

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES FROM THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON PROMOTING GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS AND RESOLVING COMMUNITY DISPUTES

1. Background

1.1. Harmonious relations between residents in a community are an important aspect of quality urban living. In consultation with stakeholders, an inter-agency committee led by MCCY proposed the following framework for resolving community disputes:

- a. promoting good neighbourliness to minimise the occurrence of disputes;
- b. encouraging neighbours to resolve issues amicably between themselves in the first instance,
- c. promoting community mediation as the primary source of assistance, if they need help to settle differences and mend neighbourly relations where disputes arise;
- d. exploring avenues of dispute resolution, including a tribunal to adjudicate intractable cases as a measure of last resort.

1.2. Views on the framework were sought from the public from 09 Mar 2014 to 21 Apr 2014. See [Appendix](#) for the public consultation document. There were 87 responses. This document summarises the feedback and suggestions received.

1.3. In addition, focus group discussions were also conducted with 400 participants in 2013. Participants included mediators with the Community Mediation Centre, community and grassroots leaders, and frontline officers from government agencies who deal with community disputes.

2. Good Neighbourliness / Community ownership

Q. What would help us build closer ties with our neighbours?

Q. How can closer ties with neighbours help us deal with disputes and complaints?

Q. What kind of disputes between neighbours might we need help with?

Q. What types of interventions by public agencies might be helpful? Who in our community could we turn to when disputes arise, and why?

2.1. Every individual who responded to the questions on encouraging closer ties with neighbours affirmed the importance of good neighbourliness, and noted that friendship and interactions between neighbours are important factors to prevent/reduce conflict. There were helpful suggestions to build neighbourly ties, including:

- Mobile hawker centres and mobile shopping opportunities at residents' doorsteps for residents to mingle with each other.
- Neighbourhood committees to help new residents when the latter move in so as to build good relations and share on social norms in the neighbourhood.
- Publicise examples of neighbourliness by having neighbourhood-based initiatives to collate stories, which will be publicised through notice boards.
- The need for a push to help people break out of the daily norms of not greeting, not praising and not doing something nice for their neighbours. Have a "Happy Neighbours Day" designated to celebrate neighbourliness, to give neighbours the opportunity to do kind deeds and host community events.

2.2. Participants in the focus group discussions shared that good neighbourliness, or the kampong spirit, was a value which had to be re-kindled in young Singaporeans. The value of informal community builders who help strengthen neighbourly bonds was also noted. For example, a focus group discussion participant recalled a childhood encounter of a then-13-year-old neighbour who kick-started a block donation effort. The boy handed out letters to his neighbours and attached a candy to each letter. The appeal was tremendous; neighbours brought their donated items to his doorstep and conversations ensued.

2.3. There were also calls to step up public education efforts to engender greater civic mindedness and mutual consideration.

2.4. We are glad to note that the feedback validates the views garnered through last year's focus group discussions, **that investing in neighbourly relations is the best insurance against bad disputes**. We will thus work with our community partners like the Singapore Kindness Movement to introduce more of these ideas into everyday practise. At the same time, as awareness increases, we are confident that more people will play their part in becoming better neighbours themselves.

3. Mediation

Q. How effective do you think mediation is?

Q. Why might you want / not want to give mediation a shot?

3.1. During mediation, a neutral third party (the mediator, who is typically a trained volunteer from the community) assists disputing parties to reach a mutually acceptable agreement. The mediator does not impose a solution or a decision on the parties, but helps them to discuss the issues and arrive at their own outcome in a calm and objective manner. Mediation can take place

either informally, facilitated by grassroots leaders within each neighbourhood, or formally, through the Community Mediation Centre (CMC). The public consultation and focus group discussions sought views on both informal and formal mediation.

- 3.2. On informal mediation, most respondents saw benefits in having grassroots leaders actively exercise their good offices to bring down the temperature of minor disagreements. Respondents felt that this could stem the tendency for some disputes to escalate, and was preferable to interventions by government agencies.
- 3.3. On formal mediation at the Community Mediation Centre, most respondents agreed that this avenue could help reach an amicable resolution. On the other hand, some doubted the effectiveness of formal mediation from their own experience, especially when the other party appeared to be unreasonable and/or refused to show up for mediation.
- 3.4. There was a suggestion for other parties, like neighbours, to apply for disputing parties to go for mediation if the parties themselves were unwilling to go for mediation.
- 3.5. We are heartened that people largely support mediation, which is a good path to finding mutually-acceptable solutions. This path can preserve relationships between neighbours and is beneficial especially when they will have to continue to live alongside each other.

4. Tribunal

Q. Should there be a Tribunal to adjudicate the most difficult cases?

Q. Some people refuse to attend mediation. Should a tribunal be able to mandate mediation?

- 4.1. On the proposed tribunal, the majority of respondents said that they supported this initiative as a *last resort* to be used where other interventions have been tried and failed. The focus group discussions also emphasised that the proposed tribunal should be used as a last resort for recalcitrant cases of anti-social and inconsiderate behaviours.
- 4.2. There were mixed views on the proposal for the tribunal to mandate mediation. Those in favour of mandating mediation said it would be a useful platform to bring disputing parties together. However, some trained mediators cautioned that mandatory mediation might undermine the ethos of mediation and could be used by an unreasonable neighbour to punish another neighbour.
- 4.3. A common theme running through feedback on this topic was that by the time a dispute was brought to a tribunal, it was likely that the relationship had

reached an irreparable breakdown and mediation could be too late; thus upstream measures were more important.

4.4. In line with the responses, we are exploring a suitable avenue of last resort for residents who want adjudication on intractable cases.

5. Other recommendations

5.1. The public consultation drew out personal stories of undesirable behaviours. These stories were usually coupled with calls for agencies to enforce rules against repeated anti-social behaviours.

5.2. Community practitioners at the focus group discussions, however, cautioned against specific rules that governed neighbour behaviours because the rules could be used in a vengeful manner and aggravate the bad blood between neighbours.

5.3. We are looking at how frontline action can be taken against blatantly anti-social behaviours. However, frontline interventions should not crowd out valuable efforts by neighbours to negotiate and compromise when disagreements arise.

6. We are grateful to all the individuals who took the time to respond to this consultation and participate in the discussions.