

WHITE PAPER ON POPULATION: Enough land for 700,000 more homes

Population density to rise but quality of life will be sustained, say ministers

Jessica Cheam

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Singapore has enough land set aside to build 700,000 more homes by 2030, when the population is projected to be in the range of 6.5 million to 6.9 million.

New towns will be built in areas such as Bidadari, Tampines North and Tengah, and there will be more housing in the central region and in mature estates with pockets of land available, especially around transport hubs.

All these plans will be rolled out in tandem with nurturing the environment and heritage, said the White Paper outlining Singapore's population strategy.

The policy document forecasted slower but higher quality economic growth on the back of a "calibrated approach" to immigration and foreign workers, as Singapore grapples with the twin challenges of low fertility and an ageing workforce.

The population is estimated to reach 6.5 million to 6.9 million by 2030 in this scenario.

While the population density will go up from 11,000 people per sq km today to about 13,000 in 2030, the quality of life here will not be sacrificed, said ministers yesterday at a briefing.

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean noted that, at 13,000, Singapore's population density is still way below that of other cities such as Hong Kong, where the figure is 22,000 per sq km.

He assured Singaporeans that policymakers have looked ahead to ensure sufficient infrastructure to meet the needs of a larger population - and that there will not be a repeat of past miscalculations.

National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan added: "You can have a higher, seemingly highly dense rebuilt city but considered as highly liveable."

He said Singapore might be better off than some cities with smaller populations and a lower density.

"Population and density per se are important factors but they are not the only factors that determine liveability. The key is good planning, good infrastructure," he said.

In recent years, a heavy inflow of foreigners led to a squeeze on transport and housing, fuelling concerns over the cost of living.

On the review of Singapore's population strategy that led to the White Paper, DPM Teo said that "we don't look only at the long term, 2020 or 2030, but also to the medium term to make sure we address the current infrastructure issues that we are facing".

In the nearer term, some steps the Government has taken include adding 800 new buses over the next five years, 110,000 more public housing units and 90,000 private homes by 2016, and 4,100 new hospital beds by 2020.

Mr Khaw said that the Government will build a buffer "wherever possible" to cater to demand for homes.

But planners have to find that "sweet spot" in balancing demand and supply as the future is uncertain and projections are only estimates, he added.

"Underdo it then we have today's problem, overdo it then it is too costly for taxpayers... We have to find that sweet spot."

Observers said that it all comes down to adequate planning. Institute of Policy Studies research associate Christopher Gee said that "with the right planning and sufficient time to execute, the physical infrastructure can be built to accommodate the population".

Dr Tan Khay Boon, senior lecturer at SIM Global Education, noted however that it will be challenging to maintain a high quality of living with a bigger population.

"More communication with the public may be needed to address this concern," he said.

The ministry is releasing a land-use plan paper tomorrow to give more details.