

Neighbour disputes: Why it feels like no one can stop the noise next door

The problem isn't the legal framework, which is carefully designed. What matters more is how it works in practice.

Ben Chester Cheong

The recent cases involving nuisance neighbours have struck a nerve because they describe a familiar and deeply personal frustration.

In Tiong Bahru, residents recently reported alarm clocks ringing loudly at random hours for weeks, disrupting sleep and work-from-home routines. Meanwhile in Boon Keng, a long-running dispute culminated in public confrontation, with Jalan Besar GRC MP Shawn Loh describing it as one of the most "frustrating and hard-to-resolve

cases" in the constituency despite sustained agency involvement.

In both situations, residents did what they were supposed to do. They approached their neighbours. They lodged reports with the town council, HDB and the police. Some sought help through mediation.

But despite all this, the disturbances persisted.

Singapore's laws on neighbourhood disputes were recently enhanced to give them more bite. Among the recommendations were introducing Mediation Directions, which gave authorised officers the power to require parties to go for mediation – effectively

making it mandatory – and stronger tribunal powers to resolve entrenched disputes more effectively.

A Community Relations Unit is being piloted in Tampines to intervene in severe noise and hoarding cases.

But all this is cold comfort to residents whose daily lives are being disrupted on a regular basis.

There is a sense of helplessness. Why does it feel like no one can help me? Why are things taking so long to resolve?

AN INHERENTLY DIFFICULT SPACE

This perception of helplessness does not arise because Singapore lacks a framework. It arises because neighbour disputes occupy an inherently difficult space between private life and public intervention.

Much of the conduct takes place within homes. The harm is often intermittent, such as noise that comes and goes. Residents may experience and record these disturbances, but early cases often require further corroboration before stronger measures are justified.

Given this challenge, the state must act proportionately, lawfully and fairly, and this shapes how and when its more intrusive tools are used. The system has deliberately been built to be proportionate and measured – which can feel slow to someone living with daily disruption.

Singapore's approach to neighbour disputes has been designed as a graduated framework, rather than a single enforcement response.

As a first step, residents facing a dispute should approach their neighbours and discuss the issue calmly. Grassroots leaders can also help.

Voluntary mediation then comes in as a next step should the

dispute not be resolved, followed by mandatory mediation, in suitable cases.

Should this prove unsuccessful – and as a last resort – residents may seek recourse from the Community Disputes Resolution Tribunals, which have stronger powers.

This framework reflects an understanding that most neighbour disputes are not crimes, and that premature coercive intervention can do lasting damage to community trust and social cohesion.

The philosophy behind this structure is deliberate. As Mr Edwin Tong, who is now Law Minister, observed in Parliament in November 2024, "some degree of friction will inevitably arise" in a dense urban society.

The aim is not to eliminate all friction through immediate enforcement, but to preserve community harmony by encouraging early resolution and escalating intervention only when necessary.

This is why there is no single authority that intervenes immediately in every nuisance complaint. The police are not meant to arbitrate lifestyle disagreements. Town councils and HDB focus on estate management and community engagement rather than punitive action.

The Community Relations Unit, which is currently being piloted in Tampines, also reflects the gradual, measured nature of the framework.

It is not intended to be a first responder for all neighbour disputes and will intervene only when established thresholds are met. This includes severe and prolonged noise disturbances, deliberate nuisance behaviour and serious hoarding cases with wider community impact.

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Ensuring residents do not feel stranded

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This enables the framework to be tested and refined during the pilot, while ensuring that stronger powers are applied judiciously and community-based resolution remains the first line of response. From this pilot, agencies will study how best to scale this approach over time.

FEELING SUPPORTED BY THE SYSTEM

But the various cases in the media highlight that more still needs to be done. Most of all, residents should feel that they are

supported by the system.

The answer lies not in replacing the structure of the framework, which has been carefully designed, but in improving how it operates in practice.

As a start, when a dispute first arises, many residents may be unsure of how to initiate conversations safely with their neighbours. Practical support, such as guidance on de-escalation, basic documentation and when to involve third parties, helps residents take that first step with confidence.

But such informal engagement will not always succeed. It would

therefore be helpful for a front-line officer or authorised agency to intervene early and neutrally.

For example, where a resident repeatedly reports late-night noise and the neighbour disputes responsibility, officers can engage both parties, set clear behavioural boundaries, assess whether mediation should be directed, and signal that continued non-cooperation will trigger further escalation under the framework.

This intervention does not involve adjudicating fault at that stage. Rather, it provides a clear structure, directs parties into the appropriate next step, and reassures both sides that the matter is being handled consistently and fairly.

And, when there are patterns of deliberate or strategic nuisance, having these front-line officers involved early would help them be better able to identify these patterns and use existing tools – like directed mediation, formal warnings, or referral to

enforcement or tribunals where thresholds are met – to prevent prolonged stalemates.

This combination of early support and credible authority helps prevent disputes from hardening, reassures affected residents that the process will move forward, and preserves the legitimacy of firmer measures if cooperation does not follow.

At the same time, clearer and more direct communication to involved parties can go a long way.

For instance, residents may wonder about the circumstances in which mandatory mediation can be used. Clearer and more consistent guidance to residents can help manage expectations and clarify how cases move forward within the framework.

Second, where agencies or front-line officers have already made observations or gathered relevant material, it is important that residents can see how this information feeds into subsequent steps as the matter progresses.

This continuity reinforces confidence that escalation builds on prior efforts, while preserving mediation as a constructive and community-centred first response.

None of these steps contradicts the Government's approach. They reinforce it. As Mr Tong cautioned, the enhanced framework "cannot be seen as a silver bullet", and some cases will "continue to resist resolution".

But the framework, as it continues to be implemented and refined, can still ensure that residents do not feel stranded, that persistent unreasonable interference is addressed firmly when necessary, and that community harmony is preserved not only in principle, but also in daily lived experience.

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A perception of helplessness arises because neighbour disputes occupy an inherently difficult space between private life and public intervention, says the writer. Much of the conduct takes place within homes, and the harm is often intermittent. ST FILE PHOTO