

## Singaporeans' feedback sought on marriage and parenthood

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Over the next few months, the Government wants to hear from Singaporeans what they think about marriage and parenthood.

Manpower Minister Josephine Teo said that the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) has set up a section on the Heybaby.sg website for people to submit suggestions on how to better support young families.

The website is holding a series of monthly polls, which started yesterday, on topics relating to marriage and parenting. The surveys will run until August.

Speaking yesterday at a People's Association event in Bishan, Mrs Teo, who oversees population matters, said the Government has been helping families through housing, pre-school and community and workplace support. For instance, it has increased pre-school places and launched Build-To-Order flats with shorter wait times. More than half of employers now offer at least one formal flexible work arrangement.

"Now what we want to do is to cast the net wider," she said, through the use of social media to get more feedback from the public.

The NPTD, which formulates and coordinates policies on population and talent, will also explore solutions with community partners, youth, employers and parents through workshops and dialogues.

Singapore's total fertility rate dipped from 1.16 in 2017 to 1.14 last year, as young people take longer to find the right partner and start families later.

During the debate on the budget for the Prime Minister's Office earlier this year, Mrs Teo said that things are looking more upbeat for the population. Between 2014 and 2018, an average of 33,000 Singaporean babies were born each year. The corresponding figures for the two preceding five-year periods were 31,400 and 32,000.

Saturday's event in Bishan, which was attended by 39 families, was organised as part of the Embracing Parenthood movement, which has reached out to about 60,000 families through events and house visits in the last two years. The movement, launched by the People's Association in 2017, celebrates the birth of new Singaporean babies and aims to support young parents.

Mrs Teo, who has a son aged 21 and 19-year-old twin daughters, said: "The idea is to let parents know their decision to become parents is celebrated, and the community is fully behind them."

Madam Charlyn Li, 35, whose son is 7½ months old, hopes more infant care places can be provided and firms can be more family-friendly.

The part-time financial adviser placed her son on the waiting lists of childcare centres when she was pregnant as she had heard it was not easy to secure infant care slots.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Mathew Mathews said it is important for the Government to see what more can be done so that conditions, especially at work, make it conducive to start a family. "While the Government had always been consulting Singaporeans on this matter, a larger platform to capture such views will help them as they think of what more can be done to reconcile people's aspirations and reality."

Singapore Management University sociologist Paulin Straughan added: "We're hitting a roadblock of sorts. This pro-family stance has been on since 2000. I believe what the Government thinks it can do, it has already done. So the question is: What else can it do?"

She added, though, that it may be tough to get young people to give their views on a subject that may seem distant from them. "Young people today may have different aspirations and may not even see not getting married or having children as a problem, and this is the group that the Government needs to target."