

'Not entirely accurate' that singles are prevented from buying prime location flats: Desmond Lee

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The supposition that singles are prevented from buying brand new flats, as well as resale flats, in prime locations is "not entirely accurate", Minister for National Development Desmond Lee said on January 24.

Speaking at the closing of the fourth and final day of the annual Singapore Perspectives conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies think-tank, Lee explained:

"If you say one person, single, living all by yourself, then of course BTO eligibility does not allow you (to purchase such flats). But singles looking after parents, one or both, singles with their siblings, especially when parents are no longer around, and both remain single and want to care for each other, are also eligible."

Lee then pointed out that there were "many" resale five-room, four-room or three-room flats available on the housing market, which singles of these categories could buy at prime locations, such as Rochor.

The minister added, "But having said all that, housing policy needs to evolve. It has and will continue to do so."

Lee: Many singles sacrifice their well-being and possibility of setting up their own families to care for their parents

Lee was responding to a question about the accessibility of singles to HDB housing, in light of the following: the rising proportion of singles across all age groups, particularly those aged 25-34, and "non-traditional" family structures which have started to take root such as "singles, LGBT families, non-marital life partnerships."

Setting the context, the minister said that Singapore was "unique" as the majority of its people live in public housing.

This has enabled affordability, flexibility, people to have a stake in the community that they live in, as well as the ethnic diversity of neighbourhoods, he added.

As for singles, Lee said that the government was cognisant of the fact that many of them also live near or desire to live near to their parents to provide care.

In addition, many of them sacrifice their well-being and the possibility of setting up their own families to care for their parents, when their siblings make their own homes, resulting in the burden falling on their shoulders.

Lee said:

"So we've made adjustments along the way. And even recognising the challenges that single-parent families face — both divorcees as well as unwed parents, the challenges that they face, bearing the burdens all by themselves. We've made changes to housing eligibility."

Public housing in prime locations will not form the majority of public housing stock

With regard to public housing in prime locations, this is a new product that will not form the majority of Singapore's public housing stock, Lee elaborated.

In comparison, "we have lots of BTO flats that coming up — 100,000 within these five years, and we have resale flats that are made available, made more affordable through grants," he said.

Lee highlighted that in light of the number of prime location flats that the government currently intends to build, it has decided to "ringfence" the criteria for initial flat purchases and resale flat purchases in such areas, to BTO eligibility.

"The aim is to manage demand, especially for a new product, new policy, that already has quite challenging objectives that we seek to achieve," he added.

This measure is to also ensure that such flats remain affordable over time, the minister said.

Adjustments are being made over time

Lee pointed out that in the last decade, the government had started making changes by first opening up subsidised public housing to singles.

"There was huge demand. It was significantly oversubscribed, and it took many years before our housing programme could meet not just the needs of larger households and families, but also the aspirations of singles to own their homes," he said.

There is also the issue of limited land and resources, he said, which means housing allocation must be done in a way that meets needs.

Not even all married couples are eligible for public housing, as criteria has been put in to secure homes for those who need them more.

Lee added:

"So that is the change that evolves over time. And we are very mindful that as society changes, we'll have to continue to make adjustments along the way to all policies, including public housing policy."