

Call for answers on arrears issue from Aljunied residents

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While they were largely sympathetic towards those in genuine need who cannot pay their service and conservancy charges (S&CC), some residents living in estates managed by the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC) whom TODAY spoke with have urged it to be more transparent about the source of its high arrears rate and what it is planning to do to tackle the problem.

Calling on the town council to share more information about the issue, the residents said they wanted to know, for example, who are those who are not paying, why they are not doing so and what is being done about those in need.

Reactions culled from street interviews with 30 residents living in the estates showed that many adopted a sympathetic bent, but only if it involves those who are genuinely in need and cannot afford to pay. In such cases, they said, more should be done to help those in need.

Nevertheless, eight residents felt that whatever the case was, AHPETC needed to be more transparent about the issue.

Said Mr Christopher Tan, 26, who lives in a three-room flat in Hougang: "We have to pay our dues whether others do or not, so I don't think it is unfair. But I would want to know why people aren't paying up and how long the arrears have been overdue."

Mr Ng Soon Huat, 58, a Bedok Reservoir resident who works in the hotel industry, added: "I'll want to know why there's such a big proportion (of residents in arrears)? Why will they not want to pay?"

Another resident, Ms Carmen Chen, 31, a social worker who lives in Hougang, also wanted greater clarity.

"This will probably clear up any ambiguous guesses by the public or residents staying in the areas," she said, while adding that the town council had done "good work" in maintaining the estate.

Political watchers contacted also raised the transparency issue. Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan, for instance, called on town councils in general to provide a breakdown on the overdue amounts.

"Assuming a uniform profile of HDB dwellers across the island, why does AHPETC have a much higher proportion of arrears?" he said.

"A compassionate, or more lenient, approach in collecting S&CC may impose an unfair burden on those who pay their dues in a timely manner ... a pragmatic approach, while efficient, can come across as cold, administratively unforgiving."

Institute of Policy Studies' senior research fellow Dr Gillian Koh added: "... some may think that the WP is compassionate and even hope arrears in S&CC owed may be forgiven."

Others may feel that ... it is not fair if some pay and others don't, especially since the government now already gives GST vouchers, so that the poor are already assisted with their S&CC."

Dr Koh cited former opposition Member of Parliament Chiam See Tong, who was known to have charged lower S&CC for his Potong Pasir constituency years ago, but that also meant his estate's quality of services would differ.

"That can be another approach, but at least it is a declared one and everyone then pays an equally lower charge," she said.

The town council has been largely silent on the issue so far. Last week, its chairman Sylvia Lim said the matter would be addressed after audits on its financial statements are completed and made public.

In response to TODAY's queries, AHPETC's vice-chairman Pritam Singh reiterated that the town council is "currently checking the S&CC arrears data and will address this matter in due course".