

What it takes to become a citizen

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Who can apply?

The Immigration & Checkpoints Authority (ICA) said an applicant must be:

- At least 21 years old and has been a permanent resident (PR) for at least two years; or
- Married to a Singapore citizen for at least two years and has lived here as a PR for at least two years; or
- A child who may be born outside Singapore but has at least one Singaporean parent

Once an ICA officer confirms the applicant's eligibility, an interview will be arranged.

The processing fee is \$100.

What is the criteria?

Applicants must show proof of good character, the intention to reside permanently in Singapore and the ability to financially support themselves and their dependents.

While there are no further details on ICA's website, there is a set of "definitive criteria", according to then Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Grace Fu in 2013 during the Population White Paper debate.

"(Selection) is based on a whole set of criteria. We will look at the economic contributions of the persons, education levels, family units applying together and their intentions. If you have the whole family applying for citizenship together, this will be given greater consideration.

"We review the criteria from time to time, making sure that they meet our immigration needs," she said.

Each PR or citizenship application for a foreign spouse is evaluated carefully to ensure that the marriage is stable and that the sponsor is able to support the family.

"Many of the foreign spouses I have seen have very good intentions of wanting to marry Singaporean men and wanting to settle down in Singapore. But they are unfamiliar with the place and the norms.

"Our PR and (Singapore citizen) criteria basically encourage them to make sure that the family has the ability to support them and that they would be working to maintain a stable marriage," said Ms Fu.

Successful applicants are required to renounce their foreign citizenship.

What can rejected applicants do?

Foreign spouses whose citizenship applications are rejected may be granted a Long-Term Visit Pass or Long-Term Visit Pass-Plus in the interim. These passes allow them to seek employment and also be entitled to some medical subsidies, just as a PR would.

This is to ensure that the immigrants are not a strain on society - they can settle down first, spend some time to understand our local culture and learn our languages, Ms Fu explained.

MP Darryl David suggests more requirements for new citizens

Want to become a Singaporean?

Pass a basic English test and do mandatory community work, said Member of Parliament Darryl David.

This was what the MP for Ang Mo Kio GRC suggested in his maiden parliamentary speech last Tuesday. It is on top of existing citizenship criteria by the Immigration & Checkpoints Authority (ICA).

Speaking to The New Paper last Thursday, the first-term MP explained that he is not trying to throw more obstacles into the citizenship application.

"The ICA has their own set of criteria when it comes to citizenship. We should continue to maintain these standards.

"Citizenship is not something that should be taken lightly or for granted... The aim is not to make the application process more onerous, but to help new citizens assimilate better," said Mr David.

The ICA said one of the eligibility criterion is to be a permanent resident (PR) for at least two years.

Mr David's suggestion stems from personal observations at a community event involving new citizens in his GRC.

He spoke to them in English, but was met with puzzled faces.

"You can tell by their reactions that they're not quite following what you're saying. I spoke to grassroots leaders and asked around.

"The feedback, indeed, was that there are times when new citizens perhaps don't have as good a grasp of the language as they should," said Mr David, who also speaks Mandarin.

Knowing basic English - the lingua franca of commerce and education among other things - is just one part of the equation to successful integration.

The other part is making sure that those who intend to sink roots here know Singapore's cultural norms, something that Mr David feels can be achieved through mandatory community work or even going through a course that is similar to our social studies curriculum.

Knowledge of a country is a requirement for citizenship in countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom.

This two-pronged approach will help identify PRs whose intentions are to make Singapore their home.

"I can't imagine why a PR, who is keen to make Singapore his home, would reject the opportunity to interact and work with Singaporeans.

"It's not just about money. We respect economic contribution, but can we have some community contribution too?" he said.

Helpful

Kerala-born Samir Salim Neji, 45, thought Mr David's idea will be helpful for new citizens like he once was in 2004.

"I think it's a good suggestion that ensures new citizens integrate more into the society and understand Singapore's culture... People coming from different countries, like India and China, will then be able to relate (to Singaporeans).

"There will be more understanding," said the managing director of a software company.

Among the comments on Mr David's Facebook post on the subject were many who supported his suggestions and thanked him for bringing it up in Parliament.

On the English language, Mr Vincent K. Zen wrote: "The pioneer leadership had slogged to nurture a dual language society, with the emphasis on English as the working language.

"If we do not protect this legacy, a lifetime of work will come to naught."

Another user Evelyn de Silva went one step further and suggested a test.

She said: "Brilliant! I completely agree. There needs to be some form of testing required before gaining citizenship. Australia provides a booklet which they study and get tested on."

National University of Singapore's sociologist Tan Ern Ser said a language requirement will be "nice to have", but he is uncertain about its implementation.

"I reckon most potential new citizens wouldn't find it too difficult to meet this requirement.

"Still, we shouldn't impose a requirement which, perhaps, at least 10 per cent of Singaporeans cannot meet," he said, referring to Singaporeans who do not speak English.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong pointed out that integration is multifaceted and language forms just one component.

Instead, it is more important to focus on adherence to social norms and values, he said.

Dr Leong added that Singaporeans have difficulty differentiating new citizens and transient workers.

"The ability to speak English among new citizens will not help if the majority of the transient workers can't.

"Enforcement of social norms and etiquettes to both foreigners and locals alike, including new citizens and transient workers, will help ease tension," he said.