

**ROUND-UP SPEECH BY MR MASAGOS ZULKIFLI,
MINISTER (SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT)
AT THE SECOND READING OF THE
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SERVICE (AMENDMENT) BILL
ON 13 JANUARY 2026**

1. Mr Speaker, I thank the Members for their comments and support for this Bill. I hear their aspirations, their caution, and I take them in good spirit. I am heartened by the care shown for the social service sector and the endorsement of NCSS' work.
2. Members have expressed broad support for NCSS' role as a sector developer, the value of sector membership and the need for a diverse and representative Council. I will now address the questions and clarifications that Members have raised.

A. SECTOR MEMBERS ARE INTEGRAL PARTNERS

3. Ms Lee Hui Ying, Mr Cai Yinzhou, Mr Melvin Yong, and Mr David Hoe asked for clarifications on sector membership.
4. On who will qualify, an organisation must have the primary function of providing or directly supporting the provision of a social service in Singapore. NCSS will look at each application and assess the organisation's objectives and activities against these criteria.
5. Today, there are about 400 Full Council Members, and close to 100 Associate Council Members. With the changes, all Full Council Members will be transitioned to become sector members. So, about 400 of them, since the criteria for Full Council membership align with those of sector membership.

Associate Council membership will be ceased. Current Associate Council members who meet the criteria are welcome to apply for sector membership. But there may be some organisations, such as those whose primary functions do not relate to social services within Singapore, which would not qualify for sector membership. Such organisations are a subset of all Associate Council Members, and joined NCSS at a time when the membership criteria was much broader. NCSS will ease this transition, including honouring any existing support until its expiry.

6. On social enterprises, the Singapore Centre for Social Enterprise (raiSE for short), established by MSF, serves as the dedicated membership body to provide them tailored support and resources. Moving forward, if a social enterprise also wishes to be a NCSS sector member, its application will be assessed, in consultation with raiSE, on a case-by-case basis, depending on its objectives and activities. Nevertheless, as a sector developer, NCSS will work with partners in the ecosystem regardless of their sector membership status, to find solutions to our social challenges.
7. Indeed, over the years, NCSS has been working closely with raiSE – itself a current NCSS member organisation – to build stronger enterprise capabilities in the sector for financial sustainability, and partnerships between SSAs and social enterprises to better serve users.
8. Mr Yip, Mr Hoe and Dr Hamid Razak asked about the rejection and revocation of sector membership and appeals to the Minister for such decisions, emphasising the importance of transparency and independence of such processes. In particular, Mr Yip asked if agencies that challenge policy gaps could be misinterpreted as acting against the public interest.

9. I assure Members that we want to continue to have constructive conversations. In fact, we welcome diverse views and suggestions, including surfacing challenges and gaps in existing policies and programmes, that can help us strengthen the ecosystem.
10. The aim of these powers is to ensure that organisations meet the criteria for sector membership, and to safeguard the diverse yet cohesive, responsible and respectful social service sector that we have built over the years. This is also the thinking behind the clause requiring that sector members' aims, objects and activities do not go against public interest, public order or national harmony. Similar clauses exist in other legislation.
11. The appeal mechanism is also precisely in place as a check and balance for NCSS' sector membership decisions. Sector membership applications will first be assessed by the Council. Appeals will only go to the Minister if an applicant disputes a decision that the Council stands by. We agree with Mr Hoe on the importance of transparency, and the appeal processes and timelines will be clearly communicated.

B. COUNCIL APPOINTMENT FOR GREATER DIVERSITY

12. I will now move on to the Council-related comments.

13. I would like to thank Members for their suggestions and comments, including Prof Kenneth Poon for sharing his personal experience as an NCSS Board Member. Ms Elysa Chen, Mr Hoe, Ms Lee and Mr Yip asked how we can ensure diverse representation under a fully-Minister appointed Council.

14. Unlike the previous elections system for the NCSS Board, an appointment approach gives us greater certainty that we can constitute the Council with people from various backgrounds, including candidates from organisations of different sizes and nature, and with the necessary range of skills and experiences. We have provided that at least half of the Council, excluding the Chairperson, must come from sector members' nominations, as a clear indication of our commitment to ensure that the sector is represented on the Council. To further expand the range of perspectives, we have also proposed amendments to allow employees of sector members to be appointed onto the Council, since their expertise and experience will provide important ground perspectives, as Ms Lee also observed.

15. Based on our past experience with the NCSS Board, the results of elections are dependent on who chooses to run at the Annual General Meeting (AGM), how well-known the candidates are amongst those voting, and sometimes, how influential the nominating organisation is. The shift to a fully appointed Council allows for the composition of the Council to be considered as a whole, so that it better represents the sector and has the necessary mix of skills and perspectives.

16. This brings me to the specific criteria and process for Council appointments, which Ms Chen, Mr Yip, Mr Cai, Ms Lee, Ms Hazlina Abdul Halim, Mr Yong and Mr Hoe asked about. As Mr Hoe rightly pointed out, it is not desirable for every detail and criterion to be hardcoded in primary legislation, and trying to do so may introduce unnecessary rigidity that will not be helpful to NCSS functioning effectively, particularly as needs change in the future.

17. We are working out the specific implementation details and will share more with sector members in due course. As Prof Poon pointed out, NCSS needs broad expertise and deep sector insight to effectively steward the sector. Broadly, we will consider whether individuals have relevant experience in senior leadership, governance, or social service. We would also look out for individuals with specific skillsets like law, science, or technology. Beyond professional credentials, experience on the ground is also important.

18. Process-wise, the Chairperson will submit all nominations to Minister, except for those which do not meet requirements prescribed by Regulations.

- a. These prescribed requirements cover procedural matters, such as each sector member nominating only one individual from their organisation, which would include their board members, and fully completing application forms.
- b. As earlier shared, a Nominations Committee will be established to assist with the nominations process. To Ms Hazlina's points, the committee will comprise individuals with diverse experience, expertise and high standing in the sector. We will share details of the composition of the committee in due course.

19. Mr Yong and Prof Poon asked about the rationale behind providing for a range in the Council size, with an increased maximum size of 27, and how the exact size will be determined in practice. The range is comparable to that of the allowed size of other statutory boards that play similar roles in their sectors, like the National Arts Council and the National Heritage Board, and the eventual size will be based on the needs of the time.

20. Ms Chen and Ms Lee asked if the reasons for rejecting nominations or removing Council members would be communicated.

- a. Sector members will be notified of the outcome of their nominations. If there are prescribed requirements that the nominees do not meet, we may inform the sector member accordingly.
- b. On the removal of Council members, even though the Bill provides that the Minister is not obliged to provide reasons, where appropriate, we will engage the relevant Council member in the exceptional circumstances where the Minister has to exercise this power.

21. Mr Yip asked about the transition for current NCSS Board and committee members. Practically, our intent is for them to serve out their current term, that is until 31 July 2026. Mr Yip may be assured that MSF and NCSS values the work of all who serve on NCSS' committees and Board, and recognises them through various platforms.

22. I would also like to highlight that at the end of the day, Council appointments are not the only avenue for sector voices to be heard. As sector developer, NCSS will continue to engage the sector, gather insights from the ground, and partner with the Government to strengthen outcomes. In the last few years, NCSS has been organising leadership visits between MSF's and NCSS'

management and SSAs, small group engagements with Board leaders, on top of larger-scale engagements, workshops and clinics that are open to all NCSS member organisations. I have attended some of these engagements. And these will continue. MSF and NCSS value the views, insights, and work of our ecosystem players, and will continue listening to and co-creating with the sector.

23. Like many Members stressed in their speeches, the key is to have processes that build trust.

- a. There is no single perfect system or process. But it will be in the conduct of each nomination and appointment, and in the everyday engagements and partnerships that NCSS forms with stakeholders in social services, that we strengthen the trust that we have built over the years.

C. STRONGER SECTOR, BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE OF SERVICE USERS

24. Lastly, I want to address the most important issue, which is the impact of the changes on the users of social services, the sector and society.
25. As Ms Denise Phua noted, this Bill will indeed strengthen NCSS' role, as sector developer, to coordinate services to provide more effective and efficient support to those in need, and raise the sector's organisational and digital capabilities. As social issues have become increasingly cross-cutting, NCSS will work closely with relevant government agencies across different domains and leverage inter-agency platforms and mechanisms to identify and meet service users' needs holistically and in a coordinated manner.
26. A few Members also asked about the implications of the Bill for innovation in the sector. Ms Phua, Ms Chen, Dr Hamid, Dr Rizal, Mr Hoe and Mr Yip expressed concerns about the potential impact of NCSS setting standards on sector members, especially smaller ones, as well as of the Ministerial power to issue directions to NCSS.
27. First, on innovation. It is in NCSS' DNA to work with the sector to incubate ideas to meet emerging needs. This will not change with this Bill. For example, NCSS recently introduced the Income OrangeAid Caregiver Support Accelerator Grant, in partnership with Income Insurance Limited, to encourage SSAs and their partners to develop solutions to strengthen support for caregivers in Singapore, an important area of need that we are seeing. NCSS also supports innovation in the sector, for example through the National Design Challenge, a platform where anyone can step forward to design solutions for social issues. NCSS also supports SSAs in measuring the effectiveness of their programmes through the SG60 Towards Sustainability Fund, which provides funding and capability building support.

28. NCSS will continue to take a principled and risk-proportionate approach to governance, to promote innovation and reduce red tape, while maintaining high standards of accountability.

a. The need to meet standards and obligations set by NCSS is not new to current Council Members. Broadly similar obligations already exist in subsidiary legislation under the NCSS Act today and are intended to protect service users, for accountability, and to uplift the sector. For example, today, Full Council Members must submit copies of their annual report, audited accounts and balance sheet to NCSS yearly. This is important, given that many of these organisations, who will become sector members after the amendments, receive donations and public funds and must steward these resources appropriately.

b. NCSS is always mindful of the compliance load on member organisations, particularly small ones, when new standards and obligations are introduced. We thank Mr Hoe, Ms Phua and Dr Hamid for their suggestions to take a proportionate approach and provide sufficient time and capacity-building support for sector members to meet any standards imposed. NCSS will support and engage sector members when implementing any new standards, and do so in a practical manner, including providing relevant resources and training, as it has been doing.

29. In response to Mr Yong's query on the functions and governance of ComChest, the amendments do not change the fundraising function of ComChest. The updated governance provisions apply to the conduct and management of ComChest, rather than grant recipients.

30. Besides impact on organisations, Ms Lee, Dr Rizal and Ms Hazlina asked about the impact on professionals. It is indeed both MSF's and NCSS' intent to support our social service professionals and we have been doing so. In recent years, NCSS has embarked on several initiatives to address sector manpower needs. This includes funding SSAs through the Transformation Sustainability Scheme to enhance their people management practices, redesigning jobs and augmenting manpower with volunteers and technology.

31. We share Dr Rizal's view that worker well-being is important, and have rolled out various initiatives to support our sector professionals. For example,

- a. NCSS introduced the Sabbatical Leave Scheme, which offers eligible professionals a chance to rejuvenate with 10 weeks of paid sabbatical leave.
- b. Moving forward, MSF and NCSS will be setting up a Protection Practitioners Care Fund to implement capability building and well-being initiatives for protection practitioners. More details will be shared later this year.

32. Ensuring good jobs in the sector will continue to be part of NCSS' work as sector developer, and we will work with all stakeholders, including sector members, unions and MOH, to ensure there are quality jobs and clear salary guidelines in the sector.

33. On the Ministerial power to issue directions, this is part of the governance framework for all statutory boards and there is already a broadly similar power under the NCSS Act today. This is not intended to interfere with NCSS' exercise of its functions or limit NCSS from representing feedback from the sector. We value the critical function that NCSS plays in reflecting the sector's

voice, to ensure that our policies are grounded in operational needs and realities.

- a. Mr Yong asked about the channels to provide feedback on NCSS's administrative decisions. Both MSF and NCSS have open channels for organisations to provide feedback and we are committed to ensure that our policies and programmes are effective in meeting their outcomes.

34. Finally, I note Members have given useful inputs and suggestions that we will take into consideration when drafting the subsidiary legislation as well as operational procedures to support the implementation of the amendments. I also ask for Members' understanding that I will not be able to address some of Members' other queries and comments that go beyond the remit of this Bill.

CONCLUSION

35. Mr Speaker, I will now conclude.

36. This Bill has been several years in the making. NCSS first formally engaged the sector on the proposed amendments at its Annual General Meeting in July 2024. Since then, there have been many further engagement sessions, which have helped shape the Bill before us today.

37. Many Members, including Ms Phua, Dr Hamid and Ms Chen, highlighted the importance of preserving the sector's voice and of continuing to engage the sector and ensure coordinated action across stakeholders. To echo Mr Xie Yao Quan's observation, this is indeed what MSF and NCSS have been doing, including through the consultation process for this Bill, and will continue to do.

38. This Bill strengthens NCSS' ability to act as the bridge for sector feedback to be translated into policy. By formalising NCSS' expanded role as Sector Developer, NCSS is better able to consult more widely, identify ground needs, and closely partner and coordinate among stakeholders to develop the social service sector. With this Bill, NCSS will be well positioned to lead the sector to achieve better outcomes and improve the quality of life of users of our social services.

39. I thank Members for your support for this Bill. Mr Speaker, I seek to move.
