

Gap in meeting needs of older Singaporeans: Heng Finance Minister hints that Budget 2018 will feature more support for the elderly

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A group of younger leaders have banded together to mull over what Singapore "needs to do differently in the coming years" as its population ages, underscoring how the issue has become one of the most urgent challenges for the Government.

Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat yesterday also hinted that measures to better support seniors will be a focus at the Budget presented on Feb 19.

At the Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Mr Heng said a group of leaders including Health Minister Gan Kim Yong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu, Minister for Social and Family Development Desmond Lee and Speaker Tan Chuan-Jin are pondering the challenges the elderly face.

They "are very concerned and are working together on this", he added.

It is not starting from scratch, he said, noting that the Government had established, in 2007, a Ministerial Committee on Ageing, which is chaired by Mr Gan.

Older Singaporeans, he said, face a slew of diverse worries, from healthcare needs to loneliness to finance - all currently addressed by different agencies and ministries.

"What it shows very clearly is there is a gap at the front line, in terms of how well we are delivering that service to the seniors who need it," said Mr Heng.

And so going forward, "we will have to think about looking at the issues in a more cross-disciplinary way, across agencies and ministries". He said the Government has to find ways for them to work better together.

"Practically every ministry will have to deal with this demographic transition."

Singapore today has around 500,000 people aged 65 and above. This is expected to rise to around 900,000 by 2030.

At the conference, which focused on ageing, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, who oversees the National Population and Talent Division, said more can be done to support seniors, such as redesigning jobs to help them continue to work and helping them take part in the gig economy.

One concern about Singapore's ageing population is the toll it could take on the economy.

An IPS study said it will cause a drag of 1.5 percentage points on per capita gross domestic product growth annually until 2060, assuming zero immigration and a stagnant fertility rate.

Monetary Authority of Singapore managing director Ravi Menon said that as a global city, Singapore cannot afford to grow too slowly.

A city with growth that is under 2 per cent annually will be unattractive to investors and talent, including its own.

Singapore's economy grew 3.5 per cent last year, from just 2 per cent and 1.9 per cent in the previous two years.