

Govt seeks feedback on population issue

It lays out demographic challenges in paper, launches site to collect views

By PHUA MEI PIN

THE Government is ramping up its drive to engage the public on population, a current hot-button issue that it says has far-reaching implications for Singaporeans' opportunities and quality of life.

Yesterday, it released a comprehensive paper laying out Singapore's demographic challenges and dilemmas, and launched a website to collect feedback.

Among the questions posed by the paper are: how to raise birth rates, what immigration to have, and how to ensure a good living environment.

At the heart of the debate is the need to manage population growth, immigration and integration while trying to raise productivity to keep the economy going.

The ultimate aim, said the paper, is to come up with a policy that "strengthens our social cohesion, provides a good living environment for our people, and maintains our economic vitality".

The Government is expected to release a White Paper on popula-

tion by the end of the year which is expected to incorporate the feedback collected.

The population puzzle has become a complex issue, going beyond birth rates to the topic of how many immigrants and foreign workers should be taken in.

The National Population and Talent Division's paper - titled *Our Population, Our Future* - follows a flurry of research papers in recent months and is the first document to set out Singapore's demographic challenges in full.

In particular, policymakers are concerned about the potential impact of low birth rates, a shrinking working population and a drop in the old-age support ratio.

The paper notes that while immigration can help supplement the shortfall in births, "we recognise that we cannot grow our foreigner population indefinitely".

"The issues we have to deal with are closely inter-related and complex, with long-term implications for Singapore and far-reaching effects," it adds.

The paper was mentioned by

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong last night on Facebook. Responding to calls for him to address the issue at the National Day Rally, he said the population issue was "an important and difficult problem".

The chairman of the Government's feedback arm, Dr Amy Khor, said she hoped engagement would "bring about greater appreciation of Singapore's complex demographic challenges".

The Behavioural Sciences Institute director David Chan said the move will give the Government a chance to understand citizens' concerns, but added that it should take the feedback seriously.

"There should also be a genuine discussion on the validity and implications of the various basic assumptions underlying the economic and population models that frame the issues," he said.

Some Singaporeans were keen to respond. Human resource consultant Martin Gabriel, 45, said he would send ideas on parenthood, adding: "There must also be some system that can bring people together so they can exchange their experiences. Singles and married people can learn from each other about family life, not just read from a paper or the Internet."

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The questions posed by the paper cover issues relating to birth rates and immigration, and how to ensure a good living



environment. ST PHOTOS: ALPHONSUS CHERN, KUA CHEE SIONG

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