

RESIDENTS WANT TO KNOW AHPETC'S PLANS ON TACKLING PROBLEM

Call for answers on arrears issue from Aljunied residents

SINGAPORE – 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

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Ms Carmen Chen, 31
A SOCIAL WORKER WHO LIVES IN HOUGANG, CALLING FOR GREATER CLARITY ON THE ARREARS ISSUE

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.

* REMINDERS, HELP SCHEMES USED BY PAP-RUN TOWN COUNCILS

● At estates managed by People's Action Party-run town councils, up to three monthly reminders will be sent to residents who have not paid their service and conservancy charges (S&CC). By the third month, most of the town councils will also impose a penalty fee.

But before the penalty fee is imposed, town council officers will typically visit residents who default on payments to understand their predicaments. Advice on financial schemes they can tap, such as ComCare, or assistance in job matching, is then dispensed to those who need help.

The Temporary Estate Inspector Scheme offered by the Northeast Central Development Council, for instance, hires unemployed residents who have difficulty paying S&CC as temporary inspectors to identify faulty lights or water leaks around the estate. The money which they earn from the scheme will be used to offset their arrears.

Among the eight PAP town councils contacted by TODAY, four cited low-income families

as the main source of residents with arrears.

Bishan-Toa Payoh Town Council chairman Hri Kumar said a "disproportionately large" number of families in arrears he encountered live in one- and two-room flats.

"The failure to pay S&CC is sometimes a good indication of a deeper problem, and we have identified a number of needy families this way," he said.

Nevertheless, not all households with arrears are in financial hardship, the town councils noted. "Some (are) couples who are estranged or going through divorce and both parties refuse to pay, although they could afford to," said Mr Zainal Sapari, chairman of the Pasir Ris-Punggol Town Council. He added that residents who refuse to discuss a payment plan with the town council may be charged "as a last resort".

When contacted, the Workers' Party-run Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council did not address queries on how it manages arrears and the profile of households in arrears. **KELLY NG**

"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". **KELLY NG**