

PRESS RELEASE
SECOND REPORT OF THE PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

1. Under Standing Order 100(6), it is the duty of the Public Petitions Committee to consider all Petitions referred to it under the provisions of Standing Order No. 18 [*Petitions*], to classify such Petitions, prepare abstracts thereof in such form and manner as shall appear to it best suited to convey to Parliament all requisite information respecting their contents and the signatures attached thereto and to report the same from time to time to Parliament.

2. The petition of Mr Quek Chee Kian, Ms Koh Xin Hui Christabel, Ms Li Man Qi, Ms Lim Sing Hwee, Ms Saleha Binte Khamis, Ms Jesvinder Kaur and Ms Renemarlina Bte Osman entitled “More Inclusive Provision of Public Housing for Single Parents” was presented by Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang to Parliament on 11 September 2017.

3. In the course of its enquiry, the Committee requested the Ministry of National Development to provide a written response to the petition as well as a written representation that the Committee received from AWARE.

4. The Committee presented its report on the petition entitled “More Inclusive Provision of Public Housing for Single Parents” to Parliament on 29 November 2017. The Second Report of the Public Petitions Committee [Parl 10 of 2017] is attached.

5. Speaker Tan Chuan-Jin, the Chairman of the Committee said,

“The duty of our Public Petitions Committee is to consider, classify and summarise a petition in a form and manner that best conveys all the necessary information in a report to Parliament. The Public Petitions Committee has completed its work on the petition entitled ‘More Inclusive Provision of Public Housing for Single Parents’ where the necessary information, including the petition and a memorandum from the Ministry of National Development, is included in our report to Parliament. Members who wish to pursue the matter further in Parliament could do so by asking a question or introducing a motion.

In the past, petitioning was one of the few ways for the people to register their concerns to Parliament. However, modern technology has opened many new avenues for citizens to express their views directly to the Government and Members. Nevertheless, petitions continue to be an integral part of the parliamentary practice in many Westminster Parliaments as they symbolise the opportunity for a citizen to make his views known to the House.”

29 November 2017

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

For general queries, please contact:
Parliament Secretariat
Email: parl@parl.gov.sg

THIRTEENTH PARLIAMENT OF SINGAPORE

First Session

SECOND REPORT OF THE PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Parl. 10 of 2017

Presented to Parliament on

29 November 2017

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Members

Mr Speaker (Mr Tan Chuan-Jin)
Chairman

Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling

Dr Janil Puthucheary
Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Communications and Information and
Ministry of Education

Mr Desmond Lee
Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for
National Development

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang

Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng
Mayor, Central Singapore CDC

Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong

Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye

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SECOND REPORT OF THE PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

The Public Petitions Committee appointed pursuant to Standing Order 100(6) has agreed to the following report:

1 The petition of Mr Quek Chee Kian, Ms Koh Xin Hui Christabel, Ms Li Man Qi, Ms Lim Sing Hwee, Ms Saleha Binte Khamis, Ms Jesvinder Kaur and Ms Renemarlina Bte Osman entitled “More Inclusive Provision of Public Housing for Single Parents” was presented by Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang to Parliament on 11 September 2017. There were 7 valid signatories to the petition.

2 A copy of the petition (without the accompanying signatory pages) is attached as Appendix I. A summary of the petition is as follows:

The Petitioners pray for Members to amend sections 47 and 65 of the Housing and Development Act by inserting certain words and to refer the issue of access to public housing for single-parent families, and Singapore’s conformity with its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child as pertains to this issue, to a Select Committee for further consultation and deliberation.

3 The Committee further received a written representation (see Appendix II) from the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) proposing suggestions to reform housing policy for single parents.

4 Under Standing Order 100(6), the duty of the Committee is to consider all Petitions referred to it, prepare abstracts thereof in such form and manner as shall appear to it best suited to convey to Parliament all requisite information respecting their contents and the signatures attached thereto and to report the same from time to time to Parliament.

5 The Committee noted that the establishment of a Select Committee to formally inquire into a subject matter is through a motion agreed to by Parliament as provided for

under Standing Order 101. The Committee further noted that the authority to amend any legislation resides with Parliament.

6 The Committee agreed to submit the Petition and AWARE's written representation to the Ministry of National Development (MND) and to request the Ministry to provide a written response.

7 A written memorandum from MND to queries raised by the Committee was received on 20 November 2017 and is attached as Appendix III.

8 MND's responses to the Committee's queries are summarised below:

- (a) On the proposed amendments to sections 47 and 65 of the Housing and Development Act (HDA), MND assured the Committee that the Government was committed to housing the nation, and ensuring the well-being of children, and that achieving these goals do not require special legislative amendments. MND explained that the Housing and Development Board (HDB) already exercised flexibility in appropriate cases and changes could be effected at a policy level, for example, the Assistance Scheme for Second-Timers (ASSIST).
- (b) On referring the issue of access to public housing for single parents, and Singapore's conformity with its obligations under the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) to a Select Committee of Parliament, MND informed the Committee that since Singapore's accession to the CRC in 1995, Singapore had progressively made improvements and would continue to make improvements to enhance the protection, care and holistic development of children. As there is a well-established mechanism for periodic review of Singapore's conformity to obligations under the CRC, MND was of the view that there was no need to refer the matter to a Select Committee of Parliament. MND further informed the Committee that a range of Government agencies

are working together to ensure that no child would be without adequate housing, regardless of whether his or her parents were married or not.

- (c) On suggestions by AWARE to reform housing policy for single parents, MND informed the Committee that the Ministry would continue to consider greater flexibility to meet the needs of specific groups. MND reiterated that the housing policies aim to address the needs of Singapore Citizen households, without undermining self-reliance and family support. When MND is extending help to unmarried parents, MND is mindful not to undermine the prevailing social norm of parenthood within marriage. Together with relevant agencies such as the Ministry of Family and Social Development (MSF), MND would consider AWARE's suggestions as part of the regular reviews to improve policy and service delivery.
- (d) On the Government's engagement with civil society groups, MND informed the Committee that the Ministry welcomed dialogue with organisations who could provide constructive suggestions and be part of a collective effort to support families in need.

9 The Committee considered the petition and MND's memorandum, and has no further information to convey to the House.

Petition Presented to Parliament on 11 September 2017

Presented by Louis Ng (Member of Parliament)

PETITION

To the Honourable Members of the Parliament of the Republic of Singapore, in meeting assembled.

The humble Petition of MR QUEK CHEE KIAN, Koh Xian Hui (Christabel) (Ms), LI MAN QI (Ms)
Low Seng Guan (Ms), Ms SALEHA Binte KHANIS, Jesvinder MS Kaur and others of like opinion

(Ms) Rosemarina Bte Osman,

SHOWETH THAT:

Petition for More Inclusive Provision of Public Housing for Single Parents

Whereas all parents and children in Singapore should be equally supported to meet their basic needs, regardless of the marital status of the parents, and housing is a fundamental need central to the well-being of all members of our society and the life opportunities of children in particular;

And Singapore, as a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (the "Convention"), is subject to obligations under international law to:

- (i) take appropriate measures to assist parents to implement the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, including through material assistance and support programmes with particular regard to housing (Article 27, the Convention); and
- (ii) respect and ensure these rights of the child without discrimination on the basis of their parents' marital status (Article 2, the Convention);

Yet a comprehensive study conducted by the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) involving in-depth interviews with 55 single mothers (unmarried, divorced, widowed, abandoned or otherwise single) found that 95% who sought public housing faced difficulties in accessing public housing, including because:

- (i) unmarried parents and their children are not recognised as a family nucleus for the purpose of determining eligibility under public housing schemes; and
- (ii) long debarment periods prevent divorced parents from accessing purchase and rental flats;

Such problems need to be addressed by more inclusive rules and not solely by discretionary case-by-case exceptions, especially in view of the increasing number of single-parent families in

Singapore, a trend which is likely to persist;

Now we, the undersigned, stand with our concerned citizens in securing the basic needs of all our single parents, especially in regard to access to public housing of single parent families, and humbly petition the Honourable Members to:

1. Amend section 47 of the Housing and Development Act by inserting, immediately after paragraph (b) of subsection (1), the following paragraph:

“(c) Paragraph (b) of subsection (1) above shall not apply to any person who has legal custody of a child and who has been given care and control of that child, notwithstanding that—

(a) any other person may also have care and control of that child; or

(b) such person may have another child or children, in respect of whom he does not have care and control.”

2. Amend section 65 of the Housing and Development Act by inserting, immediately after subsection (2), the following subsection:

“(3) In exercising their powers under subsection (1) above, the Minister and the Board shall not discriminate against any person with legal custody of a child on the ground of such person’s marital status.”

3. Refer the issue of access to public housing for single-parent families, and Singapore’s conformity with its obligations under CRC as pertains to this issue, to a Select Committee for further consultation and deliberation.

Dated this 17 day of August 2017

Name: Quek Chee Kian

Name: Koh Xin Hui Christabel

Name: Li Man Qi

Name: Lim Sing Hwee

Name: Saleha Binte Khamis

Name: Jesvinder Kaur

Name: Renemarlina Bte Osman

No. of Signatures: 7

The above petition is in accordance with the provisions of the relevant rules in paragraph (5) of Standing Order No. 18 (Petitions).

Clerk of Parliament

Singapore, 18 August 2017

Written Representation from AWARE

1. We, the undersigned, are/were single parents, children of single parents, and people who support single parents. We urge the Singapore Government to reform housing policies to give single-parent families fairer access to stable, affordable housing.
2. At the moment, policies create disadvantage and hardship for parents like us, who are unmarried, divorced, widowed or have spouses who have abandoned us. We need stable homes with space for our children to grow up in. Complicated rules that favour married couples leave us with long waits, frequent house moves, overcrowding, strained family relationships, financial drain, and stress.
3. The current system of "case by case" appeals leaves many with unmet needs. We urge you to make the rules and system more inclusive through the following changes:
 - a. **Increase the income cap for public rental housing, and set it on a per-capita basis.** Right now, households cannot earn more than \$1,500 if they want to apply for or keep rental housing. This is especially unrealistic for a parent with one or more children. We should not have to choose between a roof over our heads and a better-paying job to give our children a better life.
 - b. **Allow divorced parents with full, split or shared care and control of children to rent public housing or buy subsidised housing immediately after sale of the matrimonial flat,** i.e. remove the 30-month bar on rental and three-year bar on purchase. This is in addition to the long wait we may have for the final divorce judgment to start queueing. We and our children need quicker access to new homes for stable lives: not rules imposing delay, instability and financial stress.
 - c. **Allow unwed mothers to form a family nucleus with their children to apply for HDB housing.** Currently, we can only purchase under the Singles Scheme at 35 years old. We can only buy smaller and less accessible subsidised flats.
 - d. **Make information about housing eligibility clearer and more accessible.** We find information on different schemes, rules or waivers - and how to qualify - on the HDB website difficult to understand. The website also leaves many queries unanswered. Front-line officers often do not proactively offer clear explanations of options. HDB should also be transparent with how its "case-by-case" approach works.
 - e. **Create a special unit to coordinate services for single parent families and reduce reliance on direct appeals for case-by-case decisions.** It is confusing and stressful, as well as inefficient, to have to run around to multiple channels (like social workers and MPs), with no assurance of success. As HDB is the agency responsible for public housing, more cases should be resolved with their direct support and consultation, not through MP referral and social workers.

Written Response from the Ministry of National Development

20 November 2017

I refer to the Committee's request for MND's views on the petition for more inclusive provision of public housing for single parents, specifically on:

- i. Whether MND will consider the petitioners' proposed amendments to Section 47 (Restrictions to Purchase) and Section 65 (Powers to Make Rules) of the Housing and Development Act (HDA);
- ii. Whether MND sees a need to refer the issue of public housing access for single parent families and Singapore's conformity with obligations under the Convention of the Rights of a Child (CRC) to a Select Committee for further deliberation;
- iii. Whether MND will consider the suggestions by AWARE to reform housing policy for single parents; and
- iv. What the Government is doing to address the concerns of the Petitioners, and whether there is a need for more dialogues and engagements with relevant advocacy groups.

(I) Legislative Amendments

2 The government is committed to housing the nation, and ensuring the well-being of our children. However, achieving these goals do not require special legislative exemptions for single parents. As such, MND does not intend to amend the Housing & Development Act (HDA), as proposed by the petitioners.

3 HDB already exercises flexibility in appropriate cases, and can also effect change at a policy level. For instance, the Assistance Scheme for Second-Timers (ASSIST) was introduced in 2013. This grants second-timer divorced or widowed parents priority access to a subsidised 2- or 3-room flat in the non-mature estates.

(II) Obligations under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of a Child

4 As a party to the CRC, Singapore is committed to ensuring that every child can achieve his or her full potential. To this end, the best interests of the child are a primary consideration when designing and administering policies, programmes and services. Since our accession to the CRC in 1995, we have progressively made improvements to enhance the protection, care and holistic development of our children, and will continue to do so. In relation to meeting the housing needs of children with single parents, a range of government agencies work together to ensure that no child is without adequate housing, regardless of whether his or her parents are single or married.

5 Singapore's CRC obligations are subject to periodic review by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, a body of independent experts charged with monitoring implementation of the CRC by state parties. There is also an Inter-Ministry Committee (IMC) which coordinates the work across various government agencies in implementing the CRC, engaging stakeholders and preparing our periodic reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

6 As there is a well-established and rigorous mechanism for periodic review of Singapore's conformity to our obligations under the CRC, MND does not see a need for further deliberation by a Select Committee.

(III) Housing Policy

7 Our public housing policies aim to address the needs of Singapore Citizen households, without undermining self-reliance and family support. When we extend help to unmarried parents, we are also mindful not to undermine the prevailing social norm of parenthood within marriage.

8 At the same time, it is not possible for our policies to cater to every case and circumstance. Instead, for cases which our policies have not covered, we evaluate them holistically and exercise flexibility to help various households with their housing needs, according to their circumstances. This includes helping households headed by single parents to buy a flat within their means, or providing rental housing for those who have no other housing options and no family support.

9 We will continue to consider greater flexibility to meet the needs of specific groups. We also agree that it is important to communicate our policies clearly, and ensure good service coordination. Together with relevant agencies such as MSF, we will consider AWARE's suggestions as part of our regular reviews to improve policy and service delivery.

(IV) Dialogue and Engagement

10 We value engagement with civil society groups, who provide rich insights from their specific lens and experiences. On the issue of public housing for single parents, we have engaged VWOs on their observations, and cases they have encountered.

11 Often, families in difficulty face multiple challenges, of which housing is one facet. We thus welcome dialogue with organisations who can provide constructive suggestions, and wish to be part of a collective effort to support families in need.

Minutes of Proceedings

4th Meeting

Monday, 27 November 2017

4.00 pm

PRESENT

Mr Speaker (Mr Tan Chuan-Jin) (*in the Chair*)
Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling
Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang
Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng
Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong
Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye

ABSENT

Dr Janil Puthucheary
Mr Desmond Lee

1. The Committee deliberated.

Report

2. The Chairman's report brought up and read the first time.
3. Resolved, "That the Chairman's report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph."

Paragraphs 1 to 9 inclusive read and agreed to.

4. Resolved, "That this report be the Report of the Committee to Parliament."
5. Agreed that the Chairman do present the Report to Parliament.

Adjourned sine die.
