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Neighbour disputes: What more can we do for parties to come to the table?

Singapore has given laws sharper teeth. But the harder test is whether we still know how to live together without them.

Nicholas Thomas

Ultimately, neighbourliness cannot be legislated into being, says the writer. Laws and mediation provide structure, but everyday goodwill is built through daily acts of give and take. A "we-first" society asks each of us to give a little time to our community and extend a little grace to those living beside us. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

I recall moderating a dialogue on community action for municipal issues back in 2023. During the session, one resident described how difficult it was for his family to live beside a neighbour who displayed anti-social behaviours. I remember the weariness in his voice.

Neighbour disputes are an unwelcome hum that many of us endure, and have grown to manage. For some, it could lead to better relations. But there are times when these quarrels unfortunately end in violence or tragedy. When that happens, it becomes a stark reminder of the importance of neighbourliness.

The recent fatal knife attack in a Yishun HDB corridor after a reported noise dispute was shocking for many.

A 66-year-old neighbour has been charged with murder, and the case is before the courts. The Government clarified that the deceased applied for Community Mediation Centre (CMC) mediation on June 12, 2025, but the session did not happen as the neighbour did not respond to the invitation. As the case is under investigation, it's important that we do not speculate on the motive.

But as we reflect on this tragedy, there are some harder questions that linger.

Are we doing enough public education so people know what to do to resolve conflicts before tempers flare? Should mediation attendance be encouraged more forcefully? What forms of proportionate enforcement can signal that anti-social behaviour won't be tolerated, without escalating matters unnecessarily?

In a "we-first" society where active citizenship and ground-up initiatives are increasingly emphasised, what roles should citizens, communities and the Government each play?

We tend to treat neighbour disputes as private quarrels or irritations best ignored until they boil over. But what if we reimagined them as civic challenges that we work through together? They are, after all, about how we share space and balance rights with responsibilities as we live in close proximity.

AN EVOLVING RESPONSE

In 2012, then Law Minister K. Shanmugam told Parliament that "legislation and regulation can only do so much. Ultimately, the responsibility for creating a neighbourly and pleasant living environment lies with each individual".

Since then, Singapore has layered new structures to strengthen the mediation framework.

In 2014, neighbour-dispute management was formalised under the Community Disputes Management Framework. In 2022, the Community Advisory Panel on Neighbourhood Noise engaged more than 4,400 residents to shape shared norms, such as trying to talk to one's neighbour first.

And yet, the problem hasn't gone away. In the past three years, agencies received more than 90,000 complaints on neighbour noise, and many cases never reached mediation. For those who applied for mediation at the CMC, less than 30 per cent of the total cases registered proceeded to mediation because one party did not wish to participate.

To address this, after a broad review and more than 30 focus group discussions, Parliament amended the Community Disputes Resolution Act in 2024 to give the framework real teeth.

A key change was the introduction of Mediation Directions, which empowered authorised officers to require parties to attend the CMC, effectively making mediation mandatory and enforcing penalties for non-compliance.

A new Community Relations Unit was also piloted in Tampines, to tackle severe noise and hoarding through coordinated enforcement and evidence-gathering. In the most egregious cases, HDB may now consider compulsory acquisition of a flat as a last resort.

So yes, there is now more bite in the law. The policy frame is sound. But could more be done operationally?

For example, when residents have already engaged HDB or the town council, should agencies apply a triaging system – one that can quickly assess that facts and, where there is a risk to life or limb, issue a Mediation Direction through an expedited process?

Of course, speed comes with its own risks. To raise turnout without opening the door to abuse, referrals would need to clear basic thresholds. The other party should have a right of reply. And in the most egregious cases, expedited court action might be warranted.

That said, government action has limits, and we should not erode the everyday give-and-take that holds communities together.

Each early, safe conversation is a small deposit in the bank of social capital. There must be a balance between proportionate enforcement and shared community responsibility, so that our resilience and cohesion as a society continue to grow.

Enforcement can set boundaries, but it cannot substitute for social capital – the trust and ties that hold our communities together. If the only way we resolve an issue with a neighbour is to call the authorities, what does that say about us? Is that the kind of Singapore we want for ourselves and our children?

TOWARDS A GROUND-UP RESPONSE

Alongside laws and enforcement, Singapore should deepen civic engagement and community-level solutions.

For instance, to complement grassroots leaders, each block could have a small team of volunteer stewards. These individuals could be trusted neighbours with light training to notice early signs of strain and hold brief, respectful conversations before things escalate.

Partners such as residents' networks, the Singapore Kindness Movement, faith-based groups and ground-ups could help with recruitment and training.

We should also consider estate-level citizens' panels, championed by the Members of Parliament in partnership with the People's Association, the town council and other local partners.

These panels can tailor norms and solutions to each estate's needs. For example, if there is a conducive community space, a proposal could include respite services so affected residents can get basic support and take a time-out when it becomes overwhelming.

As pioneers of the citizens' panel process, the Institute of Policy Studies can act as neutral convenors, designing the process, facilitating sessions and publishing practical outputs residents can trust.

Singapore has already used such panels for issues from the War on Diabetes to Work-Life Harmony to Employment Resilience. Adapted to the precinct level, they can grow social capital and help neighbours co-create fair and shared norms.

The Municipal Services Office could also pilot an additional category on neighbour disputes to the existing 13 on its OneService app.

The form will enable residents to flag emerging neighbour tensions with a few factual questions. Based on the responses, it could triage emergencies and non-emergencies to the right help, and alert the Community Mediation Centre, the town council or the Community Relations Unit.

Block stewards and grassroots leaders could use it as a first-line tool, similar to how peer-support leaders surface concerns in schools. This would invite everyone to play their part, act early, rather than look away until it is too late.

WE CAN ALL PLAY A PART

Ultimately, neighbourliness cannot be legislated into being. Laws and mediation provide structure, but everyday goodwill is built through daily acts of give and take.

A "we-first" society asks each of us to give a little time to our community and extend a little grace to those living beside us.

It invites neighbours to resolve issues with one another where it is safe to do so, and to seek help through mediation or official channels when it is not. Above all, it affirms that citizens have the capacity and confidence to work things out together.

If we take that first step, then, as Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said, the "me" thrives because the "we" is strong.

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