

→ CHAPTER 6

EMPOWERING THOSE IN NEED



Singapore's approach towards social support has evolved over the years. The Government has been doing more to support disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, and will continue to do so.

At the same time, we have sought to ensure that government actions do not lead to a greater sense of dependency and entitlement. Instead, we want government actions to complement and reinforce individual and family effort, as well as contributions from other stakeholders.

In particular, we recognise that the challenges of social mobility and inequality will get tougher in our next phase of development. We have been proactively dealing with these issues so we are not starting from a bad place. Our income inequality has been trending downwards. Social mobility in Singapore also remains higher than in other advanced countries.

But like all advanced nations, we run the risk of becoming more stratified and less mobile as our society develops. There is a natural tendency for families with greater means to pass on advantages to their children, enabling them to do even better. Over time, those from lower-income households will find it harder to catch up, and their children will also face many starting disadvantages.

We will do more to provide equal opportunities, temper unequal outcomes and prevent people from getting trapped in a permanent underclass. This requires intensive collective effort by all of us — the Government, social workers, employers, unions, community groups, families and individuals.

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As citizens, there's a lot more that we can do for the lower-income families to go beyond the basic needs."

- Ms Keerthana Keshaini, Student, Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) Care Pillar Engagement with Post-Secondary Education Institutions (PSEIs), 15 November 2022



Financial assistance is important as it takes care of basic and immediate needs. But this alone will not be enough because the problems faced by vulnerable families are often complex and multi-faceted. We therefore need to consider ways to provide more intensive and holistic support, while partnering families to achieve success on their own terms. Importantly, families themselves must be able to sustain their progress.

We need to shift our approach from social assistance to social empowerment. This will strengthen families' sense of agency and ownership over their own circumstances, and give them the confidence to work towards improvements in their lives.



We already see the benefits of social empowerment in the Fresh Start Housing Scheme.

- ▶ Since 2016, the scheme has helped Second-Timer families with young children living in public rental flats own a home again.
- ▶ Eligible families can receive a housing grant if they meet certain conditions, such as stable employment, well-managed finances and regular school attendance of their children.
- ▶ The families also receive support from a social service agency to help them stay on track for home ownership.



Besides the resources and support that agencies and institutions bring to the table, the community itself has its strengths too. I believe there is a role for both the community and agencies to play, to help families become more self-reliant."

- Participant at MSF Care Pillar Engagement with SG Cares Community Network, 22 May 2023

We will extend this approach of social empowerment to further strengthen our social support system.

In particular, we will do more to uplift lower-income families, close the early gaps in their children's development, and better support persons with disabilities (PwDs).

▶ **Uplift lower-income families towards sustained progress**



▶ **Close early gaps for children from lower-income families**



▶ **Make Singapore a more inclusive society for PwDs**





Uplift Lower- Income Families Towards Sustained Progress



Many lower-income families are taking steps to build better lives for themselves by finding more stable jobs, saving up to buy a house, and supporting their children's education.

Despite their effort, some families find it challenging to sustain progress. In particular, families with children residing in public rental flats often face complex challenges, juggling many work and family commitments. This affects their ability to plan for goals that require substantial resources, such as saving up to buy a home or being better prepared for unanticipated challenges.

Today, these families are supported by Community Link (ComLink), where they have access to coordinated assistance from ComLink officers and volunteers. With ComLink officers acting as a single point of contact, families spend less time and effort navigating multiple unrelated social support services. This increases their capacity to plan for their future.

National University of Singapore (NUS) students coming on board as ComLink befrienders

Since 2022, over 430 NUS student befrienders have been or are progressively being trained and paired with ComLink families across Singapore.

The strong and sustained support from students from NUS and other Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) highlights how our youths are playing their part in Singapore's social compact and taking action to make a difference to fellow Singaporeans in need.



Going further, ComLink officers will work with each family to co-develop customised action plans that are more tailored to each family's needs.



Customisation alone is not enough to sustain progress. Drawing on lessons from the Fresh Start Housing Scheme, we will also empower ComLink families by introducing additional measures that are tied to progress on specific action plans that they take responsibility for.

For example, we could provide higher and longer-term financial payouts to these families, so long as they take active steps towards their longer-term goals, be it staying employed and securing financial stability, saving to purchase their own home, or ensuring their children attend preschool regularly. In this way, we reduce the short-term resource pressures on families and help them with their efforts to improve their life circumstances.



We also welcome the contributions of businesses and the wider community to uplift these families.

This is why we have brought in corporates such as DBS Bank Limited (DBS) and Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation Limited (OCBC) to invest their time and resources in ComLink programmes, including the new schemes in the works. More can step forward to offer financial resources, volunteer their time as befrienders for community programmes, or provide other support in-kind.



Corporates' support for ComLink

The Families100 Programme by OCBC is a long-term ComLink support initiative which started in May 2023. For 12 months, 200 staff volunteers will contribute 10,000 hours to provide close support to 100 ComLink families that live in public rental flats with their children.

OUTCOME

Through this programme, OCBC provides access to sports and creative avenues to help children and youths pursue their interests and motivate them to continue their academic journey. OCBC staff befrienders also give budgeting and money management tips to parents to help them better manage their finances. They will also provide guidance on attending the right training courses and applying for suitable grants to help individuals upskill and improve employability.



DURATION



12 months
10,000 hours

PARTICIPANTS



200
staff volunteers

PURPOSE

To provide close support to 100 ComLink families that live in public rental flats with their children.

Since 2022, DBS has been working closely with MSF Social Service Offices to co-create customised financial literacy programmes for ComLink families.

OUTCOME

The aim is to equip ComLink families with skills that will help them better manage their income and expenses. DBS also provides volunteer trainers, facilitators and in-kind sponsorship of class materials to run these programmes.





Essentially, we will move from the current ComLink support programme to an enhanced ComLink+ approach, where we journey with families over the longer haul. Together with an increased role and involvement of community partners, families will be empowered to improve their own lives. This exemplifies the outsized impact that we can make when our social compact is strong and everyone plays their part.



Close Early Gaps for Children from Lower-Income Families

Children's early years are crucial to their development. Attending quality preschool can boost children's confidence and social skills, giving them a strong foundation for life.

Unfortunately, fewer children from lower-income families are enrolled in and attend preschool regularly, particularly at ages three and four. We need to step up efforts to raise preschool enrolment and attendance for these children so as to reduce the risk of their development lagging behind their peers when they reach Primary One.

Many parents in lower-income families are focused on earning a living; their priority is to feed their children and shelter their family in a safe home. As a result, they may be less aware of the benefits of sending their young children to preschool, or less able to prioritise preschool enrolment. Others may be held back by cost — unsure if they can pay for the fees throughout the children's preschool education.



I agree education plays a big part in moving up the social ladder. I want to make a difference in the field, especially in changing the mindset of preschool educators in Singapore, where I can improve myself, my knowledge and my skillsets. It is a job that is very much needed.."

- Participant at MSF Care Pillar Engagement with PSEIs, 2 February 2023



Tackling long-term school absenteeism is key to helping students from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve their full potential. With education, uplifting lower-income families is possible and society will be fairer eventually.”

*- Mr Dawa T. Sherpa, Education Officer,
Outram Secondary School, MSF call for ideas
and suggestions from partners and volunteers*

We will therefore make the following moves:



We will facilitate and encourage more lower-income families to enrol their children in preschool by age three, so they can benefit sufficiently from preschool, learn alongside their peers and start their formal education on a stronger footing.



We will extend full childcare subsidies to all lower-income families based on their income tier, so parents can be assured that they can afford to send their children to preschool.

We note that even after enrolling in preschool, children from lower-income families may have poorer attendance and higher learning needs due to disadvantages in their home environments.



To better support these children's attendance and learning needs, we will provide selected government-supported preschools with additional funding or manpower to strengthen their curriculum and professional capabilities.

The additional resources will enable government-supported preschools to provide more timely and effective support to children from lower-income families. This includes engaging their parents more frequently to ensure that they send their children to school regularly, as well as implementing measures to help children with learning needs keep up with their peers.



Parents remain the most important educators in children's early years, especially at home. However, some parents may not know how, or may lack the resources to create a positive home environment in their children's early years.

The Government has been progressively expanding the KidSTART programme nationwide, to equip more lower-income parents with the knowledge and skills to nurture their children's development.



To help more parents build their confidence and ability, we will scale up parenting support programmes.

Through these, we hope parents will learn different parenting approaches, skills and strategies to manage their children's behaviour, and to strengthen bonds with their children. Parents will also be able to connect with other parents with similar experiences and learn from one another. This will enable parents to better support their children's development, to give them a strong foundation for life.

Together, these moves will empower more lower-income families to give their children a better start in life.

Make Singapore a More Inclusive Society for Persons with Disabilities



PwDs are important members of our society. They have aspirations, and they want to participate in and contribute to our society. However, they face circumstances beyond their control and require more assistance to fulfil their full potential in life.

Since the first Enabling Masterplan (EMP) in 2007, Singapore has come a long way in building a caring and inclusive society for PwDs. As a society, we have made much progress in ensuring that PwDs are well supported in areas such as their education, participation in sports, the use of assistive technology, as well as the design of our built environment to help them live, work and play more easily.

In our refreshed social compact, we want to empower PwDs across all stages of life. In 2022, the Government and partners in the private and people sectors came together to set out Enabling Masterplan 2030 (EMP2030). Our vision is to make Singapore a more inclusive society by strengthening lifelong learning for PwDs and creating more inclusive environments where they can participate and live independently.



Update on EMP2030

The EMP2030, launched in August 2022, sets out the vision for Singapore to be an inclusive society in 2030, where PwDs are enabled to participate and contribute fully to our society.

The Government will work towards this goal by partnering the people and private sectors to implement all recommendations of the EMP2030. We have made progress across the EMP2030's three strategic themes.

STRATEGIC THEME 1

Strengthen support for PwDs' lifelong learning in a fast-changing economy

The first Enabling Business Hub (EBH) will be launched by end 2023.

- ▶ The EBH will help more PwDs join the workforce by collaborating with employers and industry associations to showcase inclusive hiring practices and help businesses implement these practices.
- ▶ The EBH will also bring jobs closer to where PwDs live and match them to suitable employers in the region based on the PwDs' skills.

STRATEGIC THEME 2

Enable more PwDs to live independently

The first Enabling Services Hub (ESH) was launched in August 2023.

- ▶ The ESH will develop a stronger ecosystem of support for PwDs in the community with its befriending services, social recreational activities, and courses.
- ▶ Through collaborations with community partners, such as People's Association (PA), SG Cares Volunteer Centres and CaringSG Limited, PwDs and others in the community will be able to participate in activities together, nurturing a more inclusive culture in the neighbourhood.

Update on EMP2030

STRATEGIC THEME 3

Create physical and social environments that are more inclusive to PwDs



Plans are on track to install 24/7 on-demand audible traffic signals at 325 pedestrian crossings by end 2024.

These will be in 10 town centres that have higher proportions of residents with visual impairment. The enhanced crossings will enable persons with visual impairment to navigate their journeys independently.



Building legislation amendments were introduced in June 2023 to accelerate accessibility upgrading in buildings.

Owners of commercial and institution buildings that lack barrier-free access will have to provide basic accessibility features whenever additional alteration works are carried out in the buildings.



The Government has collaborated with the College of Family Physicians Singapore to offer a Family Practice Skills Course for general practitioners, which equips them in caring for persons with intellectual disabilities.

A Community Integrated Health Team has also been piloted in partnership with a social service agency and a specialist outreach team from the Institute of Mental Health. These multi-disciplinary teams offer home- or community-based care for persons with intellectual disabilities who have complex health needs, as well as their caregivers.

We will continue to track progress and review our initiatives and schemes, where necessary, to realise this EMP2030 vision.



We will help PwDs make full use of the opportunities available to them to grow, learn and work alongside their peers, during and beyond schooling years.



We will help PwDs to actively participate in community life and achieve gainful employment.



We will design our physical and social environments to be more inclusive so that PwDs can participate fully in our community programmes and activities.

Ultimately, everyone has a part to play to build an inclusive society — one where PwDs are empowered to live and participate in fully. For example, Singaporeans can care and show more kindness to PwDs, businesses can be more open to hiring PwDs, while communities can step up on collaborations with the Government to improve the caregiver support landscape.



EMPOWERING THOSE IN NEED IN A SNAPSHOT

Singapore's approach towards social support has evolved over the years, as the Government continues to do more to support disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

However, the challenges of social mobility and inequality will get tougher as our society develops. We need to address these challenges to ensure that Singapore remains a society that provides opportunities for all, regardless of our starting points.

To achieve this, we will further strengthen our social support system by shifting our approach from social assistance to social empowerment. We will do more in the following areas:



Uplift lower-income families towards sustained progress

- ▶ We will provide additional support through ComLink+, which will be tied to progress on specific action plans that the families take responsibility for.
- ▶ We ask that businesses and communities contribute financial resources, volunteer their time, or offer other support in-kind to help lower-income families.
- ▶ We urge Singaporeans from lower-income families to make use of available support so that, together with their hard work and effort, they can sustain progress in improving their life circumstances.



Close early gaps for children from lower-income families

- ▶ We will make preschool education more affordable and accessible to children from lower-income families. Preschool operators will also be better resourced to support these children.
- ▶ We will better support parents in nurturing their children's development.
- ▶ We ask that parents continue to do their best to create a safe and conducive home environment, nurture their children's development, and keep their children enrolled and regularly attending preschool.



Make Singapore a more inclusive society for PwDs

- ▶ We will strengthen lifelong learning for PwDs, enable them to live independently and create more inclusive environments for them to live in.
- ▶ We will empower PwDs to make full use of the opportunities and amenities provided for them to participate in and contribute to our society.
- ▶ We ask that Singaporeans, businesses and the community also play their part in building a fairer and more inclusive society for PwDs.