the mortality rate among our migrant workers was very low.

The other silver lining in the dark cloud of this pandemic was witnessing the resilience of our people – one people, standing together, as one nation.

It has been a profoundly humbling and heartening experience to see the outpouring of support from the private and people sectors and the indomitable spirit of our workers.

To our local and foreign workers, our employers, the industry associations, tripartite partners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Migrant Workers' Centre (MWC), HealthServe and Hope Initiative Alliance (HIA) and the many more on the list whom Senior Minister of State Zaqu Mohammad will mention tomorrow – thank you, from the bottom of all of our hearts.

Mr Bernard Menon from the MWC, Dr Benjamin Kuan from HealthServe and Reverend Ezekiel Tan from HIA also joined us earlier today. It has been all of your support, your labours, your sacrifices, together with all the rest, that have weathered us through the storm.

Today, I will reflect on the decisions made, the tradeoffs considered, and the lessons learnt in the Ministry of Manpower (MOM)'s journey in the following areas: one, bringing the outbreak in the migrant worker dormitories under control; two, protecting jobs and livelihoods of our workers; and three, building stronger systems and capabilities for the future.

We were thrust into an uncertain and extremely unpredictable environment in early 2020. There was a paucity of knowledge about the virus regarding its inherent characteristics and transmission modes at the early stage. The prevailing expert view in early 2020 was that the COVID-19 virus was closely related to SARS and symptomatic transmission was the main mode of spread.

It was also thought that COVID-19 was spread primarily through droplets rather than airborne transmission. Some experts were even saying that the pandemic itself would be over by the summer season.

The inherent mutagenic potential of the virus however, resulted in rapid mutations from Alpha to Delta and subsequently Omicron. Even now, it continues to evolve and it continues to mutate. We had to respond, we had to adapt quickly, learning continuously in real time, given the uncertainties about the virus.

Drawing from the SARS experience and prevailing expert views about symptomatic transmission, we implemented measures like temperature taking at the migrant worker dormitories and isolation of workers who reported sick with acute respiratory infection (ARI) symptoms.

At every point in time, our measures were guided by science and the latest evidence available at that moment in time.

We did not pick up on the asymptomatic cases and we were under the impression then, that our measures were sufficient. Of course, looking back now, we were completely mistaken. It was only in April 2020 that the infectious disease experts began to realise that COVID-19 could spread asymptotically.

By then, the virus was already spreading in the dormitories. We did not have a clear, comprehensive and timely picture of the workers who were sick, because not everyone reported sick. There were significant gaps in our understanding of the disease, in testing, in surveillance and in the data and information regarding the location of the workers in the dormitories.

Recognising the scale of the outbreak in the dormitories, the Government set up the Inter-agency Task Force (ITF) in April 2020, brought in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the Home Team, as well as public healthcare capabilities.

We required the resources and organisation to manage the highly complex operations in the dormitories. Drawing on the expertise and resources of multiple stakeholders, the ITF mobilised nearly 3,000 officers and volunteers from the SAF, the Home Team, MOM and across the Public Service. During that period, we worked closely with dormitory operators, employers, the medical community, NGOs and other

community groups, to provide care and support for the migrant workers in the dormitories.

In April 2020, the dormitories were progressively put under lockdown and the circuit breaker was also implemented in the community. This helped to arrest the spread of COVID-19 in the dormitories.

We knew that the dormitory lockdown put the migrant workers under stress and strain, but if we had not done so, the transmission among migrant workers across the dormitories and into the community would have been much more severe and much more widespread.

If we had allowed transmission to grow out of control, the situation could have become what we saw in other countries – a large number of cases that may have overwhelmed the entire healthcare system with a high consequent number of deaths.

Once we had made that difficult decision, the ITF swung into action and set up medical posts and networks in and around the dormitories. Thermometers and oximeters were given to migrant workers to monitor their health. We took care of our migrant workers the best we could, based on what we knew, with the resources that we had, and we ensured that all migrant workers had access to good medical care, help and treatment if needed – timely treatment, if needed.

Here, I would like to put on record our appreciation to many of our selfless healthcare workers from both the public and private healthcare institutions who were among the first to step up and provide medical services to our migrant workers living in dormitories at the start of the pandemic.

One exemplary individual, who also came earlier on, during the lunch, I think some Members of the House would have met him. One exemplary individual was Dr Muntasir Mannan Choudhury, a hand surgeon with Sengkang General Hospital, who was serving at a medical post in the S11 dormitory in early-2020.

During the early days of the pandemic where communications with migrant workers were challenging due to language barriers, Dr Muntasir took the initiative and spoke in Bengali using a loud hailer to reassure the residents that their medical needs, their safety and their well-being would be attended to.

In the last three years, he has continued to volunteer his medical services and linguistic capabilities and continued to provide free medical advice to Bengali workers living in smaller dormitories. He also gave health talks to large groups of migrant workers.

At the time, we did not have many large-scale facilities readily available to de-densify the dormitories. We knew that conveying COVID-19-positive workers away from COVID-19-naïve ones and isolating them was key.

To this end, the Government worked with private sector partners to set up quarantine, isolation and recovery facilities. Forward Assurance Support Teams (FAST teams) were formed, they were deployed at the dormitories to provide direct access to workers to assure them, to care for them and to engage them.

To slow down the transmission of the virus in the dormitories, the workers could not intermingle within the dormitories. We organised and we distributed the meals to the 200,000 workers over four months and ensured that employers continued to pay their workers even when they could not work. Mobile remittance services were also set up to make it convenient for workers to remit monies back home to their loved ones.

As mentioned by Miss Rachel Ong, we recognised that some migrant workers, particularly those in the factory-converted dormitories (FCDs) faced difficulties in accessing food as they typically sourced and cooked their own food. It was a challenging time for everyone, we appreciate the NGOs stepping in and working with MOM to provide food for the workers where needed. Workers who could not access food could contact MOM for assistance, while MOM concurrently liaised with employers to take over this responsibility when things stabilised.

By the time that the dormitory lockdown was lifted in August 2020, we estimated that about half of the migrant workers in dormitories had been infected by COVID-19, the vast majority of whom had mild or asymptomatic infection. The number of migrant workers who were severely ill, for example, requiring intensive care in hospital, was fortuitously low. In spite of that, regrettably, two workers from the dormitories passed away as a result of COVID-19.

Every death is one death too many. We had not managed to keep transmission in the dormitories low, but we did our level best at that time, to make sure, alongside with the doctors, that the migrant workers received good medical care and attended to their other needs. The situation could have turned out much worse, but through the collective efforts of multiple stakeholders mentioned earlier, we managed to stave off a potentially worse outcome.

At this juncture, I must also acknowledge the trust and support given by our migrant workers throughout this period. It was an immensely difficult time for them because they were worried about COVID-19 and they also worried about the uncertainty for their future. I am gratified that they trusted the Government to do right by them.

One of the migrant workers, Mr Hassan Mehadi, conveyed his appreciation to us in a piece of feedback. He wrote: "In April 2020, I was brought to Tan Tock Seng Hospital and I was confirmed to be COVID-19-positive. When I was there, I saw other Singaporeans who were being treated in the same room as me. That gave me a lot of assurance that I would be well taken care of and given the same level of

treatment as Singaporeans. From the bottom of my heart, I want to thank the Singapore Government and the great healthcare team for taking care of migrant workers like us with so much care and concern."

His story reflects the trust, cooperation and the incredible resilience of our migrant workers. With their support, we were able to safeguard their health and their livelihoods.

By August 2020, the ITF had completed testing of all dormitory residents to clear the dormitories of COVID-19. The workers could now return to work.

To continue the work of the ITF, the Assurance, Care and Engagement (ACE) Group in MOM was formed. The mission of the ACE Group was to safeguard the well-being of our migrant workers by enhancing support for their healthcare, housing and social needs while keeping the workers safe during the pandemic.

Our priority continued to be to protect the health and well-being of our migrant workers. ACE established ground presence in the dormitories to assure migrant workers of our continued support. We set up an infection prevention and control programme working with nurses and FAST teams to teach hand washing, personal hygiene and social distancing. In addition, we implemented routine testing and quarantine processes to keep the migrant workers safe. The team also looked after their well-being and recreational needs together with NGOs.

We worked with private and public laboratories to increase the frequency of collection of swab samples and expanded capacity for processing of test results, so that we could test more workers more quickly. This enabled our ACE teams on the ground to identify infected workers and their close contacts quickly and to convey them to recovery and quarantine facilities. We undertook all these measures before vaccination was available, so that the situation in the dormitories would remain safe and stable.

Even though there were some COVID-19 clusters and transmission after the completion of dormitory clearance, ACE and MOH working closely together, were able to bring these under control through testing and through isolation.

We achieved a significant milestone of zero new cases reported in the dormitories on 13 October 2020. This brought a new sense of confidence and optimism in our ability to respond to this virus.

Vaccination was a key lever in our arsenal in the fight against COVID-19 when it arrived. MOM and MOH worked closely together to make vaccination available to migrant workers from March 2021, at the same time as the rollout for the local community. Informational packages in the migrant workers' native languages were distributed to help them understand the benefits of the vaccination.

Leveraging the networks of our migrant worker volunteers, dormitory operators and NGOs, we were able to reach out to all workers and encourage them to come forward to be vaccinated. In less than six months, over nine in 10 migrant workers living in the dormitories were fully vaccinated. This made a difference when the highly transmissible Delta variant struck in mid-2021 and there was no further loss of life to COVID-19 among migrant workers living in the dormitories.

Bringing COVID-19 infection under control in the dormitories was only one piece of the picture. We had to keep it that way, even as new workers entered Singapore to support our economy.

For example, MOM set up one-stop onboard centres so that new workers entering Singapore were brought into a dedicated facility to complete their Stay-Home Notices (SHNs), get the necessary medical examinations, COVID-19 testing, vaccination and orientation programme done all under one roof. At the onboard centres, imported cases could be screened out, isolated, managed and contained, so that the disease was not brought into the dormitories.

With the tightening of border measures due to new variants of concern, various industry associations organised a pilot initiative to test workers and safeguard them from infection at dedicated facilities in their home countries before onward travel to Singapore.

Once the infrastructure was in place, we were subsequently able to reopen safely and earlier, so that the economy could also restart earlier. We started bringing back the migrant workers in significantly larger numbers from end 2021. This was important for many sectors, including the restart of Singapore's construction efforts. Senior Minister of State Zaqq Mohamad will make further mention of our efforts in the construction sector.

Members of the House, looking back at the way we contained and managed the outbreak in the dormitories, we asked ourselves – could we have done things differently?

If all of you recall, at the start, testing capacities were very limited, but I think we could have done more. We could have done more surveillance through sample testing for the different migrant worker population to detect clusters early.

Masks were very scarce at the start, but we could have ensured some form of facial covering, protective covering or some form of mask were worn by migrant workers to reduce the incidence of transmissions.

In the fog of war, we could also have communicated better with the dormitory workers at every stage and every step of the way, to better share information and to assure them on the measures we were taking to protect them.

MOM will learn from these lessons and we will strive to do better in the future.

This brings me to how we will use the lessons learnt from COVID-19 to build resilience in the dormitories against a future pandemic.

The three areas of reforms are: (1) housing resilience in the form of new dormitory standards; (2) healthcare resilience in the form of a new primary healthcare system; and (3) focusing on mental well-being and social support resilience by building awareness of mental health issues and support resources.

As we transit to endemicity, we have continued to review measures on the living arrangements of our dormitory residents as part of enhancing liveability in the dormitories and ensuring that Singapore will be better prepared for future health crises.

In September 2021, we introduced improved standards for all new migrant worker dormitories. Mr Leon Perera asked for NGOs to be engaged. We already have done so. We have engaged with a very broad range of NGOs for these improved standards, including Healthserve and HOME.

Some of these standards include enhanced living and public health such as larger living space per resident, in room wifi, en-suite toilets, better ventilation in rooms and dedicated bed spaces for isolation purposes as well as wastewater surveillance.

Mr Louis Ng earlier spoke about minimum standards in the dormitories. We are also working closely with stakeholders to develop a plan for existing dormitories to transition to the new improved standards. This will take into consideration what existing infrastructure in the dormitories today that they can support, as well as the potential disruption to dormitory bed supply, and how this will impact the inflow of migrant workers. We will announce details of this transition plan later on in the year.

Miss Rachel Ong spoke earlier about the conditions in the Factory Converted Dormitories (FCDs). Prior to the pandemic, MOM inspected all FCDs in 2016 and took action against a quarter of them. Six FCDs were also prosecuted for unacceptable living conditions. This was followed up with another round of inspections for those with poor standards. Since 2017, 175 FCDs were served with warnings and fines. Another four were also prosecuted for unacceptable accommodation.

But we recognise, beyond punitive measures, that more needs to be done to raise the standards of dormitories, including the FCDs.

We will continue to strengthen our regulatory levers on dormitory operators. The scope of the Foreign Employee Dormitories Act (FEDA) will be expanded to include migrant worker dormitories with seven or more beds starting from 1 April 2023.

This will increase the number of dormitories, including FCDs, regulated under FEDA from the current 53, in about two weeks' time, it will go up to 1,500, and allow MOM to raise standards and respond quickly to future emergencies. This will also give MOM additional levers to enforce against the dorm operator. Other than financial penalties, the Commissioner for FEDA can issue compliance directives to the operator to rectify lapses as well as business restrictive orders which will prohibit operators from taking in new tenants until the operator makes good on all its shortcomings.

To grow our capabilities in dormitory management, MOM will also be building and owning two new dormitories, which will be operated by a new corporate entity in partnership with the private sector. They will also provide MOM with the opportunity to innovate and pilot new ideas for public health resilience and dormitory living, to improve the lived experience of migrant workers. These initiatives to enhance the standards of the living environment of our migrant workers, will transform the features of the entire migrant worker landscape.

Our FAST teams, first deployed during the circuit breaker in 2020, and now under ACE, continue to proactively and regularly visit dormitories to engage migrant workers on their overall well-being and work with both workers and dormitory operators to resolve issues on living conditions in a timely manner.

At the end of 2022, we have also added a new feature on FWMOMCare, where migrant workers can send a request to talk to MOM via the mobile application. The FAST officer will then contact the workers directly to address any issue or feedback that the workers may have. This provides an additional avenue for workers to seek assistance when they face a problem.

ACE is now a permanent capability to support our migrant workers in their everyday lives and will also have the capability to respond quickly in a future pandemic.

In addition to housing resilience, learning from the pandemic, we will also need to strengthen healthcare resilience in the migrant worker community. We took a holistic approach to redesign the way primary care services were delivered to migrant workers and change the way migrant workers sought care when they are unwell.

We made two significant changes.

First, we organised workers living in dormitories into six geographical zones all over the country and we appointed Anchor Operators to provide integrated primary medical service at designated Medical Centres and affiliated clinics. To date, there are 10 medical centres and a network of partnered private clinics serving the population of more than 300,000 workers.

To bridge language and cultural barriers, the Anchor Operators have put in place multilingual translation capabilities and augmented their clinical teams with healthcare workers who can speak the native languages of our migrant workers.

For the second initiative, we have also mandated a Primary Care Plan (PCP) offered by all Anchor Operators that covers most of the primary care needs of the workers at a fixed annual fee to employers, thereby giving them greater peace of mind.

With the PCP, workers can now choose to seek medical consultation 24 hours a day via telemedicine or report sick at their designated regional medical centres for a small co-payment fee.

With these measures, we help employers provide quality primary care at affordable cost and allow workers to develop better health-seeking habits through accessible medical care. At the same time, we are also able to leverage on the new primary healthcare system for public health surveillance.

The healthcare resilience of our migrant worker community is now significantly strengthened.

As the COVID-19 situation improved in Singapore, we took a careful and calibrated approach to progressively ease restrictions in order to safeguard migrant workers' health. We started relaxing movement restrictions from as early as September 2020, but we had to roll back because of the emergence of new variants.

We increased the frequency of such visits to recreation centres and the community significantly, in the latter part of 2021 after the Delta wave had passed and we had assessed that it would be much safer to do so.

We had to constantly make judgement calls on when and how quickly to ease movement restrictions on migrant workers living in dormitories. New COVID-19 variants were emerging all the time and there were persistent concerns about vaccine breakthrough and re-infections. There were also concerns that new variants were getting more infectious while time was needed to assess if there were any changes to disease severity and vaccine effectiveness.

So, amid the uncertainty, our considerations were always to prioritise our migrant workers' safety and ensure that they could continue working, receive their salary and send money home. Nonetheless, this took a toll on the mental well-being of the migrant workers. However, if we had opened up more quickly and it precipitated another series of large outbreaks, it would have put at risk, again, the health of the migrant workers.

As it turned out, there were no further COVID-19 fatalities beyond the two in the early phase. We could have eased up more quickly, but, then again, all this is on hindsight.

Sir, in November 2020, the ACE Group also set up a multi-stakeholder taskforce called Project DAWN (Depression, Awareness, Well-being, Normalisation). This comprises representatives from MOM, the Government, psychologists, the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) and two NGOs – the Migrant Workers' Centre (MWC) and HealthServe. The purpose of forming Project DAWN is to develop a comprehensive support ecosystem to manage and support the mental health of migrant workers.

The DAWN task force has since developed resources and raised greater awareness of mental health issues and among our migrant worker community and stakeholders.

The DAWN framework consists of seven initiatives. Suffice to say that they are meant for primary prevention and then, for that, we have mental and social wellness awareness and promotion.

For secondary prevention, we have identification of at-risk patients and the risk factors, screening for mental health issues, surveillance for the mental health and emotional distress and counselling, and the ramping up of training of para-counsellors.

For tertiary prevention, we have developed a plan for timely escalation of care and, when they recover, the provision of post-intervention support to rehabilitate them back, hence, normalisation.

These initiatives have been progressively rolled out over the past two-and-a-half years.

Our employers and the dormitory operators form an integral part of the support ecosystem for our workers. They are regularly reminded by MOM to look out for the well-being of their workers and encourage closer networks and engagement at work and also in the dormitories.

Appropriate access to care services, such as counselling and community support, was also strengthened. With MOM's support, HealthServe set up its 24-hour counselling hotline which has been operational since August 2021 and hired more native-speaking para-counsellors to deliver culturally attuned counselling.

We would not have been able to build resilience in these areas alone. It was in this pandemic that we saw the best of Singaporeans, and, indeed, our humanity shone through when we demonstrated care for our neighbours.

We saw NGOs, businesses, migrant workers, local communities step up to provide food and gifts, care and contributions for our migrant workforce. We learnt how important it was to continually foster these partnerships, as each and every one of these partners made a difference in turning the tide.

We will remember these lessons as we build a stronger migrant worker ecosystem, as we work collectively with our many partners to care for our migrant workers and ensure that the migrant workforce remains a productive and pandemic-resilient complement to our workforce.

I am going to spend the next few minutes going through and elaborating on what we are doing to support our local jobs and livelihoods. Even as we safeguarded the well-being of our migrant workers, our abiding concern was the jobs and livelihoods of Singaporeans.

To help workers and employers navigate through the storm, MOM and the tripartite partners acted quickly. We convened the National Wages Council (NWC) soon after the start of the pandemic in March 2020, to guide employers on how they could sustain their businesses and save jobs.

The tripartite partners also issued and updated numerous advisories on matters ranging from leave arrangements during quarantine, managing excess manpower and responsible retrenchment, to workplace vaccination policies. The NWC guidelines and many of the advisories were negotiated under pressing timelines but they provided fair and balanced guidance for both workers and employers.

This was only possible through and with the trust among the tripartite partners that has been painstakingly built up over the past many decades.

To expand opportunities for jobseekers amid uncertainty and disruptions, the National Jobs Council (NJC) was formed to oversee the design and implementation of the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package, which supported locals to enter new jobs, to upskill themselves, or to be better positioned for recovery.

Various members of the NJC, including unions and business leaders, mobilised their respective networks, their expertise and their resources to support jobseekers to enter into new opportunities.

Mr Yip Hon Weng also spoke earlier about assistance to workers who were retrenched. Where retrenchments were inevitable, the Taskforce for Responsible Retrenchment and Employment Facilitation (RTF) reached out to affected local employees to offer employment support, including the provision of information kits on career resources and job fairs. Workers were also supported through matching of excess manpower across industries, skills upgrading efforts and career coaching and advisory initiatives.

Taken together, the collective efforts of the Government, the unions and the employers achieved significant traction and scale in supporting jobs and livelihood.

From April 2020 to April 2022, around 200,000 locals were placed into jobs and skills opportunities under the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package. Besides, over 744,000 jobseekers were hired with support under the Jobs Growth Incentive, which encouraged local hiring in growing firms as the focus shifted to supporting recovery.

In addition, to help self-employed persons whose livelihoods were affected by the period of extraordinary economic uncertainty, we introduced the Self-Employed Persons Income Relief Scheme (SIRS) for self-employed persons with less means and family support. Close to 200,000 self-employed persons benefited from SIRS. We appreciate NTUC for stepping forward to help with the appeals for SIRS.

Additional support for self-employed individuals, such as taxi and private hire car drivers, also came in the form of other Government schemes like the COVID-19 Driver Relief Fund. This support was disbursed by taxi and platform operators, who also helped their drivers with rental relief and commission rates.

These efforts contributed to the recovery of the labour market even before the pandemic ended. By December 2020, resident employment had rebounded to slightly above pre-COVID-19 levels, with the net number of residents in employment for the year increasing by 14,900, despite contractions in the first half of 2020.

The resident unemployment rate stayed below 5% throughout 2020 even when economic conditions were at their worst and, of course, it eventually recovered to pre-pandemic levels in 2022.

We have drawn useful takeaways from the experience of COVID-19.

First, we found that accessibility is key to the delivery of employment facilitation services. The establishment of the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Centres in all 24 HDB towns was accompanied by improved sentiments towards Government employment facilitation, which suggested that the increased accessibility and physical presence of these job matching services could have helped to reduce the anxiety of jobseekers.

Post-COVID-19, we have maintained the network of Jobs and Skills Centres as readily accessible touchpoints for jobseekers in the heartlands.

Second, we have expanded the diversity of channels available to support the employment of jobseekers. For example, the new SGUnited Mid-Career Pathways Programme introduced during COVID-19 has allowed employers to evaluate job fit through company attachments and facilitated positive employment outcomes for trainees.

Among those who had completed or exited the programme, around eight in 10 found employment within six months. Among the trainees who found employment, more than half earned the same or higher wages, compared to the last drawn wages prior to onboarding. We have, therefore, regularised the programme from April 2022 to provide more options to mature jobseekers.

Ms Janet Ang asked how the Government intends to use the jobs and skills initiatives to correct structural employment misalignment for vulnerable jobseekers. To do more for specific groups that may need greater support to secure employment, the Government had announced enhancements to the Enabling Employment Credit and also introduced a new Uplifting Employment Credit to encourage employers to hire persons with disabilities and ex-offenders respectively.

Third, and importantly, COVID-19 has also demonstrated that we should and must continue to build on the tripartite trust and partnerships as a key competitive advantage for Singapore. Our ability to navigate to tide over the worst of the crisis was a testament to the importance of the strong tripartite partnership.

Like the ballast of our ship, strong trust and partnerships will allow Singapore to make steady progress, no matter the winds and waves ahead.

If Members will bear with me for a few more minutes, I am concluding.

Distilling lessons from the pandemic, we have made permanent structural reforms in our migrant worker management capabilities and the ecosystem of support for the local workforce so as to institutionalise lasting change.

Care for our migrant workers has been reinforced in three ways: first, we have improved standards for migrant worker dormitories and we will be expanding the coverage of FEDA; secondly, we have set up a new primary healthcare system and the Primary Care Plan for migrant workers; and third, we have better capabilities to improve migrant worker mental health with Project DAWN.

For the local workforce, we have enhanced the accessibility and diversity of channels to support jobseekers in securing employment and their career transitions.

Above all, we have built and strengthened relationships and networks with both public and private stakeholders to help us weather future storms.

COVID-19, indeed, fell on us like a heavy storm. But, together, we have weathered the worst and were able to build back stronger. The mettle of our workforce was put to the test, and we showcased our resilience by facing the challenges with grit and gumption.

I have said it earlier but let me say it again. If not for the sacrifices of each and every one of us here in Singapore, we could have come out of the pandemic in far worse shape.

Stefanie Sun's song, "We will get there", was re-sung by Aisyah Aziz with images of various workers struggling through the pandemic. The video tells the story of the many sacrifices all of us made. Many of us would have felt our stories told by the images interspersed through the video. As the lyrics go, "We've struggled through the darkest storms, with family and friends. Together, we'll stand and, in the end, hand in hand, we will get there".

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, while we are yet to reach journey's end, we have, indeed, come through the storm, together. [*Applause.*]

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

6.00 pm

**Mr Liang Eng Hwa (Bukit Panjang):** Mr Deputy Speaker, there is this ancient Chinese saying, "大疫不过三" – the literal translation being "a major pandemic would not last beyond three years". I am not sure if there was enough empirical or scientific basis but after three years of the pandemic, we can finally move on and live with COVID-19 as an endemic disease.

Fortunately, since our decisive opening in 2022 and the resumption to normal lives, we have not seen significant stresses in our healthcare system. By and large, we have moved on, with COVID-19 very much like a normal flu.

Singapore and Singaporeans as a whole went through an extraordinary experience, adapting and overcoming the harsh onslaught of the pandemic.

In all, 2.2 million people fell ill to the disease. Unfortunately, 1,711 succumbed to the disease. My deepest condolences to the families.

On our economy, we went through a roller coaster ride. In 2020, we suffered the worst full-year recession since our Independence, where in the second quarter of that year, the economy contracted by a hefty 13.2%. Among the worst hit sectors were construction, retail trade, F&B, tourism and airline. Total employment shrank sharply in 2020 while many self-employed were left with no incomes.

The nation came to an almost standstill during the two months of circuit breaker. I still remember feeling eerie, seeing the streets so empty.

Even in this very Chamber, extraordinary things happened too. We had to sit wide apart – using up the gallery spaces up there, wearing masks, wiping the microphones and rostrum after each speech and conducting self-antigen rapid tests (ART).

We even had five Budgets in a year and drawn on an unprecedented amount of \$37 billion from the Reserves.

Sir, it is no exaggeration to say that the experiences and images of the last three years of our life will be in our living memory forever – very much like how our earlier generations remembered other life-changing events such as the Japanese occupation and Singapore's separation from Malaysia.

In fact, we now use the pandemic as a time reference, referring to life before COVID-19 and life after COVID-19 – "before COVID-19" as in "BC".



Sir, recently, in my workplace, we had a workshop with many of my colleagues. As part of the pre-workshop warm up teaser, the workshop moderator asked participants to share what they were most grateful for in the last three years.

I was most heartened that many participants shared they were most grateful for being a Singaporean during the last three years. They felt safe, shielded and were assured that we are well-resourced, both financially and in terms of capabilities to cope with the crisis.

Many knew that there is no perfect way to manage such a formidable crisis of this magnitude and scale, yet appreciated the balanced approach we took to manage the pandemic.

Sir, it is in this context that I like what I read in the White Paper on Singapore's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper detailed areas that we have done well but also crucially self-evaluated the areas that we could have done better. There was no glossing over of shortcomings and almost every area where we can take issue with are covered in the paper. Deputy Prime Minister Wong's speech as well as Minister Tan See Leng's speech have also elaborated some of these shortcomings.

This honest and reflective approach is important as we take stock of the whole-of-Government response to the pandemic, reaffirm and reinforce what we have done well, but also initiate necessary follow-up actions to address learning points to strengthen our response to future pandemic.

Our healthcare system withstood the stresses of the crisis well, albeit with considerable strain. Among the key successes were the capabilities that we have built up post-SARs, namely the National Public Health Laboratory (NPHL) and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID).

Consequently, NPHL had the ability to develop our very own polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test kits early in the pandemic and NCID was able to attend to early serious COVID-19 patients and saved lives.

Our entire healthcare ecosystem, both public and private, were mobilised to respond as an integrated health system to this unprecedented public health crisis. I read in the media that even retired nurses and medical professionals stepped forward to join the frontline healthcare warriors in the battle to save lives.

Sir, we also scored well in our nationwide vaccination programme, making the right call with advance purchases of the most effective vaccines and thereafter ramping up to a high vaccination rate.

Another remarkable area that I wanted to highlight is how we as a small, tiny island ensured that vital supplies were not disrupted despite the lockdowns, the border controls, the intense competition for scarce items and the export restrictions by many countries.

I can imagine the uphill tasks our frontline procurement officers faced securing large amounts of sought after critical items like medical equipment and supplies, test kits, masks and a whole range of food and daily necessities. It must have required the officers to use whatever conventional or unconventional means to secure these supplies, possibly having to deviate from the usual standard operating procedures (SOPs) and instruction manuals (IMs) in such emergency situations.

Sir, the pandemic also exposed several of our vulnerabilities. It was mentioned by Deputy Prime Minister Wong as well as Minister Tan. Allow me to also express my views on the two.

First, on the migrant workers' dormitories. Among the most severe situations or high stress points was the outbreak at the migrant workers' dormitories in this pandemic. The White Paper called it a "crisis within a crisis".

Given the communal living arrangements, the dormitories inevitably became a high-risk area in a highly infectious disease outbreak. Fortunately, as what Minister Tan has said, the morbidity and the mortality rate has been very low, notwithstanding the scale of the outbreak there.

I noted that MOM has since taken significant steps to improve the dormitories' environment, with new standards and continuous efforts to de-risk the exposures. As what Minister Tan said, even with significant improvements in the living environment of these workers, we ought to still continue to institute more defensive measures such as having self-segregating features in the event of a disease outbreak, contingency plans for quarantine arrangements as well as a business continuity plan (BCP) set up.

Sir, the dormitory outbreak also reminded us that there is really a limit as to how much more we can grow our migrant workforce. We must continue to review and weigh the trade-offs of our dependency.

Sir, the second area of vulnerability I want to highlight is mask wearing. The White Paper highlighted the shortage of masks that we had to contend with. Given our domestic constraints, both labour as well as costs, as well as our shift towards more high-value-adding advance manufacturing, producing medical masks domestically may not be economically viable. It is difficult to compete with countries with a much lower cost structure.

Our domestic demand for masks under a non-pandemic environment is not high enough to achieve the scale efficiency for production to be viable. Hence, our medical masks are almost dependent on imports.

In an ironic way, thanks to the transboundary haze situation that we faced years ago, the Government does stockpile a significant quantity of masks, which helped us meet the initial wave of demand when the outbreak happened. But the stockpile quantity was never able to meet that sort of daily consumption demand needed for the entire population in a long-drawn pandemic.

We scrambled to assemble our own mask producing capabilities so that we can produce some of our mask needs locally. Credit goes to the MTI, Enterprise Singapore and the relevant agencies for getting the mask producing factory up in double quick time, just so that we have some additional back-up supplies.

Sir, in an airborne infectious disease outbreak, masking up can be our first line of defence. As part of a key measure to prepare for future pandemic, we have to designate medical masks as a critical supply item that requires some local production capability.

However, for the production to be viable, it would require some domestic anchor orders or offtake from the Government so that there is a base level production volume to work with – very much like how the Public Utilities Board (PUB) undertook the liability to buy a certain quantity of desalinated water from water production companies even though it cost more than treated water.

In this regard, can I suggest two related supportive initiatives?

Firstly, continue to encourage Singaporeans to adopt the mask-wearing habit, especially when they are unwell, in healthcare settings or in highly crowded areas such as public transport or in crowded lifts. This would not only create some local demand for masks but also help to reduce the spread of other airborne diseases such as flu, cold, cough and other influenza.

Studies indicated that there was a sharp decline in flu cases during the pandemic, which could be attributed in part to mask wearing. Just last week, The Straits Times reported that doctors saw a rise of as much as 30% increase in flu cases in the last few months as we unwind almost all our COVID-19 measures.

If less of our population were infected with flu and cold, we could free up demand for primary care clinics like polyclinics for other patients. There will be more healthy people around, which in turn leads to overall savings on healthcare costs for the population.

Secondly, to encourage the population to wear masks, I suggest that the Government, or perhaps Temasek Foundation, consider continuing the practice of distributing face masks to every Singaporean household each year as a way to encourage the wearing of masks as a responsible social habit, especially if we are unwell. This could be a part of the Healthier SG movement.

Sir, one area that I felt that we have also done well but was not quite well elaborated in the White Paper is the tremendous contributions by the grassroots community volunteers.

The grassroots volunteers rose to the occasion in various pandemic operations in the community. For example, just in Bukit Panjang, we distributed masks and hand sanitisers to more than 50,000 residents, delivered more than 4,000 care packs, groceries and social assistance to residents affected by COVID-19, installed 5,585 bottles of hand sanitisers at lifts and supported the distribution of more 4,000 TraceTogether tokens. Our volunteers also reached out to 12,566 seniors to urge them to go for their rounds of vaccinations. I am sure Members in each of their constituencies have done similar things.

These and the many other areas are where our grassroots volunteers have selflessly stepped up in this crisis in carrying out some of these duties while at risk of being infected themselves. They made a big difference in the overall health outcomes, providing last mile support and care at the neighbourhood level and, in particular, taking care of those that are vulnerable.

Sir, in conclusion, I would like to point out two underpinning factors that enable our ability to achieve the outcomes that we did as listed in the White Paper.

Firstly, it is our financial strength. There is this Chinese saying, "钱不是万能，但没钱确是万万不能". Money is not everything, but not having the financial means is inconceivable.

When the pandemic landed upon us, the Government had initially drawn on our current Budget surpluses to fund the urgent expenditures in public health defences and the various support measures for businesses and households. Thereafter, we had to draw on the Reserves as the total bill snowballed to \$72.3 billion in FY2020 and FY2021.

Given the severity and the magnitude of the crisis, I had expected the Government to do more to support and assist, but I must admit the massiveness and the decisiveness in the series of fiscal interventions were more than I expected.

It once again demonstrated that the Government may well be cautious and prudent in managing its finances during peace time, but when hit with a severe crisis, the Government would not hesitate to use our fiscal firepower in an impactful way to protect lives and livelihoods. In essence, in 2020, it is the Government's spending that propped up the entire economy.

Sir, during a severe economic downturn, the foremost concerns are often about whether our economic capabilities would be permanently impaired as businesses will run into cash flow problems and some will have to wind down.

The Jobs Credit Scheme, COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act and the various financing support made a big difference to help our business stay afloat and safeguarded our capabilities.

When air traffic dropped to almost zero for a prolonged period of time, our national carrier SIA posted huge full year financial losses in 2020. Fortunately, the company was able to raise massive cash from their rights issue, with its major shareholder Temasek pledging to exercise all its rights to buy the shares. I am glad that we have shareholders that saw the strong fundamentals and long-term value of SIA as well as its business growth potential beyond the pandemic.

Secondly, Sir, given the enormous scale of this global crisis and the fluidity of the situation with known unknowns and unknown unknowns, the Government has steered the nation well through this crisis. We have kept Singaporeans safe, safeguarded the economy and taken care of the overall well-being of Singaporeans.

In the earlier stages of the pandemic, the Prime Minister addressed the nation at each turning point of the pandemic, updating Singaporeans on where we are and what may lie ahead. The Multi-Ministry Task Force (MTF) also regularly updated Singaporeans on the latest developments in an open and transparent manner.

So, I agree with the White Paper's conclusion that there has been high quality of governance throughout the crisis.

The Prime Minister and the Cabinet has not only steered the nation into safe harbour during the pandemic but have also set our sights beyond the pandemic with moves and strategies for the country to emerge stronger.

In particular, the 4G leadership led by Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong has shown its mettle in leading Singapore through this crisis of a generation. Not that we want it that way, but the crisis came at a time as if to test the leadership strength of the 4G team. It is like the baptism of fire. I believe that Deputy Prime Minister Wong and the 4G team has proven their leadership ability, the tenacity, the decisiveness and courage to take difficult decisions in overcoming the crisis, as well as doing what is right and what is in the long-term good for the country.

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

Most importantly, the 4G team has demonstrated that the well-being of Singaporeans is foremost in their minds and hearts.

Sir, I am heartened and assured that the future of Singapore is in good hands and together with the fortitude and unity of Singaporeans, we can continue to scale new heights and overcome whatever challenges that may come our way. Sir, with that, I wholeheartedly support the Motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Leader.

### **EXEMPTED BUSINESS**

#### **(Business Motion)**

6.16 pm

**The Leader of the House (Ms Indranee Rajah):** Mr Speaker, there are quite number of speakers for this Motion and we are trying to finish as many as possible. I think we will have to go beyond 7.00 pm. So, Mr Speaker, I beg to move, "That the proceedings on the business set down on the Order Paper for today be exempted from this day's Sitting from the provisions of Standing Order No 2.

Resolved, "That the proceedings on the business set down on the Order Paper for today be exempted from this day's Sitting from the provisions of Standing Order No 2."

– [Ms Indranee Rajah]

**Mr Speaker:** Leader.

### **TIME LIMIT FOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT'S SPEECH**

#### **(Suspension of Standing Orders)**

6.17 pm

**The Leader of the House (Ms Indranee Rajah):** Mr Speaker, may I seek your consent and the general assent of Members present to move that the proceedings on the item under discussion be exempted from the provisions of Standing Order No 48(8) to remove the time limit in respect of Minister of State Sun Xueling's speech?

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

Hon Members indicated assent.

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

Resolved, "That the proceedings on the item under discussion be exempted from the provisions of Standing Order No 48(8) in respect of Minister of State Sun Xueling's speech." – [Ms Indranee Rajah]

### **SINGAPORE'S COVID-19 RESPONSE**

Debate resumed.

**Mr Speaker:** Minister of State Sun Xueling.

**The Minister of State for Social and Family Development (Ms Sun Xueling):** Mr Speaker, Sir, in Chinese, please.

(In Mandarin): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] COVID-19 is the pandemic of the century. COVID-19 did not just present a health and economic crisis, it also presented a social crisis.

Given its unclear origins and elusive transmission pathways, the secretive nature of the virus can lead people to guard against others and focus on self-protection. These various factors may lead us to become a society driven by fear, where we may turn on each other for the sake of personal survival.

We have seen severe divisions in some countries over whether to wear masks or to get vaccinated, leading to a failure of implementing preventive measures. We have also seen other countries experience strain on their healthcare system and even ethnic conflicts.

Fortunately, none of these happened in Singapore. The reason we have been able to overcome the pandemic and minimise its social impact is due to the strong collective collaboration and a high level of mutual trust in Singapore.

COVID-19 is different from ordinary diseases because of its highly contagious nature. When one person falls ill, it affects not only their own health but also the health of others.

Everyone may have their own views on COVID-19, whether to wear masks, whether to get vaccinated, whether students should go to school.

However, if everyone only considers their own views without regard for others or is unwilling to collaborate collectively, it would be challenging to implement preventive measures with success.

The foundation of collective collaboration lies in the trust between individuals. Confucius said, "Without the people's trust, a nation cannot stand."

A study by Oxford University found that countries with higher levels of trust have lower COVID-19 mortality rates. They examined various factors such as a country's healthcare system or medical advice, but these were not the decisive factors in reducing mortality rates. The key factor was the level of trust in society.

The high level of trust between people in Singapore is the key to our success in fighting the pandemic.

People trust that the Government can handle the crisis in a transparent, honest and scientific manner. Businesses and institutions not only focus on their operations but also consider the health and caregiving responsibilities of their employees, providing them with the confidence that they are being taken care of. Every individual fulfils and stands by their roles, takes care of their families and cares for others.

It is because of the mutual trust between the Government, businesses, institutions and the people of Singapore that Singapore can harness the energies of everyone, unite in mutual assistance and overcome the pandemic.

The trust of the people in the Government is not inherent. Trust is earned through years of sincere efforts and practical actions.

During the most challenging times of the pandemic, the MTF held press conferences almost daily to inform people of the progress of the pandemic control efforts and gave guidance to the people on the preventive measures they should individually take. When Singapore secured high-quality vaccines, the Prime Minister and ministers took the lead in getting vaccinated and recorded videos for everyone to watch. These efforts aimed to reassure the public, build mutual confidence and unite everyone in fighting the pandemic.

"Caring for the elderly and young children as one's own parents and children". This has been well reflected in our fight against the pandemic. The elderly are most at risk from COVID-19; hence, taking care of them is an important part of our work.

During the circuit breaker period, visits to the elderly were temporarily restricted to minimise virus transmission. However, essential services for the elderly continued to operate. Community partners also initiated home visits, delivering cooked meals and necessities to elderly individuals without family support under hygienic and safe conditions.

When vaccines became available, the Government dispatched Mobile Vaccination Teams to nursing centres to vaccinate the elderly and caregivers. Community partners actively persuaded and guided elderly individuals who had concerns about the vaccine. Eventually, the vaccination rate among Singaporean seniors reached 90%. Their health has been safeguarded.

We would also like to thank the elderly for their willingness to listen to our advice and receive the vaccines and boosters that we have prioritised for them. This is not an easy task in other countries, especially when the elderly may not have the habit of receiving vaccinations regularly. There were even instances in other countries where people do not follow government guidelines.

Trust works both ways. While the elderly and the families trust the Government and community partners to do the best for them, the Government and the community also empowers the elderly to engage in organic and spontaneous activities, supporting their endeavours and promoting their well-being.

For example, during the pandemic, the daily lives of the elderly were affected by strict restrictions and they were unable to engage in group activities such as going to the hawker centres or the markets or gathering at the coffee shops.

They had to change their daily routine and engage in home-based activities. The Government then specially designed television programmes on nutrition, healthcare and home fitness for them. Active Ageing Committees in some of the communities also purchased portable radio sets to distribute to the elderly for free, enabling beneficiary seniors to be kept up-to-date on COVID-19 news. The interactive talkshows on the radio also helped our seniors keep loneliness at bay.

Our elders bravely embraced technology. Although they are not digital natives, they wanted to learn digital technology to stay connected with their families and friends during the pandemic. The Seniors Go Digital programme played an important role in this regard, working with community partners in equipping our seniors with the skills to go online.

Many seniors also learned to use WhatsApp to send each other text messages and greetings to keep in contact and check in on each other. Some even participated in group activities such as celebrating Mid-Autumn Festival and Lunar New Year through Zoom. These activities promoted connection among seniors and this enabled them to provide each other with emotional support.

In the past three years, about 210,000 elderly people have transitioned to digitalisation. Kudos to them for seizing the moment and making the best out of a difficult situation!

During the pandemic, we paid special attention to vulnerable families. Government assistance packages and active donations from the public provided care for vulnerable families in Singapore in a comprehensive way.

Through various Budgets, we provided financial assistance as part of an enhanced safety net. Altogether, the COVID-19 financial assistance schemes disbursed around \$2.3 billion to more than half a million individuals, helping to ease the financial burden of COVID-19 on those affected most severely. At the same time, around 200,000 individuals found job opportunities through the SGUnited Jobs and Skills programmes.

In the private sector, countless kind-hearted individuals donated generously to support vulnerable communities, social service organisations and charities.

Giving.sg, a one-stop online donation platform, raised a record of \$286 million from 2020 to 2022, with many giving more to the social welfare, health and community sectors. Community Chest was able to raise over \$87 million from April 2020 to March 2021.

During the pandemic, schools in some countries were closed for extended periods, resulting in children's studies being delayed by half a year to a year, or even longer.

However, in Singapore, while ensuring our children's health, we were able to keep preschools and schools mostly open, allowing them to continue their education with minimal disruption and with virtually no delay in their learning progress.

I recall being in Ministry of Education (MOE) meetings when it seemed like the most straightforward solution was just to shut our preschools and schools. Then, the responsibility for taking care of the children would fall on their parents, and the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) and MOE would not have to take any responsibility.

But what about the longer-term impact on the learning and developmental needs of our children? What about exacerbating inequalities as lower-income families might have to grapple with finding child-minding alternatives and some might even have to quit their jobs to care for their children? We chose not to shut our schools because we understood the difficulties the caregivers would face. The closing of schools might be the easy way out, but it will disproportionately affect these families. Furthermore, if children do not go to school for a long time, resulting in a lack of interaction with teachers and classmates, will it affect their social interaction skills and even their physical and mental health?

Hence, we decided to keep our schools open most of the time, because as much as we value health, we also place great importance on the future of these 604,000 students and 190,000 preschoolers, as well as the lives and livelihoods of all parents.

The vast majority of parents followed the Government and schools' guidelines. Attendance rates in 2020 and 2021 were comparable to the pre-pandemic period, which fully demonstrates the parents' trust in the Government.

In April 2020 and May 2021, a decision was made to swiftly pivot formal schooling to full home-based learning (HBL) to support our national COVID-19 strategy. Everyone – educators, parents and students – took pains and made sacrifices to make it work.

Educators rose to the occasion to adapt quickly to new ways of teaching and came together as a professional community to share lesson resources and best ideas. Many educators who are parents themselves juggled the responsibility of educating their students via HBL while also taking care of their own children.

Kudos to all our mothers and educators! Thank you very much for your sacrifices and efforts!

In addition to the hard work of schools, parents and educators, many also came forward during this time to help our children.

I would like to specially mention a ground-up initiative, Masks Sewn With Love, because it is a shining example of how ordinary citizens can have agency and do good even in the most difficult of times.

What started out as a local community effort in Punggol to sew reusable cloth masks for children and the vulnerable at a time when children-sized masks were not readily available grew into a nationwide initiative which saw 6,000 plus volunteers working from home to sew over 400,000 cloth masks for our children, seniors and frontline workers.

I fondly remember Aunty Amy who, at over 70 years of age, did not let age or cancer hold her back from giving to others. Sitting at her sewing machine from dawn to dusk, Aunty Amy single-handedly sewn hundreds of masks for children, seniors, persons living in shelters and frontline workers. And Uncle Chung, a retired SAF officer, who worked with Grab delivery riders to deliver donated cloth to stay-at-home mums and grandmothers so they could participate in Masks Sewn With Love.

Masks Sewn With Love also received support from various sectors of society. For example, the Temasek Foundation provided the non-woven melt-blown filters to enhance filtration efficacy. Temasek Foundation also placed advertisements in newspapers teaching the public how to sew masks at home. Singapore Post provided free mailing services for these masks; by simply writing "Masks Sewn With Love" on the envelope, the masks would be delivered to the needy beneficiaries for free.

As we can see, Singapore not only has top-down pandemic policies from the Government which could only be effectively implemented due to trust from the people, but many ordinary citizens also stepped up to initiate ground-up actions during these challenging times. These ground-up initiatives were further promoted by the Government, community and businesses on a larger scale and benefited more people.

People trust the Government's policies and guidelines, and the Government supports the actions and good deeds of the people. Through this virtuous cycle, we unite and help one other. This is both a manifestation of the beauty of humanity and a victory for collective collaboration.

In a survey by the Pew Research Centre, among the 19 countries surveyed, many in those countries saw their society as becoming more divided after the pandemic. However, Singapore is an exception. Three out of four Singaporeans said that our country was more united than before COVID-19.

After the pandemic, Singapore not only withstood the challenges but also emerged stronger and more united.

In the post-pandemic era, many countries are experiencing social divisions, economic crises and a surge in ultra-nationalism and de-globalisation, leading to great uncertainty in the international situation. Although Singapore is currently in a relatively stable state, as a small country, we are inevitably affected by international turbulence.

What new crises will we face in the future and how should we respond?

I believe that Singapore's experience in fighting the pandemic not only provides lessons for dealing with similar crises but also has significant implications for our future governance and how we go about addressing social issues.

The pandemic experience has shown us how important trust is between people. Trust is developed over time, through mutual understanding, mutual giving and mutual sacrifice. I hope that after this pandemic where we had strengthened trust in the process, that every Singaporean cherishes this hard-won and precious trust. Trust is the source of our collective strength and collaboration.

The Government needs to continue addressing issues transparently, honestly and in a science-based manner, constantly adapting to new developments and changes in the world and achieving social consensus. Only by sincerely contributing to the good of our nation can we live up to the trust and expectations of the people.

At the same time, we need to listen to the people's voices, encourage ground-up initiatives and good deeds, collaborate fully with communities, businesses and institutions, and work together with the people to build an inclusive, compassionate and empathetic society.

I believe that through the Forward SG exercise, fellow Singaporeans can refresh our social compact and reaffirm the values we hold dear in our society. Together, we will be able to overcome any crisis and challenges and create a beautiful future together!

*(In English):* Mr Speaker, Sir, in English, please. I speak in support of the Motion. COVID-19 did not just present a health and economic crisis, it also presented a social crisis. But what was more important was our response to the crisis, where the choices we made would define us as a people.

I am grateful that we made the right choices together. We chose to recognise that we are all interconnected with one another. We chose by our actions to help others and, in so doing, helped ourselves. Most importantly, we trusted one another, in the authorities to manage the crisis to the best of its ability, as well as in one another as individuals to do the right thing.

And because we did, each of us was able to respond with courage, concern and kindness. We overcame our initial fears, acted responsibly, worked together and supported one another. We not only averted a social crisis. We emerged stronger as a society.

In my speech, I would like to touch on how mutual trust and mutual support enabled us to avert a social crisis together and safeguard our way of life, and how all this was only made possible because Singaporeans cared for one another and gave something of ourselves to help others.

As the White Paper recognised, Singapore did well to support the vulnerable amongst us. Lower-income families were more vulnerable as they had less savings and resources to tide over these challenges. Others, who worked in sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, such as aviation, tourism, hospitality, F&B and retail, faced job losses or sizable reductions in income. They all benefited from quick and decisive support provided through the COVID-19 financial assistance schemes.

At the same time, many affected individuals took it upon themselves to utilise various employment support programmes, with around 200,000 individuals placed into jobs under the SG United Jobs and Skills Package.

Recently, I met a flight crew on a Singapore Airlines flight and he told me that during the pandemic, he had worked, first, as a transport hub service ambassador, then a restaurant staff and, finally, a furniture delivery mover before coming back to Singapore Airlines when the aviation industry picked up.

This is an example of mutual support where the Government supported hard-hit industries like aviation and F&B, and worked with companies to redesign jobs to help affected individuals, such as our flight crew.

At the same time, Singaporeans demonstrated personal resilience, by taking personal responsibility to secure their livelihood and continue to take care of their families. Last mile communication at the local community level is particularly important for vulnerable groups, and I would like to speak a little bit more about this here.

They may face challenges in assessing or understanding the flurry of information during the pandemic. To help our vulnerable families, our social service officers remained open to serve the needs of our citizens through the height of the pandemic.

Under the SG Cares Community Network, our local community partners, including social service agencies and the grassroots, helped to multiply outreach to ensure that vulnerable groups and families were able to receive information and the support needed.

Some 5,000 households living in rental housing, who had not previously come forward to seek support and help, were promptly given support. We expanded ComLink from the initial four pilot towns to 21 ComLink communities nationwide, so as to better serve families with children in rental housing.

The People's Association and the Silver Generation office, they swung into action quickly, leveraging on the networks that they have built over the years. They leveraged their staff and volunteers to check in regularly with seniors in need, offering support for their daily living needs and referring them to befriending services. Through their extensive networks, they helped ensure that no one was left to fend on their own.

Ms He Ting Ru expressed concerns about the rise in the incidence of family violence during the pandemic. The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and our partner agencies increased the frequency of check-ins with vulnerable clients through phones and video calls. We also stepped up home visits for cases assessed to be more urgent or high-risk, to ensure the safety of vulnerable adults and children.

Members of the public were urged to call the 24-hour National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline at 1-800-777-0000 to make a report or call the Police for emergency assistance. In October 2021, the Government accepted in principle all the Family Violence Taskforce recommendations and are implementing them progressively over the next few years.

COVID-19 also had a considerable effect on parents and caregivers and that is why the ECDA and MOE did not take the decision to close schools lightly. During full HBL, many parents had to juggle the responsibility of educating students while also taking care of their own children.

I remember doing a Zoom call with an educator, and her child was Zoom-bombing her all the time in the background. We understood this challenge, and this was why, when the situation stabilised, we opened our schools quickly but safely to resume classes in schools. Kudos to our mums and dads and educators.

Mr Gerald Giam suggested to include persons with disabilities (PwDs) in emergency response situations earlier and more extensively. This is something which we will continually look into, so that the needs of PwDs are met through active conversations with the community partners, as well as PwDs themselves.

For example, as part of the Government's active engagement process, we worked together with persons with visual impairment to improve the accessibility of new public service websites created as part of the COVID-19 response.

With feedback from the deaf and hard-of-hearing community, SG Enable connected with innovators to produce prototypes of see-through masks that allowed students to read the lips and facial cues of their teachers.

I would like to thank the community for stepping in to support PwDs who face challenges during the pandemic. COVID-19 casts a spotlight on mental well-being concerns and the general population was not spared from the isolating effects of COVID-19. Thirteen percent of the general population reported symptoms of anxiety or depression during the pandemic.

We set up the National CARE Hotline in April 2020 to provide psychological first aid. Over 78,500 calls were supported. This was only possible because of the many volunteers who stepped forward, including mental health professionals, social service agencies, public servants and other trained individuals.

The Youth Mental Well-being Network supported by MOE, MSF and MOH was also launched during this period. Over 1,600 members of the public signed up to be part of ground-up initiatives to tackle mental well-being challenges.

Project "It'll Be Alright" was one such ground-up initiative for youths by youths. It initiated a nationwide call to action for youths to contribute stories of personal resilience in the face of mental health challenges. This was supported by MOE and led to the production of an e-book resource, which continues to be used in some schools today.

In our schools, our school counsellors actively reached out and provided support to students throughout the entire pandemic. We kept schools largely open except for April 2020 and May 2021. This helped to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on social activities for our young.

We are also mindful about our teachers' well-being and will continue with efforts to manage workload and enhance administrative support. Workshops and resources on mental well-being are made available for our teachers.

We must also not forget the power of peer support. Many students stepped forward to look out for their peers as peer support leaders, a system which is in place in all schools today. Others learned how to better listen and empathise and to encourage their peers to seek help when needed.

An online poll released yesterday showed that a higher proportion of young people – 38% compared with 28% for the general population – reported a drop in their quality of life than before the pandemic. About 37% of youths in this age group also said there was a decrease in their ability to manage their mental health now compared with before the pandemic.

This emphasises the importance of continuing with our work to support the mental well-being of our youths.

The Inter-agency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-being that was established during the pandemic is working towards the development of a national strategy for mental health and well-being, and is aiming to release this by the end of the year.

We will continue to place emphasis on developing strong supportive relationships between students, their teachers and their peers and prioritise regular check-in efforts to support wellbeing in schools.

Mr Speaker, faced with the crisis of a generation, we could have broken apart as a society, degenerating into mutual recrimination or demanding that help be provided to ourselves and our loved ones first. But we did not.

Instead, we trusted one another, stayed calm and carried on. We each did our best to take care of our loved ones, continued with our work and societal responsibilities and some of us stepped up to help others. We were confident that others would play their part, do their best and look out for us as well.

We trusted that the Government would steer the country through capably, with honesty and transparency. Years of trust built between the people, private and Government sectors enabled our people sector to ramp up programmes and outreach swiftly and decisively to help families and individuals in need.

Our social services agencies (SSAs) on the frontlines, including family service centres and the many non-profit organisations supporting families, children, the elderly, PwDs and many more, overcame the numerous challenges that COVID-19 posed and embraced digitalisation to continue to provide services to their beneficiaries.

SPD, an SSA that serves PwDs, was one of many that tapped on the Invictus Fund set up by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS). The fund supported SPD to expand its e-therapy services and pilot tele-practice with caregivers so that regular speech or occupational therapy was not disrupted. In all, the Invictus Fund provided \$18 million to support over 300 social service agencies.

Corporates and the community gave generously in monetary donations and in-kind. For instance, the Majurity Trust, a philanthropic organisation, rallied the support of family foundations, philanthropists and corporate partners to launch the Singapore Strong Fund to support ground-up initiatives.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the many volunteers who rose to the occasion to demonstrate everyday acts of care and concern or who started ground-up initiatives to support the community.

Volunteers with the Partners Engaging and Empowering Rough Sleepers (PEERS) Network kept rough sleepers safe during the circuit breaker while those with the Charity Food Workgroup ensured that families in need would not go hungry.

I am heartened that many came forward to start ground-up initiatives overnight to support their fellow Singaporeans. Thank you all for embodying a culture of giving for good even when the going was tough.

I have heard in this Chamber earlier comments about how we now have the benefit of hindsight. Indeed, this reminds me of the following quote from President Roosevelt, "It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds."



When I listen and I think about mask wearing, what has been said in this Chamber about mask wearing policies, I think about the ground-up initiative, Masks Sewn With Love, which I mentioned earlier. These individuals who participated in Masks Sewn With Love, they did not wait to be told what to do.

This was the Singapore spirit at its best and brightest. Where there was no distinction of people by status, wealth, age or ability. At a time when masks were short in supply and we did not have production lines to manufacture masks, these ordinary citizens decided to stand up and be counted on. Men cut cloth so that their wives could sew. Grandmas and stay-at-home mothers rose to the occasion, dusting off old sewing machines or picking up needle and thread to sew masks to protect their loved ones and others. They had agency. Their actions mattered. They did not wait to be asked. They each did what they could.

Ordinary Singaporeans did extraordinary things together and we saw this during COVID-19. It is this spirit that prevented a health and economic crisis from becoming a social crisis.

We should take pride in how we had overcome COVID-19 as a country. The White Paper has summed up how each and every one of us played a part in the pandemic and how each and every one of us will continue to play a part in the recovery process and beyond.

It has shown us that undergirding our effective response to the pandemic was mutual trust and support, the foundations for which we can navigate our future together, come what may.

Learning from the lessons of the pandemic, we will redouble our efforts to strengthen our social compact and partnerships amongst all stakeholders in our society. We have reaffirmed the values we hold dear as a society and further anchored the foundations of our society.

As we refresh our social compact through Forward Singapore, let us tap on the strengths of individuals and families, the social capital within our communities and the expertise and resources from the public, private and people sectors. Together, we can build a more resilient, caring and inclusive Singapore in the years ahead. *[Applause.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Ng Ling Ling.

6.54 pm

**Ms Ng Ling Ling (Ang Mo Kio):** Mr Speaker, unlike SARS in 2003, which caused serious illnesses but was well contained within infected groups, or the H1N1 flu virus in 2009, which was contagious but mild, COVID-19 was both contagious and prone to severe symptoms in high-risk groups, especially our seniors. This led to a pandemic of a generation, affecting Singaporeans in an unprecedented way for almost three years.

I thank the team from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) for drawing up a review and interviews with key participants in the crisis, including our Ministers, civil servants and representatives from the public, private and people sectors to encapsulate the key events, major issues and, more importantly, the lessons to be drawn and how we can prepare Singapore for the next pandemic or crisis in this White Paper.

Relative to many other countries, we have done well in protecting both lives and livelihoods.

Singapore's vaccination rates are among the highest in the world, thanks to a high level of trust that our people continue to place in the Government – a trust that is hard-earned and never to be taken for granted, as Minister of State Sun Xueling just mentioned in her speech.

Our overall case fatality rate is one of the lowest globally. Still, we must always stay alert, nimble and adaptable to prepare for new challenges and nasty surprises.

I agree with most of the reflections in the White Paper and will like to raise two areas of focus to fortify and protect Singapore and Singaporeans when another crisis of similar magnitude hits us. They are: one, comprehensively supporting all vulnerable groups, including transient residents like migrant workers in Singapore; and two, proliferating the use of telehealth in the management of illnesses, especially chronic diseases, including mental wellness support.

Firstly, social and community support for vulnerable groups.

An impressive \$593 million was disbursed to around 480,000 unique beneficiaries across the pandemic period. They were given in the forms of Temporary Relief Fund, COVID-19 Support Grant, COVID-19 Recovery Grant - Temporary and COVID-19 Recovery Grant.

What was most uplifting to me is that over 288 non-governmental groups and ground-ups partnered the Government to support the community, especially the vulnerable.

The saying "A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and life is after all a chain" by William James, an American historian and psychologist, reminds us of the importance of looking out for the vulnerable groups in our midst, especially during crisis times.

Several Members of this House have spoken up about the clusters that emerged among the migrant worker dormitories and how transmission persisted and infection among migrants workers grew exponentially during the pandemic. This took most Singaporeans by surprise and shone a light on the living conditions of migrant workers.

I am grateful to volunteer-run groups like Welcome In My Backyard (Wimby), COVID-19 Migrant Support Coalition (CMSC) and food-related initiative WeEat for their spirited actions during the most difficult times to bring much needed relief and support to our migrant workers.

I also appreciate the swift actions taken by the Government, including improving standards of new dormitories for migrant workers and setting up a new MOM division to support migrant workers and dormitory operations. I am also very thankful to hear from the Minister for Manpower earlier on his comprehensive updates on what MOM has and will continue to do to ensure dormitory standards.

I hope that this lesson will propel the Government to conduct a systematic scan during "peace time" to scrutinise every sector where lower-cost workers, including migrant ones, are employed to ensure that their employers or agents are regulated and made responsible to provide a certain standard of living, employee welfare and resources to integrate them in the community that they are working in, including the community around their work sites or dormitories.

The next group of vulnerable individuals who suffered during the pandemic were children in families with family violence.

I read with great dismay of the jump in the number of cases reported during the pandemic. From 7 April to 6 May 2020, there were 476 Police reports filed for offences commonly associated with family violence. This was a 22% increase compared with the monthly average of about 389 of such cases before the circuit breaker, according to the Police then.

Some partners in social service agencies related to me their concerns and their constraints during those times to respond due to stay-home and safe-distancing measures. More flexibility for social workers and MSF having rights to remove children and family members suffering from family violence during times of crisis must be considered and instituted.

I am grateful to hear from the Minister of State Sun Xueling that efforts are being done by the Taskforce on Family Violence and will be progressively implemented.

Moving on to proliferating the use of telehealth, I spoke about more use and subsidy support of telehealth and digital modes that augment physical and mental health support in several of my speeches in this House. One of the recent breakthrough in the form of Chronic Disease Management Programme (CDMP) allowing the use of CHAS subsidies and MediSave for outpatient treatment via approved telehealth, like video-consultation, needs to be followed through with faster scaling and proliferation of proven telehealth protocols in the treatment of illnesses, especially chronic diseases, including mental illnesses.

As our population continues to age, mobility issues of more seniors are likely to increase, and the use of hybrid physical and remote telehealth treatment protocols will be of increasing importance. The Government should take the inflexion in adoption of telehealth during the pandemic that we used to protect patients to push on in shaping such healthcare treatment and support as a new norm. This will also address the healthcare workers shortage and over-worked problems, though it will require short-term technology capital investment and change management processes for clinicians and patients.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, I am proud of how Singapore, our people, our leaders especially those on the Multi-Ministry Task Force, our Government and many unsung heroes have pulled strengths together to not only brace through but emerge strong after a difficult three years of pandemic. My heartfelt thanks again to everyone who has contributed one way or another in the fight of the COVID-19 pandemic. My suggestions notwithstanding, Sir, I support the Motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Seah Kian Peng.

7.02 pm

**Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade):** Sir, first, let me declare my interest as Group CEO of NTUC Enterprise. Mr Speaker, Sir, it is important to remember lessons when they are fresh and I, therefore, congratulate the Government for its decision to write and to publish this White Paper, because it records our successes, our mistakes, our missteps, as well as the justifications of our key decisions.

In leadership of human affairs, there is no do-over – there is only one chance to get it right. And this is why it is so important that when we get it wrong, we make sure that it happens only once and we do it better the next time. That is not to say that we will not make mistakes but let us make new ones and not repeat the ones of history. Only in this way can Singapore progress and emerge stronger from each crisis.

That Singapore had weathered the storm is unmistakable, but the reasons we did so may be less clear.

I count at least three, the third of which is often overlooked: first, our people; second, our money; and third, sheer luck. We should not discount the role of luck, for only by acknowledging the role of luck can we keep ourselves from hubris and from underestimating the complexity, the ambiguity and the extraordinariness of future events.

The White Paper holds many useful operational lessons that I am sure will stand us in good stead in time to come. The most valuable lesson to me, however, is a reminder of the importance of the human dimension.

Here, I want to pay tribute to all essential and frontline workers – from cleaners to delivery workers to those working in healthcare, transport, education, social work, and yes, also supermarkets – many of whom had toiled for many years and mostly taken for granted by all of us. I hope also that our appreciation to this group of workers does not subside now that this pandemic is over and that we are back to DORSCON Green.

Indeed, the pandemic showed how important, how underrated, and how under-appreciated they were, and how we need an overhaul of the way we organise our world – from wages to social and economic structures, from the way we live, to the way we allocate resources. It is now a time to see that while praise and awards are good, equitable pay and respect for each other, for work, are better.

One of my proudest moments was in the way we reacted in the early days of the pandemic – how we offered free healthcare to anyone struck by COVID-19, regardless of race, nationality or means; how we, being one of the first countries to obtain the vaccine, prioritised according to needs, offering the earliest doses to the elderly and the migrant workers living in dense quarters.

I was also proud of the way we opened our hearts and our doors to the migrant workers. It was a mistake not to have anticipated the intensity of the outbreak in the dormitories – it meant that nearly half of the 300,000 workers living in dormitories had been infected by 2020. Sadly, two workers died.

At the same time, there were many, many in the community who jumped in to help. I cite one example of NUS who opened their hostels to migrant workers, housing hundreds of them within the halls of residence.

Students were briefed about the COVID-19 situation in the workers' dormitories and why they needed to share their hostels. Rather than a fear of infection and resistance to strangers living in their midst, the students worked to make the workers feel welcome. Sports teams conducted online morning personal training every day, just like our National Service times. Others held classes to teach them about financial scams. Still others recorded video messages to show their support.

The human touch was abundantly evident. When doctors working on the ground at the dormitories called for volunteer translators, students from different countries – India, China, Myanmar, Thailand – all took turns to translate these instructions. When the workers finished their stay at the hostels, they were treated to a "graduation" ceremony, where they took photos with the university mascots.

In a real way, I feel our students graduated too, and from a far higher-ranked university than NUS.

I also want to reflect on our darker moments. It was indeed confusing when we changed course and took both too much and too little risk. Our safe distancing measures – gathering in groups of two, five, eight, and then back to two – these were a reflection of the dynamic nature of the pandemic. Reality was fast-moving and so too was our response.

The key was to explain and communicate, continuously and quickly. We may not have always succeeded but the high trust that we had in each other was a key reason we managed some degree of calm and order. The people trusted that we were doing our best as a Government and the Government trusted that people were doing their best to follow fast-changing rules and guidelines. The business community also played their part and the whole Singaporean community also played their part; we all came together, and together, we reaped the returns of the trust, the faith that we had built over the years.

Indeed, during the day when DORSCON Orange was declared, when Malaysia announced their Movement Control Order and when we announced our circuit breaker, these were pivotal moments where our trust and our faith and our bonds – these were tested in full force.

Wearing my NTUC Fairprice hat at that time, and working with the Government and the media, we had to assuage genuine fears and anxieties of the general public, among many messages, that supermarkets will remain open, that stocks are available, and if they were not, they were on the way. And at the same time, seeking the understanding and support of the public to only buy what they need and not create their own stockpiles.

Despite best efforts on both sides, however, there were times of genuine confusion, not to say fear or anger, over the application of the rules to eating places and coffee shops, which caused a lot of confusion and sometimes disputes. Businesses were quite badly affected too. I know, as our NTUC FoodFare and our Kopitiam chains were also caught in this spiral.

I did raise these issues at the time, but when emotions, fear and uncertainty ran high, and in the trade-off between lives and livelihoods, one would swing on the side of conservatism and safety. We made the right call to be cautious, but we must also be aware of the costs incurred.

In a pandemic, no amount of reassurance and communications can eradicate the fear and anxiety we faced. At the same time, we need a healthy dose of agnosticism in the face of so much that we do not know – we recognise that our injunction against mask wearing was over-done. It was hubris to think we knew what was unknowable, at that time.

And here, I want to acknowledge that it was plain good luck that we were not hit by a deep and severe spread during the "no need for masks" early days, and that when COVID-19 hit us in full force later on, we already had our masks and we had our sanitisers.

However, it was not luck that allowed us to restock our supermarket shelves overnight. After the onslaught of panic buying, it was not luck that enabled the Government to inject money into our system without borrowing. It was also not luck that we got supplies of drugs, food and vaccines – for a country that imports 90% of our food, we never once went hungry.

All these were possible because of, one could say, plain and boring virtues – very Singaporean things, like long-term planning, careful husbandry of Reserves, technocratic, technical and engineering capabilities during decades of peace and prosperity, hoarded for this one-time use.

This is not just the domain of Government. There are many other partners in the community who spent their reserves too. NTUC was one among many which did our part. In 2020, the NTUC Enterprise group of social enterprises rolled out a \$50-million package to provide holistic support for Singaporeans to cope with the pandemic. In the following year, another \$20 million was committed to help the community tide over the second year of the pandemic.

These initiatives have benefited the community by providing support to frontline workers, ensuring the public's access to affordable essential goods and services, providing financial assistance to vulnerable groups and supporting small businesses that have been affected by the pandemic, and also through our foundations, providing more support to the vulnerable groups, the Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) and charities.

The work has certainly not ended because our world will never be the same.

Let me give you a boring example in logistics. During this COVID-19 period, NTUC Fairprice expanded our warehouse capabilities to support additional storage requirements. During COVID-19, we had to adapt, and we successfully set up an alternative warehouse. We did this within five days. We converted a brick-and-mortar store to an online fulfilment centre within three weeks, again to meet the surge in online orders.

By 2021, FairPrice had set up what we called a Supply Chain Ops Centre (SCope). This was to enhance our supply chain capabilities and to ensure we remain operational regardless of disruptions. More importantly, this ops centre allows us to minimise out-of-stock scenarios because it functions as an early warning system.

In fact, when the Suez Canal blockage incident happened in March 2021, Fairprice was before the international agencies reported on the news. This incident had affected a few vessels that were transporting some of the supplies and products that we had ordered. The near real-time alert had bought us precious time to execute our contingency plans, thus avoiding supply chain disruptions.

Today, we are more agile. We have further diversified our sources of supply, covering over 100 countries and we are constantly looking to strengthen our network of suppliers to avoid any over-reliance on any one source. So, yes, whilst we still carry a lot of eggs from Malaysia, we also have eggs from Australia, New Zealand as well as, certainly, from our local farms. And over this COVID-19 period, we have added Spain, Ukraine and Poland as additional sources for eggs. And just last month, we added Brunei to the list of countries supplying eggs to us.

The way we feed ourselves will not be the same. The way we live and the way we work will also be different – telemedicine, work from home, online learning and the need for insurance. But there are other things which will remain the same – resilience, unity, and a single-minded commitment to our joint future. These are enduring virtues that have always been a part of our DNA as a young country formed of hungry migrants.

I said at the start that the most important lesson in the White Paper is of the human dimension. It is a lesson of the mind and one that is difficult to record in a document, a lesson that cannot be taught but must be learnt.

We must see that our brightest moments in the whole pandemic came from the times when we recognised, and when we respected our common humanity, and that our society is one which has an equality of respect and dignity for each one of us. We must learn and we must remember this lesson, because it is one, that as Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong had said, will test us again. Sir, I support the Motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Saktiandi.

7.15 pm

**Mr Saktiandi Supaat (Bishan-Toa Payoh):** Mr Speaker, Sir, this Motion on Singapore's Response to COVID-19 and the recently released White Paper is a welcome first step to boost Singapore's capacity to weather not just the next pandemic, but other unforeseeable disruptions in future as well. It charts the broad directions that we need to head in to enhance our resilience as a small country that is susceptible to global or regional shocks.

I will focus my speech on the more general thrust of how we should enhance Singapore's resilience as a nation. I will address how we can better prepare to prevent or manage significant disruptions to our way of life in four parts – in resources, infrastructure, manpower and mindsets.

First, on resources. Early on in the pandemic, we saw how other countries implemented nationalistic and protectionist policies to restrict the export of essential medical supplies like medical-grade face masks, as demand spiked locally. Being an import-dependent economy, Singapore initially suffered difficulties in securing critical medical supplies.

Also, in early-2020, many countries, including Singapore, saw panic buying and hoarding of essential supplies amid the uncertainty and the prospect of having to be confined at home. In Singapore, we did well to keep supplies flowing and assuage Singaporeans of our sufficiency. In reviewing our stockpiling strategies, I hope the Government will make the revised comprehensive list of critical items known to the public. As Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong mentioned, I was glad to hear that there will be a fore-planning team and department that will be set up for future crises. The essential thing is whether we can determine what is the level of redundancy we need for each resource. While some of this information would concern national security, a limited disclosure to the public would reassure Singaporeans that we are disruption ready.

There will, inevitably, be an additional cost as we build buffers and diversify our supply chains. Importantly, have we calculated how much more we are willing to pay for such "insurance" as compared to buying "just enough" and from the cheapest source? Moreover, does this mean that our Government procurement guidelines need to be amended to facilitate this aim or do the existing value-for-money metrics accommodate this objective to "insure" ourselves against unknown shocks?

Finally, as we invest in boosting our local production capacity, our natural constraints mean that we will still have some reliance on foreign sources to augment our domestic solutions. Many Singaporeans may not know this, but we have Singapore-based PUB officers constantly stationed at the Johor River Waterworks in Kota Tinggi, Malaysia, to ensure the smooth supply of imported water into Singapore. So, yes, we have a group of Singaporeans who are working in Kota Tinggi on a daily basis.

While these officers commuted daily across the Causeway pre-COVID-19, many of them had to make personal sacrifices and spent up to one month per shift away from their families when the pandemic-related travel restrictions were in force. They, like many others, are the unsung heroes in our fight against COVID-19 and we are all deeply grateful, and to their families too.

Second, on infrastructure. The collaboration between our public and private sectors enabled large-scale care facilities to be mobilised and demobilised at speed during the pandemic. This helped to manage the stress on our permanent healthcare facilities as the number of cases peaked and ebbed. I look forward to hearing more concrete plans on how the Government intends to design its facilities to be multi-use and re-deployable into accommodation, medical and other critical facilities during a crisis.

However, I am also concerned about more bespoke infrastructure for which substitutes are not readily available. For example, Members may remember the publicised COVID-19 cluster outbreaks at the Jurong Fishery Port in July 2021 and Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre in September 2021. As these are key nodes for the distribution of seafood, fruits and vegetables to our supermarkets, wet markets and hawker centres, it was unsurprising that these outbreaks grew to become one of Singapore's biggest community clusters with more than 1,000 linked cases. The PPWC had to close and cease operations for three days. In Toa Payoh East, for example, at the Toa Payoh East Lorong 7 wholesale night market in my constituency, they were similarly affected and closed voluntarily for two weeks after COVID-19 cases were discovered.

Sir, I would like to commend the National Environment Agency (NEA), Singapore Food Agency (SFA) and Enterprise Singapore for responding quickly to manage the virus spread and help traders activate alternative supply arrangements. And they have done so in Toa Payoh East, too. Going forward, we may need to look at our preventive strategy to manage disruptions at such bespoke hubs and assess if there is sufficient capacity at alternate distribution ports and centres to handle contingencies that cripple a particular distribution centre.

Third, on manpower, Mr Speaker. A big plus that did not seem to be highlighted adequately in the White Paper is how we managed to effectively redeploy manpower to where it is needed. One example would be how around 3,000 Safe Distancing Ambassadors and enforcement officers were deployed and coordinated by the Ministry of Sustainability and Environment (MSE) to ensure compliance with safe management measures (SMMs) and vaccination-differentiated SMMs in public spaces.

When commercial flights were suspended during the height of the pandemic, the Public Service Division (PSD) quickly worked with the private sector to redeploy aviation workers to fill urgent manpower needs in both public healthcare institutions and public agencies. There was an added level of efficiency as the aviation staff already had the competencies to deliver basic care as Care Ambassadors.

Sir, I am glad that the White Paper has acknowledged the transferability of certain competencies across multiple jobs or roles, in suggesting that the Government will put in place a more centralised system to tag crisis-time roles and training suitable individuals ahead of time.

I have previously advocated for rationalising disparate jobs and industries in our economy and identifying overlapping or complementary skillsets or competencies. This can form the basis of our other policies, for example, offering better job matching and placements at our Community Development Councils (CDCs) and other agencies; or designing more structured training pathways under initiatives like SkillsFuture, where workers can progressively train in cross-sector skills and competencies.

Separately, has the pandemic also helped to strengthen the Singapore Core in our workforce? While it should remain Singapore's strength to remain open to the world even in trying times, the prolonged pandemic has seen expatriates and migrant workers return home to be with their families with no certainty of return. I hope MOM and relevant agencies are already looking or will be looking at the data on the trend of foreign workers and pass holders from before the pandemic up till today, to assess and mitigate our manpower vulnerabilities going forward.

Finally, on mindsets. As the White Paper noted in the lessons to be learnt from this COVID-19 episode, adaptability and flexibility will continue to be key in tackling future pandemics or crises. Mr Speaker, in Malay please.

(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] This is also an opportune time to reflect on the contributions and sacrifices that the Malay/Muslim community has made at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. From Malay/Muslim frontline workers such as doctors, nurses, social workers, delivery riders, safe distancing ambassadors and all those who worked day and night, including members of the Cabinet and Ministry staff who drafted policies, regulatory amendments and budgetary measures quickly to deal with the COVID-19 crisis at its peak, I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you.

In addition, our religious and Malay/Muslim agencies also stood out. Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Muis) and the Office of the Mufti provided clear directions in line with Islamic teachings during those tough times as we had to scale back on physical attendance to congregational prayers and other important religious practices. Provisions were specially made for vulnerable groups, reminding all of us of the need to protect the well-being of our community while performing our religious duties. The use of digital technology is a good measure implemented for prayer sessions and congregational prayer slots in mosques which was done quickly and was well-coordinated.

I am also touched and proud of the community's ability to rally together, such as under SGTeguhBersatu. The task force, with the support of our social workers and religious teachers, came up with a psycho-social resilience framework to nurture a new norm of a resilient self, family and community, and set up a Care Network and interactive e-forum to help everyone affected cope with the disruptions to their daily lives. MENDAKI also helped our students in need to procure digital devices for online learning, while Muis, the mosques and Islamic education centres and providers helped equip our asatizah with the skills to provide religious content online.

I also would like to take this opportunity to thank the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SMCCI) for their forthcoming support to companies, small businesses and families during the pandemic. They demonstrated how a true "gotong-royong" spirit can drive resilience in the community.

*(In English):* Mr Speaker, in English. I am sure many of us can agree that one positive from the past three years is the acceleration in our digitalisation journey. Not only has GovTech rolled out nationwide, data-driven tech solutions like SafeEntry and TraceTogether as part of our pandemic management measures, ordinary Singaporeans have also gotten comfortable with operating in the digital space.

There are a fair number of seniors in my constituency in Toa Payoh East and I am extremely heartened when they share that they are now able to talk to their grandchildren more often over video calls or watch performances online over Zoom and I think, more importantly, also be able to make bill payments to agencies in the comfort of their own homes.

More of our heartland merchants and hawkers are also hooked up onto digital payment solutions and electronic delivery platforms which were hastened during the COVID-19 period. This is all, in part, down to the efforts of NEA and SFA to reach out to stallholders during the pandemic. These intensive outreach efforts had also helped to achieve a 99.9% vaccination rate across hawker centres, wet markets and coffee shops and to implement the rostered routine testing regime to test thousands of hawkers and workers, which allowed our hawker centres, wet markets and coffee shops, to maintain operations and serve the local communities. This rostered routine testing at the covered plaza in Toa Payoh East and Lorong 8 Toa Payoh has played a part to reassure safety to residents and hawker patrons in those markets. On behalf of the residents and hawkers at Toa Payoh East constituency, I really do commend the swift efforts by the agencies which minimised COVID-19-driven disruptions for all.

So, even as we emerge from the pandemic and transit back into more in-person activities and interactions, I hope the Government and communities alike will continue to sustain the momentum behind our digitalisation efforts post-COVID-19.

Mr Speaker, Sir, as a Deloitte Insights report points out, following COVID-19, governments should strive to transform their operations not only in healthcare but in areas like service delivery, workforce regulation and procurement. I am proud that Singapore is in the lead, taking stock of what they have done well and what can be improved, from its response to this crisis of a generation. However, we cannot stop at these conclusions. With the support of the public, private and people sectors, I have faith that we will act specifically to make us more resilient and prepared for the next crisis, whenever it hits in whatever form. Sir, I support the Motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Deputy Speaker, Ms Jessica Tan.

7.28 pm

**Ms Jessica Tan Soon Neo (East Coast):** Mr Speaker, as I was reading the White Paper, the experience and emotions were surreal. As I looked back, I cannot help but remember my interactions and engagements with residents as they reached out for assistance during the pandemic, which I think I should share some of it.

Much has happened over the last three years and what has made it possible for us to be where we are today are the close partnership and trust amongst all stakeholders – Government, agencies, businesses, private and people sectors and, most importantly, Singaporeans and those living in Singapore and interacting with Singaporeans. We must thank our frontline workers and everyone who contributed, many who worked hard behind the scenes, unknown and unseen, and probably will never be known by many of us, and the many sacrifices that were made in this journey.

While we debate today on what went right or wrong, let us not miss some key points made in the White Paper which I think are worth repeating. I quote, "On key events and major issues, the lessons to be drawn are quite clear. We need to learn them well and make full use of our experience to prepare Singapore for the next pandemic."

Secondly, what we experienced with COVID-19 was different from SARS and we can expect that the next pandemic will be different from COVID-19. Hence, we must be prepared for surprises and challenges. While "we must learn from the past, there will be a need to adapt and be flexible".

Finally, we should use the lessons captured to help those dealing with the next pandemic "to avoid some of the errors we made and improve on what we have done right this time, in order to protect the lives and livelihoods of Singaporeans." And I think, it is important to remember, the purpose of why we are doing this – it is about lives and livelihoods.

The White Paper is comprehensive. The Prime Minister Office (PMO) team and Mr Peter Ho who put it together have given a good account of our journey through the pandemic, covered the major areas and issues and lessons learnt. I will not be able to do justice to the details in the White Paper in such a short speech and I am not intending to.

My speech today will focus on my experience and engagements with residents during the height of the pandemic, the period termed in the White Paper as the "Rocky Transition" and the period of "Learning to live with COVID-19", the challenges they faced, my learnings and thoughts on what we could do, in terms of engagement and support, to better prepare for the next pandemic.

In all stages of the pandemic, we must acknowledge that in order to protect lives and livelihoods, it required adapting as the situation changed. This naturally made communication challenging and with many parties involved, there were many moving parts to deal with, and things did get complex and at times confusing for individuals and their families.

On balance, as outlined in the White Paper, we maintained effective, timely and accurate communication. With channels like the Multi-Ministry Task Force (MTF) press conferences, a dedicated Gov.sg WhatsApp channel, timely sharing of information, both good and bad, as well as the outlining of plans, these played a major role in maintaining public trust. The efforts to ensure the countering of misinformation and scams and corrective actions like Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) prevented the spread of falsehoods and panic amongst our people.

We must give credit that public communications was well-managed overall. But as with all things, there were challenges related to the access of information or clarity, and that affected individual situations which did have ramifications on their movement, access to services and safety. Communications was not easy given that there was constant change and need for adaptation.

To illustrate the point, let me give some examples – this is not exhaustive – of appeals for help that I received from residents. These examples will give a sense of the challenges faced with the last mile of communication.

Example one, I had a resident who needed help with test results and status as well as update of TraceTogether App status. She made numerous attempts to call the MOH hotline to seek clarity but was unsuccessful over the course of more than a week. Even when she did get her call answered the persons who handled her call were unable to advise her or they gave her conflicting information. Why she needed the information was because she was required to provide her employer with the information as it was more than nine days that she had been away from work.

Example two, this example related to the vaccination status on the TraceTogether App. For this resident, after receiving the second vaccination, his vaccination status was not updated. Even after waiting for two weeks after the second vaccination and sending the query form as directed by the MOH website and calling the hotline, he was informed that nothing could be done and that the matter was being escalated. When the resident reached out to me, it was already a month. With vaccination-differentiated safe management measures (VDS), he was unable to gain access to most places as his TraceTogether App indicated that his "vaccination was in progress".

These examples related to vaccination and the TraceTogether app, but there were similar situations because of the changes with regards to quarantine order and isolation measures or safe management measures (SMMs) or border measures.

In the spirit of learning from our experience and what concrete actions that we can take to better prepare for future pandemics and help us deal with other national crisis, I would like to make some recommendations.

I agree with Lesson 07 of the White Paper which outlines the importance of continuing to deliver transparent and clear public communications to build trust and ensure effective response in a crisis. From the examples that I shared, there is also a need for channels of effective two-way communications and engagement for support and help when individual situations required it. The White Paper rightly outlined that we should have directed more resources to frontline crisis communication, especially at case management and the need for tight information flow between the various stakeholders. I agree and I recommend that we should also consider bringing this closer to the community and build structures and capability in "peace time" to achieve this.

What do I mean by this? While directing more resources is required, from past experience, we have seen that even with more resources directed, it is not always possible or sustainable to resource support for peak loads. As the Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong had said in his speech, "realistically we can plan or invest but we cannot plan for every situation."

I am proposing that one, we identify, designate and setup in "peacetime" trusted nodes of frontline crisis communication by areas or by constituencies, closer to the community.

Two, establish standard operating procedures (SOP) of communication with residents and channels of engagement and points of contacts, for example, the number to call, email addresses and WhatsApp.

Three, establish SOPs for two-way communication and appropriate engagement between the nodes and agencies including the latest information updates and escalation handling. This will enable not just communication of information to the public but also facilitate the resolution of issues faced by individuals and channels of feedback for changing needs within the community to the agencies.

Just like with business continuity plans, there is a need to conduct regular exercises to activate these nodes of frontline crisis communications and involvement of all stakeholders including the community, in "testing" the communication flows among stakeholders and for familiarisation. Just to be clear, what I mean by "community" is including residents and citizens, so that they get familiar with the



nodes of communication.

While my recommendations are not novel and parts of this already exists, what I am proposing is a deliberate move to forward plan, as Deputy Prime Minister Wong has said earlier, and put in place a network and system for frontline communications and crisis communication closer to the community that is regularly exercised and tested, so that we can activate them during a pandemic or any other national crisis.

Mr Speaker, the three years of dealing with COVID-19 demanded a lot from our people, organisations and Government. It took our resilience as one people, public and private sectors, civil society and strong leadership to protect lives and livelihoods that brought us to this new normal. I am confident that as One People and with our learnings from our COVID-19 journey, we will be able to work together to better prepare ourselves for the next pandemic and future crisis. Mr Speaker, I support the Motion.

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

7.39 pm

**Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Ang Mo Kio):** Mr Speaker, Sir, Singapore has been fortunate in having the resources to cope with most of the extensive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I agree with the recommendations in the White Paper, which takes into account different perspectives and interests, and seek to balance the needs of different segments of our community.

I join my Parliamentary colleagues in thanking everyone who has contributed to combat the disease for the past three years. Our heroes and heroines include healthcare professionals, frontline workers, safe distancing ambassadors, staff at our checkpoints including our airport, transport workers, volunteers and many more, and not forgetting residents from Fernvale, in my constituency. They have sacrificed and risked their own safety to ensure that our lives can continue as normally as possible under extraordinarily difficult conditions.

Even as we learn about the disease and have been preparing to boost our defence against it in the last three years, its variants have been changing, some of which evade the measures we have in place to detect them, such as the early temperature surveillance. As the White Paper has highlighted, Singapore needs to continue to boost its science and technology capabilities to deal with future pandemic detection, management and response. We must continue to have the strategic committee and task force to carry out regular exercises and drills as the next pandemic could be much worse and fatal.

We need to maintain our production capability and capacity for essential goods, such as masks and test kits as well as vaccines.

In the meantime, Singaporeans and residents need to keep up the habit of best practices in our daily lives, such as putting on masks if unwell, using serving utensils to take food from common shared dishes, maintaining a safe distance from others wherever possible in public spaces and other hygienic practices.

We also now have the chance to plan better housing infrastructure to prepare for potential pandemics. The home self-quarantine is certainly a good approach. However, large families with limited rooms have difficulties. Can the Housing and Development Board (HDB) look into how we can improve on our housing designs? The Government also needs to study and prepare community quarantine facilities.

Young families with children who fall sick one after another struggle as they do not have enough annual leave to look after them. Can the Government assist and support them? With that, thank you.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Shawn Huang.

7.43 pm

**Mr Shawn Huang Wei Zhong (Jurong):** Mr Speaker, I would like to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to the committee for their tireless efforts in putting together this report. The report provides valuable insights into the challenges we faced during the pandemic, the measures taken, and the lessons learnt.

Operating in a dynamic environment with evolving knowledge and understanding of the virus is challenging. The pandemic has been an unprecedented global crisis. It has impacted all our lives, from healthcare to the economy, and tested our social cohesion, and Singapore's resilience and agility as a nation. It emphasised the need for cooperation and partnerships between the Government, businesses, and individuals. We have done remarkably well in our response to the pandemic.

In the healthcare domain, there were four key issues: (1) continued access to healthcare; (2) resources to ensure the survival of Singaporeans stricken with COVID-19; (3) testing capabilities; and (4) vaccinations. To do this, we needed a trained workforce, space, equipment and essential medical supplies such as vaccines.

And to mention that Singapore was among the first to secure and administer vaccinations to protect our citizens. I would like to applaud the planning group for vaccines and therapeutics for being able to pick out two of 35 other potential candidates during the early stages of vaccine trials that enabled us to have early access. We may not be as fortunate in the future.

Singapore was able to build up COVID-19 testing capabilities. For this to occur, it required PCR testing kits, swab kits, PCR machines, trained personnels and well-coordinated logistics capability. Without one of these, large-scale testing would not have been possible.



Scaling up COVID-19 testing was nearly insurmountable, given the backdrop of scarce resources and few trained personnel. Despite all the challenges, Singapore was able to build up a testing capacity of up to 60,000 tests a day.

In light of this, in preparation for future pandemics, how could we build up capabilities within Singapore to develop and manufacture vaccines here? Do we have sufficient capacity or ability to re-tool and manufacture these testing capabilities locally?

On access to food, water and other essentials, throughout the pandemic, Singaporeans had uninterrupted access to food, water and essential items. However, we cannot take this for granted and assume that the global supply chain would remain intact, with ports, ships, airports and air cargo operating normally.

Our continued access to essentials was possible because Singapore's robust supply chain management system could quickly adapt to the pandemic's changing circumstances. In addition, the Government worked closely with local businesses and international partners to establish safe corridors for transit.

The litmus test was when Singaporeans were able to walk into heartland markets, NTUC, Sheng Siong or Cold Storage, and all the shelves were stocked. I would like to thank those silent heroes at the frontlines of procurement, those unsung heroes on the ground who secured those essential supplies and their safe passage to Singapore.

In the future, circumstances and scenarios may restrict or disrupt our accessibility to essential resources. How can we better on-shore or near-shore resources to buffer our resilience further? Can the Singaporeans play an active role in building buffers within households? If so, what is this list of resources, items and capabilities that citizens can help to stockpile and maintain?

Every National Day, we should allocate time to have a nationwide exercise. Every citizen, community, private and public sector can participate in an emergency exercise – a time when we review and refresh procedures, trial our national emergency capabilities and examine our own household resilience through education and active participation.

On safeguarding our industries and livelihoods, one key aspect of safeguarding local industries was Singapore's agility in locally re-tooling and building COVID-19 capabilities. Companies such as Razer Technologies quickly built up manufacturing capabilities to produce masks. Hope Technik designed and retrofitted COVID-19 buses with high-flow HVAC systems to transport patients. Mirxes developed COVID-19 testing kits and Singapore Airlines redeployed its pilots and cabin crew to provide essential services such as contact tracing and patient care.

Numerous SMEs and business owners responded to the call of duty. Without hesitation, they invested their monies to secure scarce resources and manufacturing equipment and quickly onshored those capabilities for Singapore, producing masks, testing kits, PCR machines, and many more. I want to take this opportunity to thank the SME business owners for your service and personal sacrifice.

On safeguarding our heartlands and community. Jurong Spring has one of the busiest markets. I have personally observed how COVID-19 affected hawkers and stall owners. I must share that the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment (MSE) played a critical role in coordinating and implementing safe management measures (SMMs) and vaccination-differentiated safe management measures (VDS) in public spaces. At the height of the pandemic, over 3,000 Safe Distancing Ambassadors and Enforcement Officers were deployed daily at public areas such as malls, parks, hawker centres, and coffee shops to ensure compliance with SMMs and VDS. In addition, there are over 114 hawker centres and wet markets and over 1,200 coffee shops. This is no mean feat.

Overall, in Jurong Spring, there was zero COVID-19 deaths within the market and hawker centres, and all the hawker centres and market stalls remain open till today. No one went out of business. This was because MSE officers had a close working relationship with the hawker and market stall holders. There was deep trust in their working relationship. The officers were understanding, pragmatic and agile in their execution to ensure that operations were conducted safely, but yet nuanced with commercial and economic practicalities when possible.

This strong working relationship was further validated when collectively together with the local community, NEA and SFA conducted intensive outreach efforts and achieved a 99.9% vaccination rate among stallholders rapidly.

Between July 2021 and February 2022, NEA and SFA also worked with the Health Promotion Board (HPB) to implement the Rostered Routine Testing (RRT) regime, which regularly tested around 24,000 hawkers and stakeholders at markets and hawker centres, as well as some 39,000 workers in food courts and coffee shops. One of these RRT centres were actually just behind the Block 505 market in Jurong Spring. These efforts actually helped to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within the community and safeguard the health of stallholders and patrons. Operations in local and regional testing centres were strategically located and professionally operated.

On behalf of my hawkers and stall holders, I would like to thank all MSE, NEA and SFA staff who have been very hard at work on the ground, with much personal sacrifice to ensure the continued safe operations of our hawker and market centres.

To enhance preparedness in our community areas, could we include pandemic scenarios in the future planning of our hawker and market centres?

Our heartland shops were also deeply affected by COVID-19 but the impact was quickly mitigated with the swift and professional response by the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI). MCI played a crucial role in supporting the digitalisation of heartland shops in Singapore during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was in response to the need to enable heartland shops to operate remotely and

maintain their businesses during the pandemic.

I remembered how useful it was to the hawkers when MCI launched the Hawkers Go Digital programme in June 2020. It quickly enabled my hawkers and heartland businesses to digitalise their operations overnight and adopt ecommerce capabilities.

My hawkers were very supportive of the programme and were provided end-to-end support with funding and education. As a result, numerous heartland businesses were able to adopt digital solutions such as epayments, online ordering platforms, and delivery services. All these would not have been possible or accessible to them.

After digitalisation, hawkers needed a platform to sell. Once again, MCI stepped in to assist. They worked with industry partners to develop digital tools and platforms that supported heartland businesses and brought their products and services to the market. For example, MCI collaborated with the food platform Grab to launch GrabFood Hawker Picks. This service gave customers a curated list of hawker stalls for delivery and takeaway.

Our seniors were also greatly affected. Many of them never had a smartphone in their lives. So, yet again, MCI worked hard to increase digital adoption among seniors and vulnerable groups during the pandemic. It launched the Digital Ambassadors Programme, which recruited and trained volunteers to help seniors. It has benefited my residents a great deal. As a result, today, we have a better and well-connected senior population than ever before. Most of them are able to use Zoom, WhatsApp, TikTok and Facebook as well, to connect and progress and find new friends and extend their network.

There is much to be appreciative of. Many of our lives here were safeguarded by the collective actions of frontline staff, unsung heroes from the public and private sector, community volunteers and caring neighbours. It was not a perfect outcome, but there was every intent to ensure we achieve the best possible outcome and for Singapore to survive.

Lives and livelihoods are what we are accountable for, and that is what matters most. We have done well. There is still much to learn and prepare for the future. The work of building for tomorrow continues. Mr Speaker, I support the Motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Sharael Taha.

7.55 pm

**Mr Sharael Taha (Pasir Ris-Punggol):** Mr Speaker, in the past three years, we have battled for lives and livelihoods due to the pandemic. The scale of this pandemic should not be forgotten.

Over 6.6 million lives were lost globally, including 1,331 in Singapore. The global economy took a severe hit. Our country's economy contracted by 4.4% and suffered its worst recession since Independence. Several industries such as aviation, hospitality and the aerospace industry were brought to a literal standstill, threatening people's livelihoods.

In 2019, 68.3 million passengers passed through Changi Airport. At the height of the pandemic, passenger traffic fell to its lowest levels ever, barely reaching 0.5% of 2019. These numbers paint a stark picture.

The impact of COVID-19 was unprecedented in many ways. Streets, schools and offices were empty during the circuit breaker. People were separated from their loved ones during festivities such as Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Puasa, Deepavali and Christmas. Even places of worship were empty as we all took the collective responsibility to stop the spread of this pandemic. It was indeed the crisis of our generation.

The crisis tested our values as a society. It laid bare what we would be willing to do to support one another. Now that the pandemic has passed, it is an opportune moment to reflect on how we perform as a society and what values will we like to shape the future of our society. Three critical values that emerged during the pandemic were trust, care for each other and the resilience of society.

Firstly, trust was essential during the pandemic, whether in each other or in the authorities and various agencies. Compliance with Safe Management Measures (SMMs) and guidelines was essential, and it became everyone's responsibility to practice basic hygiene for the greater good. Additionally, when the guidelines changed during the pandemic, such as group size, distancing and mask wearing, we trusted the view of experts and adapted quickly. At work, new requirements were implemented due to the pandemic. Staff had to be split into two teams to minimise contact between employees. In factories, even during breaks, workers had to be separated from one another. Additionally, masks had to be worn by those in high-risk jobs, such as those for our delivery workers.

In many other countries, even basic needs, such as the wearing of masks, became highly contentious and heavily politicised issues. Thankfully, this was not the case here. We trusted the advice of experts and implemented necessary measures without delay. By doing so, we were able to move forward without losing valuable time and energy on unnecessary debates.

Secondly, caring for each other was crucial during the pandemic, where we witnessed an unprecedented outpouring of care for one another. The pandemic has brought to light the sacrifices that workers make to support society. Among them are healthcare workers who continued to serve tirelessly even during the early days when little was understood about the virus. As the number of cases increased, healthcare workers put in longer hours to ensure our healthcare facilities were not going to get overwhelmed.

In addition to healthcare workers, our essential workers, driven by a sense of responsibility, have also made numerous sacrifices to continue serving society despite their own reservations and even those of their families. Workers in industries such as transportation, platform workers, aerospace and ports, and water and electricity industries, have played a crucial role in keeping our infrastructure running amid these challenging times.

Besides the sacrifices of our workers, care for one another also meant helping those in need of financial support due to the financial challenges brought about by COVID-19.

The Government's financial support for businesses, workers and individuals was unprecedented. The Jobs Support Scheme (JSS), for example, helped businesses affected by the economic slowdown by paying for their workers' salaries, saving an estimated 165,000 jobs and reducing the unemployment rate. As someone from the aerospace industry, I personally witnessed how the JSS assisted companies to retain workers and allowed companies to use the downtime to reskill our workers.

Individuals who lost their jobs or are self-employed also received support such as through the COVID-19 Support Grant and Self-Employed Person Income Relief, which provided up to \$9,000 to support taxi drivers and platform hire workers and their families through the difficult times.

The SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package also helped redeploy manpower to high-demand areas. For example, I remember how, with the facilitation by MOM and Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) staff, aerospace workers were reskilled and redeployed to the busy electronics industry.

To help deliver this support, grassroots and union leaders like Ms Jobie Lee from Pasir Ris went online to raise awareness for these support measures.

During the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in Pasir Ris, it was the community that stepped up to provide sustenance to those in need. Grassroots volunteers such as Mdm Uma, Mr Raymond Phua, Mr Rajeev and Mr Charlie Cheong, all volunteers from Pasir Ris East, were among the first to offer food packs and rations to families who were quarantined at home. The community's efforts evolved into the Pasir Ris East Care Store, which continues to provide monthly assistance to needy residents.

Additionally, SGUnited Buka Puasa delivered over 300,000 food rations to residents to break their Ramadan fast. Engineering Good provided laptops to children who had no access, so that these children could continue with remote learning. Together with the Government support, the unity and generosity of the community played a crucial role in providing sustenance during the pandemic.

Beyond providing physical support, the community also prioritised mental health and digital connectivity during the pandemic. Volunteers and staff from the Silver Generation Office and Active Ageing Centres visited seniors who felt isolated to check on their well-being and to allay their fears about vaccination. Digital ambassadors were deployed to assist seniors in learning how to use technology such as Zoom, digital payments and WhatsApp to stay connected with loved ones.

Proactive steps were taken to ensure that residents had the necessary mental and emotional support during the pandemic.

Thirdly, our resilience as a society was integral in our ability to overcome the pandemic.

Unsurprisingly, our journey through COVID-19 was far from smooth. At times, we had to re-evaluate SMMs just as they were loosened, such as when we combated the Delta and Omicron variants. Often, it felt as if we were forced to backpedal even as we thought we had forged ahead.

We moved between the circuit breaker, Phase 2, Phase 2 (Heightened Alert) and the Stabilisation Phase. This required resilience from our society to stay the course.

At times, we had to pivot to meet and overcome these new challenges. This was exemplified by various industries during the pandemic such as the aerospace industry, where airlines converted their aircraft to carry more cargo and airline workers moved to man vaccination centres or across different industries while upskilling and retraining themselves.

The entire education sector had to adapt to home-based learning. Even religious practices had to make significant changes, such as suspending prayers and booking for prayers at mosques.

These examples show the value of resilience and perseverance and how it had helped us to adapt to changing circumstances. Mr Speaker, in Malay, please.

(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#).] Mr Speaker, we have witnessed how the transmission of COVID-19 has drastically changed Singapore's environment. From the circuit breaker to Phase Three (Heightened Alert), to Phase Two and back to the Stabilisation Phase, we had to carefully shift these stages to ensure public safety is maintained and Singapore's healthcare system is not overburdened.

Despite being faced with a challenging and uncertain situation, I was proud to see our community display resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the best memories that I recall fondly was when our community joined hands to support healthcare workers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. From giving words of encouragement to driving them home from the hospital for free, the COVID-19 crisis has shown our ability to come together and help each other in critical times.

Our Malay/Muslim community also exhibited commendable qualities during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Many cooperated with various parties to help the needy in this challenging environment. For example, the SGBukaPuasa initiative has distributed more than 300,000 food rations to needy residents throughout the month of Ramadan.

Spiritually, we did not let the COVID-19 crisis hamper our ability to perform religious obligations. In fact, we used this opportunity to look for innovative solutions such as performing congregational prayers under SMMs or implementing online classes for madrasah education and Quran reading. We also understood that religious practices can be adapted to safeguard the well-being of the general public.

Finally, our patience and persistence have paid off and allowed us to emerge safely from this pandemic. While this achievement is certainly worth celebrating, we must also look to the future and prepare ourselves for the next pandemic. As the Malay proverb goes, "Prepare an umbrella before it rains" – we should also learn what works and what can be improved so that we are better prepared to overcome the next pandemic. I am confident that with Singaporeans' ability to rally together, we will be able to overcome any challenges that may come our way.

(In English): Mr Speaker, at this juncture, I would like to express our heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to everyone in Singapore who had contributed and sacrificed in one way or another for the common good of all. Truly, it is only with each and everyone's effort and commitment to the cause were we able to pull through this crisis which, at times, seemed almost insurmountable.

The paper highlights seven key lessons that we can learn from our experience through the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is an eighth lesson that is equally important and also mentioned by fellow Member Mr Seah Kian Peng – a lesson that is hard to pen down, that cannot be taught in textbooks but only learnt.

It is the need to anchor, strengthen and build upon the values of our society.

While it is essential to work on infrastructure, supply chain and policies to make us more resilient, these efforts will be futile if we do not stay united as a society and exhibit the values that have made us stronger during this challenging period.

It is critical to recognise that the next pandemic is not a question of "if" but "when" it will happen and Disease X may be even more dangerous than COVID-19.

Therefore, we must use the same values to guide us not only through the next pandemic but also through other challenges in our volatile and uncertain world. These values will help us to transform our economy and ensure inclusive growth, providing equal opportunities for everyone.

It is too easy to forget these values of our society. Left to chance and on its own, it may deteriorate with time. When the next pandemic comes, we may not be able to rally together as a society.

COVID-19 is often described as the crisis of our generation. However, given the volatility of the world today, it may not be the only crisis for our generation.

While we reflect on our policies and actions during COVID-19 and learn and improve for the next pandemic, beyond policies and actions, it is also through anchoring, strengthening and building upon the values of our society that we have shown during the pandemic, trust, care for one another, understanding towards each other, resilience, grit, agility and perseverance that will prepare our society for the next pandemic ahead.

Mr Speaker, I support the Motion and once again would like to express our deepest gratitude to all in Singapore for contributing to our nation's fight against COVID-19. Majulah Singapura.

**Mr Speaker:** Leader.

## ADJOURNMENT OF DEBATE

8.10 pm

**The Leader of the House (Ms Indranee Rajah):** Mr Speaker, I beg to move that, "That the debate be now adjourned."

Resolved, "That the debate be now adjourned." – [Ms Indranee Rajah].

**Mr Speaker:** Resumption of debate, what day?

**Ms Indranee Rajah:** Tuesday, 21 March 2023, Sir.

**Mr Speaker:** So be it. Leader.

## ADJOURNMENT MOTION

**The Leader of the House (Ms Indranee Rajah):** Mr Speaker, Sir, I beg to move, "That Parliament do now adjourn."

Question proposed.

8.11 pm

**Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon):** Sir, I have spoken up many times for a green Singapore. Last year, I wore green in this House during our debate on sustainability and the environment, and I have literally gone green by painting my face and my hands completely green to show how serious Nee Soon is in cutting our carbon emissions.

Do not worry, Sir, I promise I will not be painting my face or hands during this speech.

I am heartened to see that Singapore has become greener in all aspects of life. We now have the Singapore Green Plan 2030, the Singapore Green Building Masterplan, the Maritime Singapore Green Initiative, Singapore Green Bond Framework and the Singapore Green Finance Centre.

I thank the Government for listening to and partnering with civil society and businesses to take bold action to green Singapore.

As we keep getting greener, let us also not forget the other important colour – blue.

Today, Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin and I will be speaking up for our blue nature spaces. I will be calling for greater protection for our marine spaces and Ms Samdin will be focusing on one of our other important blue spaces – the Southern Islands.

Let me start by talking about why our marine ecosystems are important.

The first reason is biodiversity. We have a rich marine ecosystem of mangroves, mudflats, coral reefs, intertidal zones and seagrass meadows. We are home to 25% of the world's coral species, 55% of mangrove plants in Asia and 52% of seagrass species in the Indo-Pacific. These numbers may continue to increase as we discover and rediscover more species.

The Neptune's Cup Sponge, thought to be globally extinct, was rediscovered near St John's Island in 2011. Just last year, we discovered three new species of moss animals in the Sisters' Islands Marine Park.

I am glad that the Government is joining the world in protecting this rich biodiversity.

At last year's United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15), the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework was adopted to conserve 30% of the world's land, coastal areas and oceans by 2030. Singapore has committed to contribute to these global targets and I am glad that, once again, Singapore is playing a role as a responsible international party.

The second reason our marine ecosystems are important is climate change. Marine ecosystems trap carbon and keep it from worsening climate change. How much carbon?

Looking at just our mangroves, a 2015 study found that they contain as much carbon as the annual emission of 620,000 people. Mangroves also help in adaptation efforts against sea level rise and coral reefs reduce wave energy. Such nature-based solutions against climate change can provide over one-third of the mitigation needed to achieve net-zero by 2050. They need to be part of our roadmap to net zero.

To help these marine ecosystems to be our swords and shields against climate change, we should protect them. How can we further protect our marine spaces? I have three proposals to learn more, protect more and restore what we have lost.

These are not my ideas but what our young researchers and activists, Sam Shu Qin, Inez Alsagoff and Samantha Thian are calling for. Many of our marine advocates are up in the gallery. This is their Adjournment Motion.

The first proposal is to learn more about our marine spaces. We have many passionate scientists who are studying our marine spaces. One such scientist is Sam. She is a coral scientist who has been actively studying our coral reefs.

Scientists like Sam are working hard to study our marine spaces. However, there remain gaps in our knowledge and they need the Government's support to continue and intensify their work. Our last marine biodiversity survey was in 2015. The last edition of the Singapore Red Data Book List on species in Singapore was in 2008. Our database of knowledge is due for an update.

I hope that the Government can provide support to and work with researchers to update and plug gaps in our existing knowledge on our marine ecosystems.

Knowledge can be translated into action. In addition to her research work, Sam co-founded “Our Singapore Reefs”, which connects marine enthusiasts through diving and raises awareness on marine biodiversity through outreach programmes. She tells me, “I envision a future where we can all work hand in hand to create spaces where wildlife can co-exist with humans. Together with our research, conservation and community initiatives, we can better safeguard our native biodiversity and keep our ecosystems healthy with more legislation, funding support and long-term partnership from the Government.”

The second proposal is that as we learn more about our marine spaces, we also take steps to protect these spaces. We should designate more marine areas as nature reserves or marine parks.

Nature spaces that are designated as nature reserves, national parks or public parks enjoy protection under the Parks and Trees Act. Nature reserves and national parks get the most protection. Any changes to their boundaries can only be amended after debate in Parliament. But public parks like marine parks do not enjoy the same level of protection. Their boundaries can be redrawn without the

scrutiny of Parliament.

This is not just a hypothetical possibility. In 2001, the Government had already finalised plans to reclaim the Chek Jawa wetlands. This unique habitat – home to mudskippers, dugongs, herons and otters – was on the verge of being destroyed. But these plans were suspended only after activists commissioned a biodiversity survey, wrote their own report and submitted a petition to the Government. It was a shining day for activism. But we should not protect our marine spaces only when ordinary people take extraordinary action. These areas deserve statutory protection.

Which areas should we protect? As our first marine park, the Sisters' Islands Marine Park should receive more protection by elevating it to a nature reserve. The waters around the islands of Pulau Ubin, Pulau Semakau, Pulau Hantu, Pulau Jong, Pulau Biola, Pulau Satumu, St John's Island, Kusu Island and Lazarus Island are all rich in biodiversity and have great potential as marine parks. I hope we can designate these areas as marine parks first before subsequently considering them to be nature reserves.

These waters are familiar to Inez, who is an avid diver and a nature guide. She shared this with me: "As a frequent diver, I have had the opportunity to conduct research with NUS and explore Singapore's Southern Islands. I have witnessed first-hand the remarkable biodiversity present in our waters, including sightings of blacktip reef sharks, blue-spotted fantail rays, large groupers and vibrant coral ecosystems. I strongly believe that we need to take action to protect our marine spaces and ensure their conservation for future generations."

The third proposal is that we go beyond protecting what we have to restoring what we have lost. Our community of activists is working hard on the ground to protect our marine spaces. Samantha Thian, who founded Seastainable, is one such activist.

Seastainable is a social enterprise supporting marine conservation in the region. On seeing the amount of trash and pollution on our beaches, Samantha started a Telegram group to organise beach clean-ups, gathering hundreds of volunteers. This has now grown to thousands of clean-ups.

While our local community works hard to protect our beaches, I hope the Government can match their efforts a little further from the beach.

We can start by restoring our degraded seagrass meadows. Currently, the Tropical Marine Science Institute is studying the restoration of marine habitats such as seagrass meadows. While seagrass may not receive as much attention as coral reefs, they are crucial as carbon sinks, home to rich biodiversity, improve water quality and protect our coast.

Seagrasses are 35 times faster than tropical rainforests in capturing carbon. They are also nurseries to fishes and feed marine creatures such as parrotfishes, turtles and dugongs. Despite their importance, we have lost 1.6 square kilometres or about half of our seagrasses since the 1960s.

It is critical that we not just protect but restore our degraded seagrass meadows. The largest meadows today are found at Chek Jawa, Pulau Semakau and Cyrene Reef. There are also substantial meadows in the waters of Pulau Pawai, Labrador Beach, Pasir Ris Beach, Changi Beach and Pulau Sekudu. I hope the Government can support efforts to restore seagrass meadows in these areas.

Lastly, Sir, activists are also asking for specific updates on the proposed recommendations in the SG Blue Plan 2018 which they called "a labour of love from civil society". Activists had proposed comprehensive recommendations to maintain and conserve our local marine environment.

To conclude, Sir, I hope that we can respond to the calls of our young advocates to know our marine ecosystems better, protect what we currently have and restore what we have lost, especially our seagrass meadows.

These proposals level the playing field for nature when it comes to development decisions and give our wildlife in our waters a chance at survival. In doing so, we also increase humankind's chances of survival.

Sir, I was there at Chek Jawa as a young activist and student more than two decades ago. I saw the amazing biodiversity we were about to destroy at Chek Jawa and it was painful to see what we were going to lose. I also saw first-hand the tremendous dedication by the researchers, activists and thousands of people, members of the public who stepped forward to speak up and fight for the protection of Chek Jawa. And I also saw how the Government responded positively, reversed our decision and protected Chek Jawa instead.

I hope we continue to support our researchers and activists, continue to protect our marine spaces and continue to save our nature areas.

Let me end with a quote, as always, from Sylvia A Earle, the former chief scientist of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration: "The ocean matters. If the sea is sick, we'll feel it. If it dies, we die. Our future and the state of the ocean are one."

**Mr Speaker:** Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin.

8.20 pm

**Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin (Ang Mo Kio):** Sir, I join my colleague, the hon Member Mr Louis Ng in this Adjournment Motion, and thank you for the opportunity to speak.

I would like to zoom into a specific area, namely the Southern Islands. Over the years, like you, I have had the opportunity to volunteer as a clean-up diver and kayaked around our waters. While what is under the surface may not always be front of mind, my time out on and in our waters has made me determined to play my part in our collective action.

The Southern Islands refer to a cluster of islands, an informal planning area to the south of mainland Singapore. It comprises Kusu, Lazarus, Seringat, St John's, Sentosa, Tekukor and the two Sisters' islands.

For some time, visitors were generally marine scientists, casual picnickers, Kusu pilgrims, nostalgic former islanders or those in search of a trail off the beaten track. However, restlessness from COVID-19 piqued Singaporeans' interests. Visitorship on the islands increased by 2.5 times, from 6,800 a month in 2019 to 17,000 a month in 2021. In 2022, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) conducted a long-term plan review (LTPR) and engaged more than 13,000 participants in polls, discussions and webinars, which culminated in roving exhibitions. Together with some marine scientists and environmental advocates, I toured the exhibition and was interested in how the LTPR highlighted the creation of an island of "green, blue and fun" by expanding nature-based recreation networks and embracing islandness. This includes plans to transform our Southern Islands.

Sir, I agree it is important to embrace our islandness and increase recreational options for Singaporeans.

While it is exciting to hear new plans and see Singaporeans engaged in these nature spaces, the Southern Islands must be developed sensitively. Given that the Southern Islands are more or less a blank slate, it would be exciting as well to testbed sustainable ideas and the learnings could be implemented on mainland Singapore.

Some may wonder what is there to protect in the first place. The Southern Islands are significant in two key areas: natural and cultural heritage. The Southern Islands support coastal habitats to several nationally vulnerable or endangered species. It is also home to a rich culture and history. The islands were part of the lively settlements of Orang Laut and former islanders have religious significance and hosted Singapore's first quarantine centre – when we are talking about COVID-19 today.

Given the natural and cultural significance of the Southern Islands, I appreciate the efforts of NParks, which engages and consults stakeholders and URA for adopting a science-based approach to stewarding green and blue spaces through the ecological profiling exercise (EPE). The EPE showed that the Southern Islands is a space where development should be considered sensitively.

Based on these findings, I ask that we consider how best to ensure the careful integration of conservation and development in our plans.

Sir, our varied interests and land needs are outsizing the 719 square kilometres or so of our main island. In recent times, we have seen two activities introduced. First, aquaculture activities taken over by Barramundi Asia Group, just beyond Bendera Bay. I note that the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) had completed an environmental impact assessment (EIA) before implementation. How does the Government measure ongoing water and sediment quality as well as the potential presence of larger predators, given that the fish cages are barely 50 metres from Bendera Bay, which is stewarded by Friends of Marine Park?

How are agriculture sites selected? And are there any other sites around the Southern Islands which are being considered for the future?

What are the measures and safeguards which the Government requires of companies to minimise damage to the seabed, including the anchoring of cages and monitoring of feed spills? Is there ongoing assessment as to the extent of natural habitats and water flows in both the short and medium term?

I appreciate that aquaculture is a very important part of our food resilience goals and I hope we can establish good practices and standards around it before further expansion.

Second, Big Tiny's Tiny Away Escape was launched, which will start taking bookings very soon. Like the throngs who flocked to the Southern Islands during COVID-19, staycations were also a popular activity during COVID-19. I think opportunities for Singaporeans to connect with nature are good, especially for our young, who are more likely to fall in love with our environment if they are familiar with it. I echo comments from the marine community, and I sincerely appreciate the Sentosa Development Corporation's (SDC) consideration in this less intrusive accommodation option. I also appreciate that SDC carried out stakeholder engagements and I would be keen to understand what environmental and safety considerations are required of the operator and whether any of the suggestions during consultation have been adopted. I would also appreciate hearing what the future plans are in developing the Southern Islands as a light touch ecotourism destination.

The balance between conservation and development requires tighter coordination between the multitude of Government agencies involved in the islands' management.

For illustration, island and land permits are currently managed by the Singapore Land Authority (SLA; the National Parks Board (NParks) is involved in conservation, for example, through the Sisters' Island Marine Park and also the conservation of heritage trees and development of trails. While the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) looks after the development of the island into a light touch tourist destination, the Maritime Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) governs the rest of the waters that surround the island.

While I appreciate the good work of each of these agencies, it may be difficult to have a holistic understanding of the islands' development and ensure that any changes are done sensitively.

Sir, I seek clarification if there is a main liaison that supports coordination between the Ministries on the islands' land use, development and management, and is responsible for ensuring that any potential plans are sensitive to the environment and safety.

I propose for an inter-agency workgroup with perhaps URA leading it to ensure systematic coordination between various stakeholders, utilising the technical expertise of each stakeholder. As recommended in the Singapore Blue Plan 2018, the inter-agency workgroup could then develop processes relating to the islands' use, implement a structured approach to manage competing land and ocean use, as well as oversee EIA's and the islands' development plans. A clear checklist could be developed to identify environmental considerations to be assessed before any land or sea use is approved.

Given the technicality of such environmental assessments, there is potential to crowd-in expertise and public participation through a technical work group or panel. This would support the implementation of a well-coordinated and comprehensive plan to ensure that any development is sustainable and science-based. I sincerely hope that the Government considers this suggestion.

I have some further questions. First, on zoning. Given that the Southern Islands are near marine and coastal areas, was an EIA conducted to understand and mitigate potential impact of the new development such as Tiny Homes on the area? How does the coastal and ecological profiling exercise by URA inform development in the Southern Islands?

In line with the plans to develop the Southern Islands sensitively, we can refer to preliminary research, horizon mapping and integrated concept plan for St John's Island developed by Dr Jani Tanzil and the team at the St John's Island National Marine Laboratory (SJIML), funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF). Using participatory mapping, the team came up with a preliminary proposal of both sea and land use zonings to create an environmentally friendly multi-use space for many stakeholders.

Such zonings are in line of developing the island while ensuring that sensitive areas are kept protected. Potential areas include education, research, tourism, religious, cultural, conservation, sea sports fishing, agriculture and even military. I would like to ask if the Government has considered this piece of research.

Second, on carrying capacity. With increasing developments on the island, more Singaporeans and tourists are visiting. Has there been any research to estimate the carrying capacity of the islands and are there limits or caps to the number of visitors on the island at any one point? In nature areas such as Kranji Marshes, permits for large groups are required for similar reasons. I hope that the Government could consider a similar concept to be rolled out on the islands.

Next, on safety. What are some efforts made to ensure the safety of and environmentally friendly practices of visitors? For example, there can be signs to indicate strong currents for safe enjoyment in the waters and evacuation plans in the case of emergency.

Visitors to the island will also be familiar with the long-tailed macaques which inhabit the island. Has the Government considered how human-wildlife conflict will be minimised, especially if the families on staycation bring food and snacks with them?

I would also like to know who the enforcement authority is for safety and operations on the island. Perhaps, it will also be helpful to place life buoys at prominent locations or even consider a lifeguard during peak periods to prevent incidents of drowning.

Next, on waste —

**Mr Speaker:** You have one and a half minutes left.

**Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin:** To provide sustainable living by powering houses through solar, building using sustainable materials and providing biogesters.

While efforts seek to lower the carbon footprint of tourists, are there any sewerage treatment and waste disposal plans to cope with the overall increased human traffic and corresponding waste generated on the islands?

Sir, we recognise that it is a tough balancing act for Singapore with intense land use pressures as a city-state and the need to balance conservation and natural heritage as well. To be clear, this is not about no development, but an appeal for clear processes and frameworks to encourage a science-based and coordinated approach between Government agencies in doing so.

Big changes can take place in the most unexpected and smallest of places. Let us be at the forefront as an island city-state in dealing with these issues. Beyond Governmental bodies, many ground-up groups and individuals have dedicated their careers and free time to this. I would like to acknowledge, in particular, Friends of Marine Parks such as Stephen, Dr Zeehan and the team behind the Blue Plan, Dr Jani of SJIML, and Sam and Tai Chong from Our Singapore Reefs, who have shared their thoughts and hard work with me, as well as many others who championed giant clams, sharks, seagrass, clean shores and oceans.

Our marine and reef ecosystem takes years to develop but only a moment to destroy if we do not prioritise them. Let us take this step to protect what we have and ensure the sustainable development of our Southern Islands.

**Mr Speaker:** Minister.

8.31 pm



**The Minister for National Development (Mr Desmond Lee):** Sir, I thank Mr Louis Ng and Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin, and our blue activists, for championing the protection of our marine environment and our Southern Islands. I only have 10 minutes, so I will be brief and may not be able to address all the questions that they have raised.

As a small city-state, we will always have to balance conservation with our development needs. The pressures on our sea spaces are no less intense than on land. We are home to a rich array of marine biodiversity, from hard corals and seagrasses to turtles and dugongs.

The Port of Singapore is also a busy global transshipment hub, supporting our economy and the continued flow of global supply chains. Our coastal and marine areas are also used for many important activities, including offshore industries, aquaculture, tourism, recreation and defence.

As we balance these competing demands, we recognise that our marine ecosystems are an important part of our natural capital and agree with Members that we must take collective action to conserve them.

Through our Marine Conservation Action Plan, we seek to conserve our rich marine biodiversity. This comprehensive, science-based approach is part of our broader Nature Conservation Masterplan, which sets out conservation strategies for both green and blue spaces.

Over the years, NParks has been partnering experts, researchers and the marine community to study and monitor the biodiversity in our waters. With the use of advanced modelling tools, as well as efforts such as the Comprehensive Marine Biodiversity Survey and the more recent Southern Islands Biodiversity Survey, we continuously update and deepen our knowledge base. This helps us to identify key marine habitats for protection.

In 2014, we established the Sisters' Islands Marine Park, in view of the area's important ecological functions and variety of marine life. The Marine Park is protected under the Parks and Trees Act, which prohibits the removal of biodiversity and restricts activities such as fishing, the collection of corals and the mooring of boats, among others.

I would like to assure Mr Louis Ng that, just like for nature reserves, the boundaries of the Marine Park are set out in the Schedule to the Act and any changes would have to be presented to Parliament.

In addition to protecting our key marine ecosystems, we are also actively enhancing them, in close partnership with the community. For example, together with JTC and the National University of Singapore (NUS), we are supporting the introduction of artificial reefs at the Marine Park, to promote the restoration of its coral habitats.

We also work closely with the multi-stakeholder Friends of Marine Park, as well as volunteers, to conserve and study native turtle species at the turtle hatchery on Small Sister's Island.

Beyond the Marine Park, we also make use of science and data to prioritise threatened species for our recovery programmes. Today, our efforts cover the Neptune's cup sponge, over 14 species of corals, and more. We will do more to protect our natural marine habitats and heritage.

At this year's Committee of Supply debate, we announced our enhanced commitment to restore and enhance 80 hectares of habitats by 2030, up from 30 hectares previously. These efforts will also include coastal and marine habitats.

Like Mr Louis Ng, we recognise the importance of our seagrass meadows as carbon sinks and habitats for marine fauna. We have been partnering the marine community on a long-term survey of our species-rich seagrass meadows and are currently developing a restoration programme for these habitats. And we are planning to expand our "Plant-A-Coral, Seed-A-Reef" programme to rally more of the community around our efforts to establish and restore thriving reef habitats.

We will also continue to ramp up our outreach and education efforts, together with partners such as the Nature Society (Singapore) and the Waterways Watch Society. Through initiatives such as guided intertidal walks and citizen science programmes, including our yearly Biodiversity Beach Patrols, we will encourage even more Singaporeans to join us in celebrating and stewarding our amazing marine biodiversity.

Across the board, our marine conservation efforts are underpinned by strong and active partnerships. One example of how ground-up efforts can make a meaningful difference is the Singapore Blue Plan, which Mr Louis Ng mentioned.

I had the opportunity to attend the launch of the Blue Plan back in 2018 and was encouraged by the passion and dedication of the diverse stakeholders who contributed to it. Many of our actions to better understand and conserve our marine spaces are indeed aligned with the recommendations of the Blue Plan.

For example, we are stepping up funding for marine research. Through the Marine Climate Change Science programme, we are investing \$25 million to develop solutions that address the impacts of climate change on our marine ecosystems. We have recently started to award grants for the first two projects and we look forward to catalysing further advancements in this field.

To strengthen the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process, we are piloting the centralisation of EIA consultants under NParks. This will ensure the rigour of EIAs, including for coastal and marine areas.

And to facilitate collaboration among Government, industry and researchers in areas including marine conservation, MPA launched the GeoSpace-Sea portal in 2019. This publicly accessible database harnesses and integrates marine and coastal geospatial data from various sources and can help parties work off a common set of information.

This also ties in with Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin's call for greater coordination across agencies to ensure that our Southern Islands are developed sensitively. We agree with her that proper coordination is important to ensure that we develop Singapore sustainably. Today, we already take a whole-of-Government approach to coordinate our plans, from planning to implementation.

Upstream in the planning process, environmental considerations are taken into account in our land use plans. URA regularly reviews our long-term plans with agencies and studies alternatives and trade-offs to optimise our land use plans.

This includes working with developing agencies such as the Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC) and the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) to evaluate proposals for ecotourism projects and fish farms.

Our plans are also guided by science. As part of the Long-Term Plan Review, NParks conducted an Ecological Profiling Exercise (EPE) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Singapore's island-wide ecosystem and ecological connectivity. Based on the findings, NParks will work with agencies to study how development can be undertaken sensitively, taking into consideration the various habitats. For example, the marine EPE will help to guide future developments such as the placement of sea-based farms.

When development plans are more firm, developing agencies undergo an in-depth consultation process and work closely with technical agencies to minimise the environmental impact for developments near or in an ecologically sensitive area.

In the context of Lazarus Island, this also involves consulting technical agencies and SLA, the agency managing the island, to develop visitor management measures that ensure public safety and sustainable practices.

Throughout the planning process —

**Mr Speaker:** Minister, you have one and a half minutes left.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** We engage nature groups and other stakeholders, so that their inputs can be considered in the review of our plans.

We have also developed an Integrated Urban Coastal Management (IUCM) framework that guides the planning and management of our coastal and marine habitats. The framework is put together by an inter-agency committee including NParks, SFA, NEA, MPA and PUB, and seeks to promote the sustainable development of our coastal and marine areas.

Agencies will continue to work closely together, for example, to monitor and coordinate responses to oil spill incidents as part of the IUCM framework.

We are committed to being responsible stewards of our coastal and marine spaces, including our Southern Islands. As we push on with these efforts, we encourage everyone to join us, share with us their views and ideas, to ensure that our precious marine biodiversity is conserved for many generations to come.

Question put, and agreed to.

Resolved, "That Parliament do now adjourn."

**Mr Speaker:** Pursuant to Standing Order No 2(3)(a), I wish to inform to inform hon Members that the Sitting tomorrow will commence at 10.30 am. Order, order.

*Adjourned accordingly at 8.41 pm.*

## **WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS FOR ORAL ANSWER NOT ANSWERED BY END OF QUESTION TIME EXTENSION OF LEMON LAW TO COVER USED CARS SOLD BY CAR DEALERS ON BEHALF OF OWNERS**

19 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for Trade and Industry (a) whether the Government will consider extending the Lemon Law to cover used cars sold by car dealers on behalf of owners; and (b) if not, whether the Government will require used car dealers to provide an upfront declaration of the nature of its used car transactions to potential buyers.

**Mr Gan Kim Yong:** Used cars sold by car dealers on behalf of owners, also known as consignment cars, are consumer-to-consumer (C2C) transactions between the owner and the buyer, where the dealer provides a service to match the buyer to the seller. The Lemon Law only covers business-to-consumer (B2C) transactions and does not cover C2C transactions, which tend to be ad hoc and informal in nature. However, car dealers which misrepresent a C2C transaction as a B2C transaction can be taken to task for engaging in an unfair practice under the Consumer Protection (Fair Trading) Act.

Consumers who choose to purchase a used car via the C2C channel, including consignment cars, can refer to the Standard and Functional Evaluation checklist developed by the Consumers Association of Singapore on the checks that might be needed to assess the condition of the used car.

## **ADEQUACY OF NUMBERS OF PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLORS TO CATER FOR INCREASED ATTENTION ON MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES**

20 **Mr Seah Kian Peng** asked the Minister for Health with regard to the increased attention on mental health issues and the need for counsellors (a) whether Singapore is prepared in terms of the number of professional counsellors; and (b) how does this number compare against the benchmark for best practices in other advanced economies.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** Based on publicly available data from the Singapore Association for Counselling (SAC), the number of counsellors registered with SAC increased from 940 in 2020 to 1,240 in 2022. Besides professional counsellors, other healthcare professionals and social workers provide counselling as part of their work. There is no international benchmark on the ratio of counsellors to population.

The tiered care model for mental healthcare delivery currently being developed by the Interagency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-being will serve as the basis for agencies to plan and develop counselling services and manpower across different sectors. More details will be released in due course.

#### **DATA ON PLACEMENT, PROFILE OF APPLICANTS AND DURATION OF STAY FOR APPLICATIONS FOR SAFE, SOUND SLEEPING PLACES**

22 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development (a) in 2022, what is the (i) utilisation rate of Safe, Sound Sleeping Places (S3Ps), (ii) number of applicants, (iii) rate of successful placements and (iv) median duration of stay; (b) what are the reasons for not admitting unsuccessful applicants and what follow-up actions have been provided for them; (c) what is the profile of such applicants and whether this has changed over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic; and (d) what is the proportion of S3Ps residents who have moved out to stable housing.

**Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M:** Safe, Sound Sleeping Places (S3Ps) are temporary shelters provided by community partners on their own premises. As these are voluntarily provided facilities, the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) does not track the number provided at any point in time. Nevertheless, when the Social Service Offices work with befriender groups to engage rough sleepers, the availability of places in S3Ps has never been a constraint.

This is because rough sleepers have many varied reasons and motivation. Many do not readily accept the offer of a S3P but need persuasion over weeks, months and even years. For those willing to accept the offer of rehousing, MSF works with other agencies to identify the best option, be it securing a public rental flat or staying in interim shelters, such as S3Ps and Transitional Shelters.

#### **REQUESTS FOR CHANGE OF TENANTS SINCE LAUNCH OF JOINT SINGLES SCHEME OPERATOR-RUN PILOT FOR HDB'S RENTAL FLATS**

23 **Mr Gan Thiam Poh** asked the Minister for National Development since the launch of Joint Singles Scheme Operator-Run (JSS-OR) pilot for HDB's rental flats (a) how many requests for a change of tenant due to disputes have been received; and (b) how many of such requests are dropped after the operators stepped in to mediate disagreements.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** As of end-February 2023, the operators of the three Joint Singles Scheme Operator-Run (JSS-OR) sites have received 79 requests from tenants for a change of co-tenant due to disputes.

Of these 79 requests, 35 were dropped after the operators successfully mediated between the parties involved, who have continued to live together amicably. For the remaining 44 requests, most were resolved after the operators made changes to the flat sharing arrangements.

#### **OUTCOME OF CONSULTATION TO REDUCE RISKS TO CONSUMER WHILE SUPPORTING DEVELOPMENT OF CRYPTOCURRENCY TRADING**

24 **Mr Desmond Choo** asked the Prime Minister (a) what is the outcome of the consultation on proposals to reduce risk of consumer harm from cryptocurrency trading and to support the development of stablecoins; and (b) what are the salient insights from the consultation.

**Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam (for the Prime Minister):** We thank Mr Choo for his interest in the consultation papers that the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) published, which proposed regulatory measures to reduce the risk of consumer harm from cryptocurrency trading and to require stablecoin issuers to maintain a high degree of value stability.

The consultation period closed on 21 December 2022 and MAS received substantial feedback from a wide range of respondents. MAS is currently reviewing the feedback received and intends to publish our response to the consultation feedback by mid-2023.

#### **LOCAL WORKFORCE'S ABILITY TO MEET CURRENT DEMAND FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE SKILLS**

25 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Communications and Information what is the Ministry's assessment of our local labour force's ability to meet the current high demand for artificial intelligence skills.

**Mrs Josephine Teo:** The Government recognises the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) and has, since 2019, implemented the National AI Strategy to broaden and deepen the use of AI in Singapore. Talent is a key enabler to drive AI innovation and adoption and the Government has taken proactive steps to grow our AI talent pool in different but complementary ways.

First, we are growing a pipeline of talent to support the translation of AI advancements into new products and services. The TechSkills Accelerator (TeSA) initiative has placed and trained more than 2,600 individuals in AI and data analytics job roles since 2016. With support from TeSA, AI Singapore (AISG) has also partnered companies to train mid-career Singaporeans to take up good AI-related jobs. Through

AISG's Programme, trainees receive hands-on training on projects contributed by participating companies and Government agencies. Results have shown that, given the right training, our local workforce is capable of seizing opportunities in AI, with 80% of participants receiving multiple job offers before graduation and also benefiting from an average pay increase of 25%.

Second, we continue to expand the pool of top-quality local AI research talent. Researchers in Singapore are already internationally recognised leaders in fields of AI research, such as natural language processing and computer vision. Later this year, the Government will partner AISG to introduce an AI Investigatorship to target top-tier AI researchers who can mentor promising local talent. This complements AISG's PhD Fellowship Programme in 2020, which supports top research talents in advancing fundamental AI research here in Singapore.

Third, we are growing awareness of AI's value and potential in the wider economy and society. AISG has various AI literacy outreach efforts. More than 100,000 attendees participated in its "AI for Everyone" programmes as well as courses catered to a younger audience.

As in other fast-growing fields worldwide, demand for talent will likely exceed supply for some time. The Government will continue working with partners to scale up our efforts and empower more of our citizens to access these valuable opportunities.

#### **EXTENSION OF CO-FUNDING FOR ASSISTED CONCEPTION PROCEDURES SCHEME TO PRIVATE CLINICS**

26 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Health (a) whether he can provide an update on the Ministry's review to extend the Co-Funding for the Assisted Conception Procedures scheme to private Assisted Reproduction centres; and (b) if the review has not been completed, when will it be completed.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** The public Assisted Reproduction (AR) centres, generally, have sufficient capacity, with current utilisation rates at around 67% and average wait times of around four to eight weeks. The public AR centres are also expanding to prepare for an increase in patient load. The National University Hospital completed renovations of its in vitro fertilisation (IVF) laboratory in 2022, while the KK Women's and Children's Hospital is in the process of building a second IVF laboratory.

Nonetheless, we recognise that there could be scope to consider extending co-funding to the private sector as some couples may prefer to seek treatment at private AR centres. As part of the ongoing review, the Ministry of Health (MOH) is studying the merits of doing so and assessing how best to ensure clinical outcomes are monitored and acceptable, that couples are charged reasonably and that co-funding monies are used prudently. We aim to complete the review by the end of this year.

#### **BENEFITS PACKAGES FOR SENIORS BORN AFTER THOSE IN MERDEKA GENERATION**

27 **Dr Lim Wee Kiak** asked the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance (a) whether the Government will introduce a benefits package, such as the Merdeka Generation Package, for Singapore citizens born between 1 January 1960 and 31 December 1969 when they reach senior citizen status; (b) if so, what benefits will be included in the package; and (c) when can we expect the package to be implemented.

**Mr Lawrence Wong:** The Government is committed to looking after the needs of all Singaporeans.

We introduced the Pioneer Generation (PG) Package and Merdeka Generation (MG) Package in 2014 and 2019 respectively to honour PG and MG seniors for their contributions in the early years of Singapore's nation-building. Many of our PG and MG seniors earned less and had access to fewer safety nets when they were working. Hence, they were not able to set aside much for their needs in old age. The PG and MG Packages provide them with more assurance that their healthcare costs will be taken care of.

Successive generations of Singaporeans, including those born from 1960 to 1969, have seen improvements in their lives, in tandem with Singapore's economic growth, as well as our investments in education, healthcare and social security. These subsequent cohorts have more access to education and career opportunities, enjoyed stronger income growth and are more retirement-ready. Nevertheless, we will continue to review and consider if there is a need for additional specific support at the cohort level and, if so, how best such support can be targeted and effective.

#### **REQUIREMENT FOR HDB COFFEE SHOP OPERATORS TO REPLACE EXITING HALAL FOOD STALLS WITH HALAL-CERTIFIED INCOMING ONES**

28 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Minister for National Development (a) whether HDB coffee shop operators are required to replace their sole halal food stalls with another halal vendor once the original vendor ceases to operate; (b) if so, what is the timeframe within which the coffee shop operator must seek a replacement; and (c) if not, why not.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** The Housing and Development Board (HDB) coffee shop operators are required to replace their sole halal food stalls with another halal vendor once the original vendor ceases to operate. The coffee shop operator is required to find a replacement within the current tenancy period. HDB may decide not to renew the tenancy if the operator fails to fulfil this condition.

Operators who face difficulties in bringing in a replacement halal stallholder can appeal to HDB, and HDB will assess these appeals on a case-by-case basis.

#### **INDIVIDUALS CONVICTED OF OFFENCES UNDER COMPULSORY EDUCATION ACT**

29 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Minister for Education in the last five years (a) how many individuals have been convicted of offences under the Compulsory Education Act; and (b) what is the duration of absence that schools will wait for before invoking the Compulsory Education Act.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing:** As non- and irregular attendance issues are often complex and multi-faceted, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and schools take a holistic approach in dealing with each child's unique circumstance without predetermined timelines.

Schools monitor students' attendance closely and engage students and their parents proactively when they observe non- or irregular attendance. This includes providing counselling to the students, having conferences with parents and conducting home visits. If necessary, schools may also refer the child or family to community-based support, such as the Enhanced STEP-UP Programme or Family Service Centres.

If the child's attendance does not improve, schools will refer these cases to the Compulsory Education Unit in MOE for further investigation and engagement with parents. Where other forms of social assistance are required, other agencies such as the Ministry of Social and Family Development and community groups will be brought in to help resolve underlying familial issues that affect the children's attendance.

In cases where parents still refuse to ensure their children's attendance, their cases are escalated to the Compulsory Education Board, which may summon the parents and children for a formal hearing. Legal enforcement is used as a last resort. Due to the effectiveness of these actions by schools, community and the Compulsory Education Board, no parent had been convicted under the Compulsory Education Act since its inception in 2003.

### PREVALENCE OF POTHOLES ON PUBLIC ROADS

30 **Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye** asked the Minister for Transport (a) whether there is a sharp rise in the number of potholes on our public roads in 2023; (b) whether LTA tracks the areas that are most prone to potholes reoccurring on our roads; and (c) what are the preventive measures undertaken by LTA to minimise the number of potholes on our public roads.

**Mr S Iswaran:** More potholes were observed in 2021 and the first two months of 2023 when there was heavy rainfall. Conversely, when rainfall was lower, such as in the first two months of 2022, we typically observe fewer potholes.

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) monitors and maintains over 9,000 lane-kilometres of roads and checks for road defects, including potholes. LTA analyses data to prioritise roads where potholes are more common for resurfacing. LTA will also be utilising artificial intelligence and video analytics technology to aid this maintenance effort.

During periods of prolonged heavy rainfall, LTA dedicates more resources to conduct additional inspections and to expedite pothole repairs.

Furthermore, LTA undertakes a range of preventive measures from sealing over minor cracks identified to regularly resurfacing stretches of roads. LTA is also studying the feasibility of using high performance asphalt mixes.

Motorists can report road defects through the LTA website, the "Snap and Send" function on the MyTransport.SG mobile application, or the OneService mobile application.

### CONSULTATIONS WITH BTO FLAT BUYERS ON CREATIVE DESIGN OF NEW FLATS

31 **Miss Cheng Li Hui** asked the Minister for National Development whether HDB will consider holding consultations with Build-To-Order (BTO) flat purchasers at an appropriate juncture during the construction of their flats to balance residents' preferences and creativity in respect of design.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** The Housing and Development Board (HDB) works closely with architectural consultants and reviews design proposals of Build-To-Order (BTO) flats to ensure that they are in line with prevailing regulatory requirements, design objectives and guidelines.

The precinct design is committed before project launch. Prospective buyers can refer to the launch brochures to have a general sense of each development's design.

I understand that the Member may be concerned about the design process for HDB BTO flats, following public feedback on the red lift lobbies at Tampines GreenVines. For this project, HDB had given the architects flexibility to incorporate new approaches to make the estate more distinctive. The architects proposed to use bright accent colours inspired by local fruits, such as red and yellow. The colours were used to differentiate the different clusters of blocks and facilitate wayfinding for residents. The sales models showed the cluster colours during launch.

HDB has received mixed views on the cluster colours as taste is subjective. However, given feedback from residents that the red colour was too strong, steps were taken to repaint the walls and ceiling of the blocks to white to tone it down.

This was an exercise of judgement, balancing the need to innovate with new designs and public receptivity. HDB continues to build up a store of experience over the years from residents' feedback in various BTO developments.

HDB proactively seeks feedback from Singaporeans, through surveys and engagements, to understand their aspirations and preferences, to review and refine the overall design for HDB flats. For example, Post-Occupancy Surveys are conducted for all newly completed BTO developments one to two years after new home owners have settled into their new living environment and have a sense of what they like in their neighbourhoods.

HDB also conducts regular dialogues with Town Councils to gather feedback. Such feedback from residents and Town Councils informs the design of new developments as well as upgrading initiatives in all estates.

### **SHARE OF SOPHISTICATED INVESTMENT PRODUCTS SOLD TO RETAIL INVESTORS AS PERCENTAGE OF ALL FINANCIAL PRODUCTS SOLD**

32 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Prime Minister (a) what is the prevalence of sophisticated investment products, such as structured products or those involving derivatives, being sold to retail investors as a share of all financial products sold; and (b) what requirements does MAS impose in terms of disclosure and pre-purchase counselling before non-accredited investors are allowed to purchase sophisticated investment products.

**Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam (for the Prime Minister):** Sophisticated investment products make up less than 5% of all investment products sold to retail clients.

Financial institutions and their representatives must adhere to the Monetary Authority of Singapore's (MAS) conduct requirements when selling investment products to retail clients. They must ensure that the products recommended are suitable for the client, taking into consideration the client's investment objectives and financial situation. They must disclose and clearly explain to the client all material information on the product, including its risk and return features. They must also explain any option to unwind the purchase decision, which is typically within a seven- to 14-day period. In fact, 85% of transactions involving investment products are sold with such an option.

When selling more complex products, financial institutions must take the additional step of assessing the client's investment knowledge or experience. If the client is assessed not to possess the relevant investment knowledge or experience, the financial institution must advise the client accordingly. However, should the client wish to proceed with the purchase against the advice, it must be escalated for higher approval within the financial institution. The client will be allowed to purchase the product after he has confirmed in writing that he has been properly informed of the risks and implications of proceeding with the transaction and is making the purchase against the advice of the financial institution.

MAS reminds retail investors to understand a product's risks and returns before committing to a purchase.

### **STEPPING UP RECRUITMENT FOR NON-TEACHING POSITIONS IN SCHOOLS**

33 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Education (a) what are the non-teaching positions that the Ministry has been stepping up efforts to recruit for; and (b) what are the targets that the Ministry hopes to achieve in its recruitment efforts for these non-teaching positions.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing:** In recent years, we have increased the number of allied educators and administrative staff who support teachers in non-teaching duties in school, such as counselling, working with students with higher needs, and other administrative and operational tasks.

We focus on recruiting suitable individuals with the right disposition and competencies, rather than be too fixated on specific short-term recruitment targets.

### **NUMBER OF FOREIGN STUDENTS CAUGHT WORKING ILLEGALLY IN 2022 AND ACTIONS TAKEN AGAINST HIRING COMPANIES**

34 **Mr Mark Chay** asked the Minister for Manpower (a) whether an update can be provided on the number of foreign students caught working illegally in 2022; and (b) what actions have been taken against the companies that hired these foreign students who worked illegally.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** Foreign students issued with a Student's Pass should be here to study. Student's Pass Holders who wish to work must have a valid Work Pass other than if they study in a recognised educational institution, where they can then work up to 16 hours a week, or if they work under an industrial attachment that is part of the course.

In 2022, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) took enforcement action against 38 Student's Pass holders for working illegally. All of these Student's Pass Holders were warned for committing an offence under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act. Their Student's Passes were cancelled by the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) and they were barred from working in Singapore.

The 21 employers who hired these Student's Pass holders illegally were also taken to task – 11 received stern warnings, nine were issued composition fines and one was prosecuted.

### **REPORTING POTENTIAL UNSAFE WORKPLACE PRACTICES THROUGH ONESERVICE MOBILE APPLICATION**

35 **Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye** asked the Minister for Manpower whether the Ministry will consider making it easier for members of the public to report potential unsafe workplace practices, such as that through the OneService mobile application.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** There are existing easily accessible avenues for members of the public to alert the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) of unsafe workplace practices or conditions. These include the MOM hotline, the Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) e-feedback portal on the MOM website and the LifeSG mobile application. Nonetheless, MOM is exploring other means, including the one suggested by the

Member, to make reporting more convenient. In line with the "No Wrong Door" policy, WSH feedback given via other Government applications would be routed to MOM.

### **IMPACT OF REMOVAL OF SUBSIDIES FOR COVID-19 TEST KITS ON NATIONAL SURVEILLANCE PROGRAMME**

36 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Health with the introduction of charges for Antigen Rapid Tests and Polymerase Chain Reaction Tests for COVID-19 treatment (a) whether patients can opt out of these tests; and (b) whether the removal of subsidies for treatment and the imposition of charges for tests will collectively lead to a decrease in the effectiveness of our national surveillance programme for the prevalence of COVID-19 in Singapore.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** With our high level of resilience, the great majority of COVID-19 infections are mild and there is no need to routinely test every person with acute respiratory infection (ARI) symptoms. Hence, the Ministry of Health (MOH) no longer imposes any mandatory testing for public health reasons. Testing is mainly for patients who are medically vulnerable, for example, the elderly or immunocompromised, who can benefit from early COVID-19 diagnosis and treatment. Such patients can tap on prevailing subsidies for their testing and treatment fees. Oral antivirals remain free-of-charge for clinically eligible patients.

As for the national ARI surveillance programme, this helps us monitor the trends of COVID-19 variants and other circulating respiratory viruses, such as influenza, in the community. These tests remain free.

### **PROPOSAL TO CARVE OUT MYANMAR FROM ASEAN GROUPING**

37 **Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs as the second anniversary of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus on the situation in Myanmar approaches, what is the Government's position regarding the recent suggestion of carving out Myanmar from ASEAN.

**Dr Vivian Balakrishnan:** Myanmar remains a member of ASEAN.

### **DATA ON TYPES AND SOURCES OF REPORTING OF CHILD ABUSE CASES**

38 **Mr Saktiandi Supaat** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development (a) how many cases of child abuse in the past year were detected by (i) reports made through the National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline, (ii) proactive investigations by the Child Protective Service, (iii) identification by frontline professionals and (iv) other means; and (b) what enforcement powers are available to overcome active concealment by abusive parents.

39 **Mr Saktiandi Supaat** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development of the child abuse cases investigated by the Child Protective Service in each of the past three years (a) whether the Ministry has data on cases which feature emotional or psychological abuse and, if so, what are they; (b) how many cases are referred to the Attorney-General's Chambers for prosecution, broken down by the different types of abuse; and (c) whether the Ministry is considering enhancing the penalties so as to deter child abusers.

**Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M:** In 2022, the Ministry of Social and Family Development's (MSF) Child Protective Service (CPS) investigated about 2,070 cases involving serious abuse or neglect of children and young persons by parents or caregivers. Cases investigated for emotional or psychological abuse constituted 20% of these cases. About 45% of all cases were reported through the National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline (NAVH). MSF has previously answered a Parliamentary Question (PQ) by Member of Parliament Mr Louis Ng on 9 January 2023 on the breakdown of CPS' investigation cases by referral sources and the Member may refer to that reply.

CPS conducts social investigations. In situations where there are immediate or serious safety concerns for the child, CPS will interview the child in person without the caregiver present. Where a possible crime is disclosed, CPS refers the case to the Police to conduct a criminal investigation into the offence against the child. Therefore, CPS does not make recommendations to the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) regarding prosecution. Aggravating factors, such as active concealment of child abuse, may be considered in determining the sentence, if the parent or caregiver is convicted.

The penalties for child abuse offences were last revised in 2020. The maximum penalty for offences against children below 14 years old was enhanced to twice the maximum penalties prescribed for offences in the Penal Code.

### **EXPANSION OF MANDATORY ENERGY LABELLING SCHEME TO INCLUDE OTHER HIGH-ENERGY CONSUMPTION HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES SUCH AS DISHWASHERS AND WATER HEATERS**

40 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment whether there are plans to expand the Mandatory Energy Labelling Scheme to include other household appliances with significant energy consumption, such as dishwashers and water heaters.

**Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien:** The National Environment Agency (NEA) regularly reviews the list of household appliances under the Mandatory Energy Labelling Scheme, taking into consideration factors, such as the energy consumption of an appliance, how widely it is used and the availability of energy-efficient models. The scheme has recently been expanded to include portable air-conditioners and more types of lamps and we will continue to assess the feasibility of including other household appliances.

### **ENSURING MATERIALS USED FOR SCREEDING OF FLOORS IN HDB COMMON AREAS ARE NON-SLIP AND LOOK PLEASANT**

41 **Mr Lim Biow Chuan** asked the Minister for National Development what are the criteria used by HDB to assess whether the materials used for screeding of floors in HDB common areas are non-slip and look aesthetically pleasant.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** For new Build-To-Order (BTO) projects, the Housing and Development Board's (HDB) building specifications currently require contractors to use Acrylic Polymer Cementitious Coating (APCC), with a sealer coat system, for the screeding of floors in common areas.

This system fulfils the slip resistance test under Singapore Standard 485 and meets the acceptance criteria of 40 to 50 British Pendulum Numbers (BPN). This is also the level of slip resistance HDB specifies for its bathroom floor tiles. In terms of aesthetics, APCC is grey in colour and, upon application, furnishes our common areas with a uniform and neat look.

For existing estates, it is the Town Councils' responsibility to regularly inspect and maintain the floors in common areas. HDB does not stipulate the materials to be used and the slip resistance standards to be followed by the Town Councils, but will provide technical advice to the Town Councils, where required.

#### **MANDATORY RETRENCHMENT NOTIFICATIONS RECEIVED BY GOVERNMENT AND PROPORTION OF TECH FIRMS AMONGST NOTIFYING COMPANIES**

42 **Mr Desmond Choo** asked the Minister for Manpower (a) how many Mandatory Retrenchment Notifications have been received by the Ministry in 2023; (b) of these notifications, how many of them are from the Big Tech sector; and (c) what is the number of companies that have failed to comply with the requirement of Mandatory Retrenchment Notifications.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has received about 850 retrenchment notices since the start of 2023 and about a quarter of the notices were from the information and communications sector.

To ensure that affected workers receive timely support, it is important for retrenching firms to comply with the requirement to submit notices of retrenchment to MOM within five working days after informing affected employees. Three in four of the retrenchment notices received were submitted on time. Among the late submissions, about 65% were submitted before the retrenchment took place, which was still useful in providing Workforce Singapore or Employment and Employability Institute an opportunity to offer employment assistance to affected employees. Employers who submitted notifications late are issued with caution letters.

#### **NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS PERTAINING TO ROAD AND MRT TRACK NOISE**

43 **Ms Mariam Jaafar** asked the Minister for Transport what is the number of complaints received pertaining to road and MRT track noise in the past five years.

**Mr S Iswaran:** In the past five years, we have received a total of 6,470 feedback on road traffic noise and 1,101 feedback on the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) track noise. We have explained the sources of noise from roads and MRT and our mitigation measures in previous Parliamentary Question (PQ) replies.

#### **DATA SUCH AS ATTRITION RATES AND GENDER OF FOREIGN SERVICE STAFF**

44 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs (a) if any analyses have been done on whether there is a gender gap within the Ministry between men and women in (i) positions of deputy director-general or above, (ii) terms of attrition rates and, (iii) the reasons for the differences between the point at which attrition rates are highest; and (b) if so, what are the findings.

**Dr Vivian Balakrishnan:** Currently, half of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officers are women. The proportion of women at superscale grades has doubled from 15% in 2010 to 29% in 2022. There is no significant difference in attrition between men and women in MFA. We acknowledge that the obligation to serve multiple postings overseas is especially disruptive for MFA officers with spouses and young children, particularly women, who bear a disproportionate burden of caregiving.

The Ministry regularly reviews our human resource (HR) policies, including terms for overseas postings, to provide a more conducive environment for officers to realise their career aspirations and fulfil their family obligations. We expect more women to take on senior roles in the Ministry as we need all the talent we can recruit, nurture and deploy in the Foreign Service.

#### **REVIEW OF \$4,500 SALARY CAP IN SECTION 35(A) OF EMPLOYMENT ACT 1968**

45 **Mr Abdul Samad** asked the Minister for Manpower when will the cap of \$4,500 salary in section 35(a) of the Employment Act 1968, which determines which employees have coverage under the Act, be reviewed.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** The Employment Act protects all employees, regardless of salary. Part 4 of the Act provides additional protections to workers who operate machinery and vehicles or are involved in manual labour and earn up to a salary cap of \$4,500, as well as other workers who earn up to \$2,600. These additional protections cover areas, such as hours of work, rest days and other conditions of service.

We review the Employment Act regularly, together with our tripartite partners the Singapore National Employers Federation and the National Trades Union Congress. The Employment Act was last reviewed in 2019 and we will be consulting our tripartite partners on the next review, including the salary caps for Part 4 protections. The review will take into consideration developments, such as the recent Progressive Wage moves, which will raise salaries in the coming years.

#### **PROPOSAL TO INSTALL DOUBLE-GLAZED WINDOWS IN NEW HDB FLATS BEING BUILT IN AREAS CLOSE TO MAIN ROADS, MRT TRACKS OR RSAF FLIGHT PATHS**



46 **Ms Mariam Jaafar** asked the Minister for National Development whether HDB can install double-glazed windows in all new HDB flats being built in areas that are close to main roads, MRT tracks or RSAF flight paths.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** In the context of our high-density environment, and with the Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats designed for natural ventilation, it is not possible to completely sound-proof a unit. Effectiveness of double-glazed windows are also limited and would require residents to close their windows to cut down noise. As such, HDB takes a holistic approach in designing HDB flats to mitigate noise.

For new HDB flats located close to land traffic noise sources, such as major arterial roads and MRT tracks, HDB carries out noise impact assessment (NIA) during the design consultancy stage to understand the noise impact on the new residential developments and put in place appropriate noise mitigation measures. HDB has also introduced facade designs with overhangs or canopies to deflect and abate land transport noise transmission into the dwelling units.

To mitigate the impact of aircraft noise, HDB is testing further noise mitigation measures and will introduce these when ready. Such measures include noise-cancelling technologies and innovative facade designs.

#### **UPDATE ON EXPANSION OF MARINA BAY SANDS UNDER ITS SECOND DEVELOPMENT AGREEMENT**

47 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for Trade and Industry (a) whether he can provide an update on the Second Development Agreement between the Singapore Tourism Board and Marina Bay Sands (MBS); (b) whether MBS is on track to meet the construction commencement date of 8 April 2023 for its expansion project under the Agreement; and (c) whether there are any changes to the deadline by which the project is supposed to be completed.

**Mr Gan Kim Yong:** At the Second Reading of the Gambling Duties Bill on 10 January 2022, Mr Gan Thiam Poh and Mr Louis Chua asked about the expected completion of the two Integrated Resorts' (IRs) expansion plans. I shared that both IRs had indicated that there would be potential completion delays due to disruptions to the construction industry brought on by the pandemic.

The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) and the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) will ensure that MBS fulfils its development obligations, while also considering the impact of the pandemic on the expansion project. MTI and STB are working with MBS to review the development timeline and minimise potential delays.

#### **EXTENSION OF COMPLIMENTARY ADMISSION TO CHILDREN'S MUSEUM SINGAPORE**

49 **Ms Hany Soh** asked the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth whether the complimentary admission to Children's Museum Singapore will be extended beyond 31 March 2023.

**Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai:** Our publicly-funded museums are avenues to share our rich history and cultural heritage, so that Singaporeans understand what we stand for, thereby strengthening our sense of belonging and national identity. To ensure our museums are accessible to Singaporeans, the Children's Museum Singapore – like other public museums – will continue to have free admissions for all Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents beyond 31 March 2023. Tourists and foreign residents will be charged prevailing rates.

#### **NUMBER OF HAWKERS EXITING TRADE AND HOW MANY WERE DUE TO IMPACT OF INFLATION**

50 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment (a) how many exits from the hawker industry occurred in 2022; and (b) what has been the impact of inflation in the past year on the number of hawkers who have exited the industry.

**Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien:** In 2022, there were 342 cooked food stall tenancy terminations in hawker centres managed by the National Environment Agency (NEA) or NEA-appointed operators. This works out to an average of 29 terminations a month, which is comparable to the monthly average of 30 terminations between 2017 and 2019, prior to the COVID-19 years. Vacancy rates at hawker centres managed by NEA or NEA-appointed operators have continued to remain low and stable.

#### **STANDARDISED FORMS FOR REQUIRED DOCUMENTS TO ACCOMPANY APPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT BUSINESS GRANTS**

52 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Minister for Trade and Industry whether samples or standardised forms for required documents accompanying applications for Government business grants may be made available.

**Mr Gan Kim Yong:** The majority of business grant applications take place on the Business Grants Portal (BGP), which is part of the GoBusiness portal. The portal provides step-by-step guidance on the application process and required documentation. Where possible, we have standardised and simplified application forms and processes. For instance, we have streamlined productivity-related business grants covering more than 17 sectors and across eight agencies into a single scheme called the Productivity Solutions Grant (PSG). Through BGP, applicants can access a standardised application form, which takes about 30 minutes to fill in.

For more customised or complex schemes, agencies may require additional supporting documents. Where possible, agencies provide templates or checklists on their respective websites.

The Government will and must continue to strike a balance between convenience of application and accountability for use of public monies. Applicants who require assistance on business grants can refer to the Government Assistance e-Adviser on the GoBusiness portal or contact the grant administering agency directly.

## ENFORCEMENT AGAINST NEIGHBOURS WHO REFUSE TO COOPERATE FOR THE REPAIRS OF SPALLING CONCRETE OR LEAKAGES

53 **Mr Gan Thiam Poh** asked the Minister for National Development (a) what is the current number of uncooperative neighbours who are reported as refusing to work with their neighbours to repair and resolve spalling concrete or leakages; and (b) how many of these cases have required HDB to take enforcement measures.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** Flat owners are responsible for the maintenance of their flat interiors, including repairs to ceiling leaks and spalling concrete that could occur due to wear and tear over time.

For ceiling leaks within the flat, the upper-floor and lower-floor flat owners are jointly responsible for repairs. Such issues can usually be amicably resolved when both flat owners exercise mutual understanding and cooperation in investigations and repairs. The Housing and Development Board (HDB) also provides financial support through the Goodwill Repair Assistance scheme, if applicable.

If the upper-floor flat owner refuses to cooperate, HDB will advise both parties to understand each other's needs and may further help to arrange for mediation between both parties, where necessary. As a last resort, when persuasion fails, HDB may take legal action to compel the upper-floor flat owner to comply with the covenants of the Lease.

Generally, most flat owners are cooperative. HDB is currently taking legal action against seven cases where the upper-floor flat owners have remained uncooperative despite efforts to engage and persuade them to allow HDB to conduct investigations and repairs in their flats.

For spalling concrete, HDB does not encounter any uncooperative flat owners, as spalling concrete occurs within a single unit and does not affect other neighbours.

## NUMBER AND ASSESSMENT OF APPLICATIONS TO SET UP SINGLE FAMILY OFFICES IN SINGAPORE

54 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Prime Minister (a) what is the number of family office applications that are pending; (b) whether there is a growing backlog of such applications; and (c) whether the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) conducts due diligence and imposes Know Your Client (KYC) standards to ascertain the identity and source of funds for those setting up Single Family Offices (SFOs).

**Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam (for the Prime Minister):** Family offices can be either multi-family offices (MFOs) or single-family offices (SFOs).

MFOs manage third party assets of two or more families and are, therefore, regulated by the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) like other fund managers under the Securities and Futures Act (SFA). There is only one pending MFO licence application.

SFOs manage assets belonging to only the family. Similar to other major jurisdictions, such as the US, UK, Europe, Switzerland and Hong Kong, SFOs in Singapore are not subject to licensing. However, the majority of SFOs apply to MAS for tax incentives on income derived from their investments managed in Singapore and are, in fact, subject to our requirements with regard to money laundering and terrorism financing risks.

First, MAS screens the individuals and entities involved in the SFO against databases and other information sources for money laundering, terrorism financing and other adverse news, and reviews the business plans of the SFO.

Second, an SFO applying for the tax incentive is required to open and maintain an account with a bank licensed by MAS. The bank is, in turn, required to conduct customer due diligence. This includes assessing whether there is a clear and legitimate purpose for the use of the SFO structure, ascertaining the ultimate beneficial owners and corroborating the sources of wealth and funds of both the SFO and any beneficial owner(s).

There are, currently, about 200 SFO tax incentive applicants pending approval. To safeguard against money laundering risks and ensure that Singapore reaps the benefits of hosting these SFOs, MAS and banks take care to ensure that these evaluation processes are conducted properly and are not rushed.

## DISRUPTIONS TO REGULAR TRAIN SERVICES ON THOMSON-EAST COAST LINE SINCE OPENING OF LINE'S STAGE 3 SEGMENT

55 **Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye** asked the Minister for Transport since the opening of the Thomson-East Coast Line (TEL) Stage 3 for passenger service on 13 November 2022 (a) how many disruptions to regular train services has the TEL experienced; and (b) what are the underlying reasons behind these disruptions.

**Mr S Iswaran:** The Thomson-East Coast Line Stage 3 (TEL3) was opened in November 2022. Since then, there have been four train-related faults on the TEL which caused delays of more than five minutes, and one instance in which trains had to travel at a slower speed due to a signalling system fault.

Of the five faults, two were due to software issues, which have since been addressed. The other three were due to hardware malfunction and the relevant components have since been replaced. Detailed investigations to identify the root causes of the component malfunction are ongoing.

Prior to opening a new stage of a line, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) and the rail operators conduct extensive testing to minimise the risks of service disruption or delay. Nevertheless, as rail systems contain many interlinked hardware and software elements, certain issues may only surface during the early phases of full-scale operation before the system stabilises.

We seek the understanding and patience of commuters in such instances, as LTA, the rail operators and the original equipment manufacturers continue to do their utmost to resolve any issues as quickly as possible.

## WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

### ATTRACTING TALENTS AFFECTED BY RECENT WORKFORCE LAY-OFFS AND HIRING FREEZES INTO CIVIL SERVICE

1 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Prime Minister how does the Civil Service intend to attract talents to join the Public Service that have been affected by the recent workforce lay-offs and hiring freezes by big global technology companies.

**Mrs Josephine Teo (for the Prime Minister):** The Public Service keeps an active lookout for tech talent keen on contributing to public good. Besides the Smart Nation Scholarship programme, we offer internships to tertiary students. Experienced tech specialists may be offered Smart Nation Fellowships to do short stints and work on innovative projects with us.

In addition, agencies conduct their own recruitment exercises and participate in joint recruitment efforts involving other organisations. We welcome persons of all backgrounds, including those who may have been laid off, as long as they meet the job requirements and are keen to serve the public.

A few months ago, the Government also launched the “Tech for Public Good” initiative to accelerate tech hiring for the Public Service. As part of the initiative, we set up a new microsite, [techhiring.open.gov.sg](https://techhiring.open.gov.sg), to publicise available tech-related openings across all agencies. Since then, we have conducted 15 career talks that attracted over 800 attendees. More than 100 positions have been filled.

### BUDGET ALLOCATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH OF CIVIL SERVANTS

2 **Dr Shahira Abdullah** asked the Prime Minister (a) whether the Government allocates mental health budgets for the welfare of civil servants; and (b) if so, what are the allocated budgets for the past three years.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing (for the Prime Minister):** The Government provides a budget for staff welfare for civil servants, which agencies use to fund activities that improve employee physical and mental health and well-being and show care and appreciation to staff. We do not allocate a specific budget for mental health activities.

### DIFFERENCE IN INCOME TAX PAYABLE FOR WORKING MOTHERS FROM NEW WORKING MOTHER'S CHILD RELIEF

3 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance based on the personal income tax data of working mothers for Year of Assessment 2022, what is the percentage of mothers who would (i) pay a higher amount of income tax, (ii) experience no change in income tax paid and (iii) pay a lower amount of income tax, had the new Working Mother's Child Relief formula been in place and applicable for working mothers.

**Mr Lawrence Wong:** The change to the Working Mother's Child Relief (WMCR) should not be seen in isolation. It is part of a suite of moves to support marriage and parenthood in this and previous Budgets. We have changed the basis of WMCR to a fixed dollar relief to focus on providing support for children, regardless of the mother's income. This effectively provides more support for those with greater needs. In tandem, we have significantly increased financial support via the enhanced Baby Bonus Cash Gift (BBCG) and the enhanced Child Development Account (CDA). These are available to all eligible parents, whether tax-paying or not.

Mr Chua is asking about a hypothetical scenario, as the new WMCR applies from YA 2025, and only for eligible mothers of Singaporean children born or adopted on or after 1 January 2024. Nevertheless, for the purpose of illustrating the impact of the changes on working mothers, the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (IRAS) has done a simulation using YA2022 data. When we take into account both the WMCR change and the \$2,000 increase in the CDA First Step Grant in the child's first year of birth, about 97% of mothers with newborns in 2021 would be better off or, at least, no worse off that year.

Apart from grants, we are also working with employers to better support parents in managing their work and family commitments through flexible work arrangements and enhanced leave provisions, some of which are funded by the Government.

The Government remains committed to supporting Singaporeans who want to get married and have children. We will continue to review and update our policies to build a Singapore Made For Families.

### PROPORTION OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES IN PUBLIC SERVICE

4 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs (a) how many women serve at the Permanent Secretary, Deputy Secretary, Ambassador-at-large, Director-General and Deputy Director-General, Head of Mission and Deputy Head of Mission levels, and their equivalents in the Ministry; (b) what proportion does women account for at each of these levels respectively; and (c) what proportion does women account for amongst the foreign service officers and total Ministry staff respectively.

**Dr Vivian Balakrishnan:** Women constitute about half of the staff and a quarter of the senior appointments at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## LESSONS FROM RECENT SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATION LIONHEART IN TÜRKIYE

5 **Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim** asked the Minister for Home Affairs (a) what are the lessons and experience that can be drawn for future deployment from the recent Operation Lionheart in Türkiye in terms of the techniques and technology used in the search and rescue of earthquake disaster victims; and (b) what are the steps that will be taken in recognition for the contributions of the SCDF officers and dogs in the K-9 Unit who participated in the successful mission.

**Mr K Shanmugam:** The Singapore Civil Defence Force's (SCDF) Operation Lionheart deployment reinforced the importance of leveraging technology to assist in rescue operations. The advanced video scope cameras and seismic sensors which SCDF used were vital for locating the two live casualties whom SCDF saved. SCDF and the Home Team Science and Technology Agency will continue to enhance our technological capabilities, such as robotising cockroaches for search and rescue operations.

A second takeaway is that during such high-stress missions, it is important to take care of the mental well-being of our contingent members and not just their physical health. Two psychologists were deployed as part of Operation Lionheart. They conducted regular psychological check-ins of the members.

We are very proud of our SCDF officers for stepping forward to help our Turkish friends in their hour of need, despite the risks and difficult operating conditions, and for their significant contributions to the rescue efforts. We will be nominating them for the SCDF Overseas Service Medal. As for their canine colleagues, we are looking at according them a special vest or collar of distinction.

## EFFORTS TO PREVENT JAYWALKING AND IMPROVE TRAFFIC INFRASTRUCTURE FOR SAFETY OF ELDERLY PEDESTRIANS

6 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Home Affairs in view of the increased number of accidents involving senior pedestrians, how will the Ministry work with LTA to (i) prevent jaywalking and (ii) improve traffic infrastructure for improved safety by providing more lifts in pedestrian overhead bridges.

**Mr K Shanmugam:** While the number of traffic accidents involving elderly pedestrians increased from 2021 to 2022, the Member may wish to note that the 2022 figures are comparable to pre-pandemic figures.

The Member may wish to refer to past replies to Parliamentary Questions on how the Traffic Police works with the Land Transport Authority (LTA) to prevent jaywalking by elderly pedestrians, as well as plans by LTA to progressively install more lifts at overhead bridges across Singapore.

## PERFORMANCE OF COMPANIES UNDER GLOBAL TRADER PROGRAMME

7 **Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis** asked the Minister for Trade and Industry (a) what is the number of companies under the Global Trader Programme (GTP); (b) what are their (i) revenues, (ii) pre-tax profits and (iii) taxes paid in the last five years; and (c) whether the GTP will lapse should the Government implement a domestic top-up tax that will top up multinational enterprises' effective tax rate to 15%.

**Mr Gan Kim Yong:** There are about 400 companies on the Global Trader Programme (GTP) today.

Mr Chua has asked for tax-related data of GTP companies. It would not be wise to reveal such detailed information on our incentive recipients as it would undermine our economic competitiveness. Nevertheless, the Member may wish to note that the concessionary tax rate for this incentive is either 5% or 10%, depending on the size of economic investments these companies commit to bringing into Singapore.

In line with the Global Anti-Base Erosion (GloBE) rules, Singapore's domestic top-up tax will apply to Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) with annual group revenues of at least 750 million euros. The GTP remains relevant for MNE groups below the revenue threshold.

## MEASURES TO REDUCE URBAN HEAT ISLAND EFFECT FROM TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE

8 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Transport what measures have been implemented or are being considered to reduce the contribution of transport infrastructure, such as flyovers, viaducts, MRT tracks and stations, to the urban heat island effect in residential estates.

**Mr S Iswaran:** Various measures have been implemented to mitigate the Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect, via (i) reducing heat absorption, (ii) improving energy efficiency, and (iii) reducing the overall carbon footprint.

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) designs our transport infrastructure to meet the Building and Construction Authority's Green Mark standards to reduce the amount of heat absorbed by transport infrastructure. Planters and inground planting are incorporated at above-ground structures, such as the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations and entrances and also new road viaducts, to reduce accumulation of incoming heat. Transport infrastructure also provides more shaded areas in urban environments, which help to reduce the amount of direct sunlight and heat absorbed by buildings, roads and footpaths, thereby reducing the UHI effect.

LTA also improves the energy efficiency of buildings through incorporation of green features in MRT stations and MRT and bus depots. These include solar panels on roofs, use of LED lighting, façade designs which optimise natural ventilation and natural lighting and exploring methods to optimise the use of air-conditioning.

In addition, the Ministry of Transport and LTA promote the use of public transport, which reduces an individual's carbon footprint by 70% or more, compared to driving an internal combustion engine car. We are also pushing ahead with our vehicular electrification efforts to reduce the carbon footprint among our private vehicle population.

LTA regularly reviews the design of existing infrastructure, system and materials to ensure that they are environmentally sustainable and may implement additional measures to mitigate the UHI effect. LTA is also actively involved in the research and development of new technologies, for example, using plastic-bituminous asphalt mixes, for roads for better performance in urban cooling.

### HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES SOLD UNDER ENERGY LABEL TICK RATING SCHEME

9 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment (a) in the last three years, what is the number of household appliances that are sold under the Energy Label Tick Rating scheme; and (b) of these, what is the breakdown amongst the different household appliances categories.

**Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien:** Based on the National Environment Agency's (NEA) surveys on the sale of regulated household appliances under the Mandatory Energy Labelling Scheme, about 570,000 units of air-conditioners, 340,000 units of refrigerators, 56,000 units of clothes dryers, 600,000 units of television sets and 18 million units of lamps were sold between 2019 and 2021.

### EXPORT OF WASTES NOT COVERED UNDER HAZARDOUS WASTE (CONTROL OF EXPORT, IMPORT AND TRANSIT) ACT 1997

10 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment (a) whether any safeguards or controls are in place over the export of trash, second-hand items, or other wastes not covered under the Hazardous Waste (Control of Export, Import and Transit) Act 1997 from Singapore to countries that prohibit the import of such items; and (b) if so, what are they.

**Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien:** This question has been addressed in the reply to Question Nos 8 to 10 for Oral Answer on the Order Paper for 20 March 2023. [*Please refer to "Steps Taken to Ensure Recyclables Collected in Government Campaigns are Completed and Not Misused", Official Report, 20 March 2023, Vol 95, Issue 93, Oral Answers to Questions section.*]

### DISRUPTION TO FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN FROM FLOODS IN MALAYSIA

11 **Miss Cheng Li Hui** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment whether the Ministry expects any disruption to the food import supply chain due to the ongoing floods in Malaysia.

**Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien:** We have not detected any food supply disruptions arising from the recent floods in Malaysia.

### PROVISION OF MULTI-RELIGIOUS PRAYER ROOMS AT AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITIES, POLYTECHNICS AND ITES

12 **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Minister for Education (a) whether multi-religious prayer rooms may be provided at all autonomous universities, polytechnics and Institutes of Technical Education; and (b) if not, what are the constraints that inhibit such a provision.

**Mr Chan Chun Sing:** The Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) are secular institutions which provide a common space for our young to develop a shared identity as Singaporeans, irrespective of race, religion or social status. Students and staff can access informal spaces on campus for their personal religious needs and our IHLs also have multi-purpose quiet rooms that can be used for various purposes.

### COST OF PLACING CHILD IN JUVENILE REHABILITATION CENTRE AND PLACE OF SAFETY

13 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development for each of the past five years (a) what is the average and median cost of placing a child in (i) a juvenile rehabilitation centre and (ii) a place of safety; and (b) how much and what percentage of the average cost is (i) provided by the Government or by the Court or (ii) raised from private fundraising by the respective homes.

**Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M:** Over the past five financial years, the average monthly cost of placing a child or young person in a juvenile rehabilitation centre (JRC) or a place of safety was \$5,400 and \$3,000 respectively, and the median monthly cost was \$5,100 and \$3,200 respectively.

The Government provides 100% funding for JRCs. For places of safety, the Government fully funds Court-ordered cases and covers 75% of the cost for cases not ordered by the Courts.

### EXPENDITURE ON MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION, PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

14 **Dr Shahira Abdullah** asked the Minister for Health for 2020, 2021 and 2022 respectively, (a) what is the Ministry's total expenditure on (i) mental health care treatment and (ii) mental health promotion and prevention; and (b) for each, what is their respective percentage of overall healthcare expenditure.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** The Ministry of Health's (MOH) healthcare budget is used to support the prevention, control and treatment of a wide range of conditions and diseases, including mental health conditions. An average of \$385 million was spent on mental health annually from FY2020 to FY2022. Table 1 below provides the breakdown of MOH's expenditure on mental health treatment and promotion and

prevention.

Table 1: Breakdown of MOH's Mental Health Expenditure across FY20-FY22

(\$'mil)	FY20 Actual Expenditure	FY21 Actual Expenditure	FY22 Projected expenditure
MOH's Healthcare Expenditure (excluding COVID-19 related expenditure)	\$11,256.1 mil	\$12,435.6 mil	\$14,509.1 mil
Mental Health Care Treatment	\$339.0 mil	\$369.9 mil	\$421.0 mil
% of MOH's Healthcare Expenditure	3.01%	2.97%	2.90%
Mental Health Promotion & Prevention	\$3.9 mil	\$9.2 mil	\$13.6 mil
% of MOH's Healthcare Expenditure	0.03%	0.07%	0.09%
MOH's Expenditure on Mental Health	\$342.9 mil	\$379.1 mil	\$434.6 mil
% of MOH's Healthcare Expenditure	3.05%	3.05%	3.00%

**ADOPTION OF TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIONS TO CARE FOR OLDER PEOPLE**

15 **Ms Sylvia Lim** asked the Minister for Health in terms of using technology to care for older people (a) whether studies have been done to compare Singapore's adoption of technologies and innovations with those of other developed countries in Asia; (b) if so, how does Singapore fare by comparison; and (c) what are the technological areas and innovation utilisations that Singapore can improve on.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** The Ministry of Health constantly monitors best practices and technological innovations in other countries, including in aged care, that are suitable to be used in local settings. However, we do not deliberately evaluate how we fare compared to other countries in this area, as circumstances differ across countries.

Over the years, we have embarked on numerous projects that use technology to enhance care for seniors. One example is a web-based health management system that integrates technology and home care services, such as smart home sensors, medication adherence and meal planning and delivery. Another project aims to create a safe home environment for seniors through a sensor-enabled fall detection system. Service providers also adopt technology in different ways, including leveraging telehealth for remote monitoring of vitals, checking in on mental and emotional well-being, and delivery of care services. There are also ongoing trials to bring companion robots that were developed in other countries, such as Japan, into nursing homes and community hospitals to improve seniors' social engagement.

**GLP-1 RECEPTOR AGONIST DRUGS APPROVED FOR TREATMENT OF DIABETES AND OBESITY**

16 **Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye** asked the Minister for Health (a) whether any GLP-1 receptor agonist drugs are currently approved for use to treat diabetes in Singapore; and (b) whether any of such class of drugs are under review to treat obesity, given the popularity of such drugs to treat obesity in countries, such as the US.

**Mr Ong Ye Kung:** There are three GLP-1 receptor agonist drugs which have been approved for use in Singapore by the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) for the management of diabetes. Of these, two have also been approved by HSA for the purposes of obesity management.

**PROFILE OF FIRST-TIMER HDB FLAT OWNERS AT POINT OF KEY COLLECTION**

17 **Ms Hazel Poa** asked the Minister for National Development at the point of key collection, what is the age and gender of first-timer HDB flat owners in the (i) 10th percentile, (ii) 90th percentile and (iii) median level for the periods from (i) 2017 to 2019 and (b) 2020 to 2022.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** The breakdown of first-timer family applicants by age and gender at the point of key collection to their new HDB flats for the periods requested is tabulated below.

Table 1: First-timer family new flat applicants\* at point of key collection

Sex	Period	Age		
		10 <sup>th</sup> percentile	Median	90 <sup>th</sup> percentile
Male	2017 to 2019	28	33	49
	2020 to 2022	29	33	48
Female	2017 to 2019	26	31	46
	2020 to 2022	27	32	45

Note: \* An application can include up to four applicants. The data includes applications where at least one applicant is a first-timer.

**HDB BTO APPLICANTS WHO DECLINED TO SELECT THEIR FLAT**

18 **Mr Gan Thiam Poh** asked the Minister for National Development (a) whether the 40% of HDB BTO applicants who declined to select their flat is consistent for each flat type, from 2-room to 3Gen flats; (b) if not, what are the respective rates of decline for each flat type; (c) whether the rate is the same for the different buyer groups of 2-room Flexi flat; and (d) whether the Ministry will consider different targeted

approaches for each flat type to prioritise those who need them most and are less selective about their choice of flat.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** The 40% non-selection rate is fairly consistent across the different flat types. In the 2021 Build-To-Order (BTO) exercises, the non-selection rate by flat type ranged from 36.1% (4-room flats) to 44.7% (2-room flexi flats).

For 2-room flexi BTO flats launched in 2021, the non-selection rates for seniors and first-timer (FT) families were both about 45%. Second-timer families and FT singles had non-selection rates of about 51% and 43% respectively.

Currently, applicants with greater housing needs are given priority in HDB's flat allocation system, such as through the different allocation quotas and priority schemes. To streamline flat allocation so that those who need a flat can secure one more quickly, we have recently announced a tightening of non-selection rules at the Ministry of National Development's Committee of Supply debate. This adjustment will take effect from the August 2023 BTO exercise and will apply across all flat types.

**MANDATORY TREATMENT ORDERS ISSUED IN ANIMAL CRUELTY AND ABUSE CASES**

19 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for National Development in each year for the past five years, how many Mandatory Treatment Orders have been issued against offenders in animal cruelty and abuse cases.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** A Mandatory Treatment Order (MTO) is a sentencing option for offenders who suffer from a treatable psychiatric condition that contributed to their commission of the offence. For appropriate cases of animal cruelty and abuse, the Court may make an MTO.

The number of MTOs issued by the Courts against animal cruelty offenders from 2018 to 2022 is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Mandatory Treatment Orders issued by the Courts**

2018	1
2019	1
2020	0
2021	0
2022	1

**APPLICATIONS UNDER SCHEME TO BUY BACK UNITS FROM ETHNIC INTEGRATION POLICY-CONSTRAINED FLAT OWNERS**

20 **Ms He Ting Ru** asked the Minister for National Development since the introduction of the scheme to buy back HDB flats from eligible Ethnic Integration Policy-constrained flat owners who have difficulty selling their flats (a) how many applications have been received under the scheme; (b) what is the breakdown by ethnic groups; and (c) how many flats have been successfully sold back to HDB.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** The Housing and Development Board (HDB) provides a range of assistance measures for flat owners who face genuine difficulties selling their flats when the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) quotas have been reached. These include giving EIP-constrained flat owners more time to sell off their existing flat if they have purchased another one or waiving the EIP limits in exceptional circumstances to allow them to sell their flat to buyers from any ethnic group. In cases where waiving the EIP limit may lead to further imbalances in the proportion of the various ethnic groups in blocks or neighbourhoods, HDB may consider buying back flats from eligible EIP-constrained flat owners.

In 2022, HDB received 411 EIP-related appeals: 14% of the appeals were from the Chinese ethnic group, 25% from the Malay ethnic group and 61% from the Indian/Others ethnic group. HDB acceded to 128 of the appeals, of which four of them were assisted through the buyback assistance measure. Most of the remaining cases were ineligible as the flat owners did not make regular attempts to sell their flats over a continuous period or had yet to own their flats for at least 10 years.

HDB will continue to extend assistance measures to flat owners who face genuine difficulties selling their flat when the EIP quotas have been reached.

**REVIEW OF APPLICATION PROCESS UNDER SALE OF BALANCE FLAT SCHEME**

21 **Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong** asked the Minister for National Development whether HDB can review its current process for application of flats under the Sale of Balance Flats scheme with the view to shorten the current total time taken for the sales process from the launch of sales exercise to the balloting and allocation of flats, given the relatively fewer numbers of such flats on sale each time.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** During each Sale of Balance Flats (SBF) exercise, flats that remain unselected from earlier Build-To-Order (BTO) sales launches, surplus Selective En bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS) replacement flats, and flats from other sources, such as those repurchased by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), are offered to Singaporeans.

Although SBF exercises may involve fewer flats than BTO launches, the former comprise a wider range of flat types, locations and prices. This means that the number of application categories, that is, towns and flat types, offered are higher under the SBF exercises, which also often see high flat application rates. These are factors which add to the balloting and selection time.

SBF applicants, typically, receive their ballot results about six weeks from the close of the application period and would be invited to book a flat within six months from the release of the ballot results.

HDB regularly reviews its sales processes and will continue to refine them where possible, to meet the needs of home seekers.

### **IMPACT OF HIGHER INTEREST RATE ON HDB MORTGAGE RATES AND LOAN REPAYMENTS**

**22 Mr Desmond Choo** asked the Minister for National Development with the Federal Reserve of the United States signalling higher and faster interest rate increases in 2023, what is the likely impact on HDB mortgage rates and extent of non-performing loans of HDB dwellers.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** The concessionary interest rate that the Housing and Development Board (HDB) charges for its housing loan is pegged at 0.1% above the prevailing CPF Ordinary Account interest rate and is currently at 2.6% per annum.

There are existing credit measures, such as limits on Loan-To-Value ratio and Mortgage Servicing Ratio to encourage prudent borrowing. Since September 2022, alongside measures on housing loans granted by financial institutions (FIs), HDB introduced an interest rate floor to compute eligible loan amounts for housing loans granted by HDB. These measures help to ensure that HDB flat buyers take on loans prudently and are better able to service their loans should interest rates rise further.

Nonetheless, we recognise that some HDB home owners may face financial difficulties when their circumstances change. We encourage such borrowers to reach out for assistance early.

For HDB home owners with housing loans granted by HDB, HDB has various financial assistance measures in place to help them. These include allowing them to temporarily reduce or defer their loan instalments, pay their arrears by instalments within a reasonable period; and/or extend their loan tenure to help reduce their monthly instalments.

For HDB home owners facing difficulties servicing their housing loans from FIs, they are encouraged to approach their lenders early. Government agencies have worked with FIs to establish standardised interventions for HDB home owners, which include potential loan restructuring solutions and early referrals to social service agencies.

### **VARY CHOICE OF LOCATIONS IN CONSECUTIVE BTO SALES EXERCISES**

**23 Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong** asked the Minister for National Development whether the HDB can vary the choices of locations featured in consecutive BTO sales exercises to give buyers more and different location options especially when buyers have not been successful in earlier sales exercises.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** The Housing and Development Board (HDB) endeavours to provide a good geographical spread in each sales exercise to meet the diverse needs and budgets of Singaporeans. However, land is scarce in Singapore and the planning and staging of sites in the Build-To-Order (BTO) flat supply are subject to site availability and readiness. Where new areas, such as Tengah, are being developed to provide housing, there is also the need to launch a sufficient quantum of flats to provide the critical mass to ensure viability of new facilities, for example, shops, and major infrastructure, such as rail lines.

In the recent February 2023 BTO launch, HDB offered about 4,400 flats in four towns comprising a mix of non-mature and mature estates of Jurong West, Tengah, Kallang Whampoa and Queenstown. HDB will offer about 5,400 BTO flats in Tengah, Bedok, Kallang Whampoa and Serangoon in May 2023.

HDB is prepared to launch a total of 100,000 flats from 2021 to 2025. This will comprise a range of flats in different locations to meet the diverse needs and budgets of Singaporeans. Flat buyers who have specific locational preferences can consider resale flats, where first-timer buyers can qualify for housing grants of up to \$190,000.

### **BUDGET MEAL CRITERIA IN NEW LEASE RENEWAL REQUIREMENTS FOR HDB RENTAL COFFEE SHOPS**

**24 Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** asked the Minister for National Development (a) what is the dollar amount that is deemed as a budget meal under the new lease renewal requirements for HDB rental coffee shops; and (b) in view of the new requirement to provide four budget meals spread across different stalls, what is the motivation behind the decision to reduce the number of meals from six to four.

**Mr Desmond Lee:** The price of the budget meal is proposed by the operator and reviewed by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) to ensure they are reasonable and remain affordable in reference to nearby options. This strikes a balance between the operator's business sustainability and the needs of residents for affordable food options. Rental coffee shops leased under the Price-Quality Method tenders typically provide budget food options with prices at around \$3 to \$3.50 across the estates.

Existing coffee shop operators who successfully tendered to rent their coffee shops under the Price-Quality Method will continue to provide six budget meals and one budget drink, as stipulated in the conditions of their original tender bids. However, operators of coffee shops who did not tender to rent their coffee shops under the Price-Quality Method will require time to make the transition with their stallholders. Hence, we will only require them to provide four budget meals and two drinks as a condition for the renewal of the coffee shop tenancy, until further review.



To further ease the transition for operators and stallholders to offer the budget meals, HDB is offering them a 5% discount on the renewal rents for a period of one year.

### **SPORTSG'S SHOE COLLECTION AND RECYCLING PROGRAMME AND OVERSIGHT**

25 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth what has been the cost of SportSG's shoe collection and recycling programme to the Government since the inception of the programme.

26 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (a) whether sub-contractors will continue to be used in SportSG's shoe collection and recycling programme; and (b) what plans are being made to improve oversight over such sub-contractors.

**Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai:** The updates on the recycling programme and its costs to the Government have been provided in the combined oral reply to Question Nos 5, 6, 7, 25 and 26 on the Order Paper for 20 March 2023. [*Please refer to "Second-hand Shoes Collected in Project for Recycling to Create Running Tracks Exported Instead for Overseas Resale", Official Report, 20 March 2023, Vol 95, Issue 93, Oral Answers to Questions section.*]

We have taken steps to tighten the process chain and remain committed to our Singapore Green Plan 2030 efforts to support the national sustainability agenda.

### **JOB ADVERTISEMENTS ON MYCAREERSFUTURE PORTAL AND VACANCIES FILLED**

27 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for Manpower for each year since 2020, broken down by each career sector respectively (a) how many job vacancies have been advertised on the MyCareersFuture portal; (b) what is the median number of resident and non-resident applicants per job; (c) what is the median number of resident and non-resident applicants who are selected for interviews; and (d) how many job vacancies have been filled to date.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** Only Singapore residents can apply for jobs on the MyCareersFuture (MCF) portal. MCF serves both unemployed individuals looking for a job as well as employed individuals looking for a new job. The majority of users are employed.

From 2020 to 2022, an average of 112,600 vacancies was posted on MCF daily. Most of these vacancies are from administrative and support services (27%), information and communications (13%), professional services (10%), accommodation and food services (9%) and manufacturing (9%).

There has been, on average, one applicant for every five job vacancies posted on MCF over this period.

Information with regard to selection for interviews and number of filled vacancies is not available as employers are not required to report such data. Moreover, employers and jobseekers adopt multiple recruitment and job search strategies simultaneously, and do not rely on any single portal.

Hence, we should look more holistically at the proportion of active MCF users who have found jobs, as it reflects the outcomes of their job search across all channels. From 2020 to 2021, on average, there have been about 240,000 active local MCF users each year, of which about half found new jobs within six months. Of those who did not find new jobs within six months, close to eight in 10 were already employed at point of application.

### **INVESTIGATION INTO CAUSE OF EXPLOSION AT AUDI SERVICE CENTRE AT 55 UBI ROAD 1**

28 **Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye** asked the Minister for Manpower with regard to the 7 March 2023 explosion at the Audi service centre at 55 Ubi Road 1 (a) whether the Ministry is investigating any possible unsafe workplace practices that led to the explosion; and (b) if so, whether the Ministry can provide a timeline on when investigations will be completed.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** The Ministry of Manpower (MOM), together with the Building and Construction Authority and the Singapore Civil Defence Force, are investigating the explosion. This will likely take a few months to conclude. MOM will take action against those responsible, including prosecuting them, if wrongdoing is found.

In the meantime, MOM has instructed Premium Automobiles Pte Ltd to cease all work involving the use, handling, collection, storage and disposal of automotive oils and fluids at the workshop and to appoint a workplace safety and health auditor to review their workplace safety and health management system. MOM will be sending a Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) alert via the WSH Council's Bulletin and the relevant Trade Associations and Chambers, to remind workshops on the safe use and handling of automotive oils and fluids. MOM will also share the key learning points from the incident with the industry when ready.

### **RE-EMPLOYED WORKERS GIVEN RE-EMPLOYMENT CONTRACTS OF TWO YEARS AND LONGER**

29 **Mr Desmond Choo** asked the Minister for Manpower what is the current proportion of re-employed workers who are given re-employment contracts of two years and longer.

**Dr Tan See Leng:** In 2021, 98.5% of re-employed workers<sup>1</sup> were offered re-employment contracts<sup>2</sup> of one year and above. We do not have further breakdown on the tenure of the contracts for two years and longer.

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Note(s) to Question No(s) 29:

<sup>1</sup> Data pertains to those working in private sector establishments each with at least 10 employees.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to new fixed-term contracts in the same organisation.

VERNACULAR SPEECHES

- Vernacular Speech by Dr Tan Wu Meng( )
- Vernacular Speech by Dr Tan Wu Meng( )
- Vernacular Speech by Ms Sun Xueling( )
- Vernacular Speech by Mr Saktiandi Supaat( )
- Vernacular Speech by Mr Sharael Taha( )