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Budget 2026 should make it easier to book void deck spaces and rebuild social capital

Removing small hurdles that hinder people from doing more in their community could have huge payoffs.

Nicholas Thomas

A resident wants to organise a simple thank-you lunch for migrant workers who have just finished upgrading works in her estate. She needs a place to gather – perhaps a void deck or a community hall in her estate. But who should she approach? Is it the town council? The People's Association? HDB? NParks?

Each manages different spaces, and none is obviously the right first door to knock on. What should be a straightforward act of neighbourliness quickly becomes a test of persistence.

Many residents who try to organise ground-up activities encounter similar confusion, enough to stop some from trying again.

A SIMPLE WISH FOR BUDGET 2026

Removing such frictions through small steps could transform everyday community life for Singaporeans. When Prime Minister Lawrence Wong delivers Budget 2026 on Feb 12, attention will naturally focus on big national priorities: healthcare, education, defence and economic competitiveness.

But beneath these imperatives lies a quieter challenge that deserves fuller attention: how to strengthen the social ties that bind Singaporeans together in ways that might not require multimillion-dollar budgets but demand a redesign of public policy.

In 2019, six in 10 citizens said they wanted to help build a caring society. By 2024, that figure had fallen to 42 per cent. Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth David Neo flagged this

trend in Parliament last September, describing it as a challenge the Government is determined to address.

At the same time, Singaporeans' social networks are becoming more insular and confined within the same socioeconomic group. Among degree holders, only 38 per cent have at least one close friend from a different educational background, an Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2026 survey shows. More than a fifth of private housing residents have no close friends in public housing. Similar divides persist even within public housing, between residents of larger and smaller flats.

Social ties do not form on their own. They grow when people organise, participate and show up for one another. When fewer people do so, chances to mix across housing, income and educational lines narrow.

This matters because social capital – the trust and networks that make people look out for one another – does not form by accident. It is built when we come together to help one another.

The Government has shown, through initiatives like ServiceSG centres and the OneService App, that removing such hurdles is possible, and Budget decisions are precisely where such design choices are made.

MAKING IT EASIER TO ACT

Budget 2026 could respond in three practical ways. First, make funding simpler for small, ground-up ideas.

Consider a resident keen to organise an arts day for elderly neighbours. He needs to buy materials and arrange transport to a nearby community space.

The People's Association's Community Volunteer Scheme

offers seed grants of up to \$1,000. For projects costing more, residents must typically tap other grants like the OurSG Fund, which covers up to 80 per cent of eligible costs and requires a 20 per cent co-payment. A \$2,000 project therefore means \$400 out of pocket, often reimbursed only after the event.

These safeguards are sound and necessary for accountability. But for residents without spare cash, or who are uncomfortable dipping into personal savings, having to navigate these varied frameworks can deter action.

Budget 2026 could introduce a micro community grant of up to \$3,000 that covers 100 per cent of eligible costs, capped to small-scale projects with clear outcomes and post-project reporting.

This would build on existing models such as the National Youth Council's Young ChangeMakers Grant, which already provides full funding for youth-led projects. With clear criteria and safeguards, such a scheme could unlock thousands of small, practical acts of community-building – from retirees organising activities for fellow seniors to residents in rental flats rallying neighbours for a clean-up.

Second, make booking of community spaces less confusing. As mentioned earlier, the process of booking community spaces must be more intuitive.

Today, void decks are managed by town councils, community club halls by the People's Association, and some open spaces by NParks or HDB. Each has its own system. For residents organising ground-up events, the system can feel fragmented and opaque.

Some integration already exists. LifeSG supports facility bookings for several town councils, and ActiveSG has begun integrating PA sports facilities. But a clearer first-stop portal, akin to what the Municipal Services Office achieved with the OneService App, would go further.

A phased approach could start

by using LifeSG to direct users to the right agency, before moving towards a more fully integrated booking system over time.

Finally, Singapore can do more to recognise those who give their time. We already provide tax deductions for financial donations. Yet time is often the more precious contribution. According to the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre's National Giving Study 2023, three in 10 citizens volunteer, but less deeply than before. In just five years, median

A two-year pilot involving existing programmes such as Youth Corps and the Silver Generation Ambassadors would allow the scheme to be tested and refined. Over time, informal groups could also be brought into the fold, with volunteer hours verified by SG Cares Volunteer Centres. This would preserve accountability while recognising the many forms that community action takes.

volunteer hours have more than halved from 24 to fewer than 10 hours a year.

A pilot community volunteer credit could help. Volunteers who log 100 verified hours a year – about one day a month – on a national platform such as giving.sg could receive either a \$100 tax credit or \$100 in SkillsFuture credit. The amount is modest by design and meant to be symbolic to signal that society values the time given.

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Few countries have attempted a broad-based scheme to recognise community volunteering in this way. Singapore could be among the first.

PHILANTHROPY IS WORTH BACKING

The changes proposed here are modest, but their impact could be significant. By removing small hurdles, we make it easier for any resident with an idea to act on it and for others to join in. Over time, these everyday interactions can help rebuild connections across social and economic lines.

Budget 2026 offers a chance for the Government to invest in this social glue. When it does so, it also sends a signal to philanthropy and the private sector that this is a priority worth backing.

One recent example is Dr Tan Cheng Kok, who wanted to bring 60 seniors together to run a marathon. With help from the Singapore Government Partnerships Office, he was connected to the Antica Foundation, which helped defray race costs and support the seniors' training. What made the project possible was not just goodwill, but timely connections and support.

Mr S. Rajaratnam called it a "democracy of deeds". Today, our vision of social cohesion in Singapore is often described as a desire for a We-First society. Either way, the principle is the same: a society is stronger when people find it easy to help one another and are encouraged to do so.

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