



# Relocation Applications Tips & Practical Guidance for cases involving Singapore

In a May 2023 article, The Economist Magazine proudly proclaimed that “*a winner has emerged in the old rivalry between Singapore and Hong Kong*” – and it was the Lion City that came out on top. Singapore has long been seen as a cosmopolitan, vibrant and truly international city. At its heart, a hugely multicultural population of 5.45 million retain connections across the world, but in particular with the United Kingdom. Aside from being a major hub for aviation, tourism, and financial services, it has been rated one of the strongest economies in the world for business and is a hugely popular destination not least due to its reputation as one of the safest countries in the world. Many individuals from all over the world make the decision to relocate there, often for reasons of employment, and whilst the cost of living can be seen as quite high, expatriate salaries often provide a healthy level of disposable income. Frequently, particularly with longer-term postings, individuals will naturally seek for their children to join them on a temporary or permanent basis, with a view to families forging their lives there. Where a dispute in relation to relocation arises, it is the court that is charged with determining where a child or children should reside for the foreseeable future.

In any leave to remove application, a close eye will need to be had to a variety of factors. All evidence presented will need to be brought back to the Court’s central concern, which remains in the child’s best interests. Whilst no two cases are ever identical, cases involving Singapore in particular bear specific scrutiny, as seen in the issues below.

## Travel

Singapore’s Changi airport is one of the largest transportation hubs in Asia, with direct flights to London with Qantas, Singapore Airlines and British Airways. There are also indirect flights from London or other UK cities with stopovers in places such as Dubai, Doha, or Abu Dhabi. Singapore



to London as a direct flight is no short hop: with thirteen or fourteen hours each way, specific consideration must be had to the impact of such a grueling journey on children. It is a flight time that many adults, let alone young children, find challenging. Whilst some children may be more used to lengthy intercontinental journeys, be sure to keep an eye on what this means in practice. This is more than just the flight time itself, but also stretches to check-in times, and connections on either side. Judges are likely to consider this carefully in any relocation application, but particularly ones involving Singapore. Direct flights are naturally easier, with one check-in, a lower risk of luggage not arriving, and one security procedure to navigate; yet thirteen hours is a very long time to keep a child entertained and engaged. Thought will need to be had as to whether regular flights of this length are in a child's best interests. If this is not the case, stopovers may be something to consider carefully.

Quite apart from the lengthy flight – if a child is to move or visit Singapore, who will accompany them on each leg of the journey? That of course will depend on a number of factors from family to family, including the age of the children and the connections with each country. Can an accompanying adult be expected, for example, to bring a child to Singapore, and thereafter return to London the next day – or is a longer stay almost inevitable? In terms of immigration, can the accompanying adult enter Singapore without issue? What are the policies of the airline(s) regarding unaccompanied travel – if indeed this is something the parents and children themselves can even stomach?

Long flights are often synonymous with high costs, and in any application or agreement, there will need to be very clear provision as to who will be responsible for them. Peak time flights can be eye-wateringly expensive, and term-time travel is almost impossible to escape when school-age children are involved.

## **Time zones**

Singapore observes Singapore Standard Time all year round; there is no observation of daylight savings. Singapore is therefore 7 or 8 hours ahead of London. This is not the easiest time difference to grapple with, and mid-week calls are not particularly easy to accommodate amongst busy schedules. The most practical way of arranging mid-week calls is likely to be in the evening in Singapore, which would be during the working day in England. The scheduling of calls alongside school and work commitments will require careful consideration, to see if they are at all feasible in practice. If calls are only on weekends, then these will in all likelihood need to be of an extended duration to factor in a lack of contact during the week; a question does remain however as to the



viability of the relationship if calls are limited this way.

## **School terms and education systems**

Singapore has a very high standard of education, with a wide variety of international and local public schools. Public schools largely follow the local curriculum, and international schools offer British, American, Australian, and Canadian qualifications. Some international schools will follow the curriculum in England (A-Levels) but also offer the International Baccalaureate. Yearly fees can be expensive but can often feature as part of an employment package. Certainty around this central issue is vital.

The school holiday dates at a school in Singapore will vary depending on the school, but the majority of international schools will largely follow the UK/US school calendar. However, each specific school's term dates should be checked as there can be some variation. With that in mind, it may be possible to line up term dates with British summer holidays. The end of July or beginning of August is thus an opportune moment for visits to England to see the other parent and other family members (taking into account flight times and returning to Singapore with plenty of time to adjust for the new school year).

Alongside this, there are other holidays to consider; for example, Singapore has public holidays for Deepavali, Hari Raya Puasa, Vesak Day and the Chinese (Lunar) New Year holiday, which all often fall within the school term. These long weekends could provide an opportunity for contact to take place in Singapore or in a neighbouring country.

## **Healthcare**

Singapore has excellent provision for healthcare with public and private hospitals. Private healthcare is comparatively achievable and relatively affordable and exists alongside public hospitals which have provision for emergency care. Consideration will need to be given about the costs of any private insurance and whether it is compulsory to obtain insurance for citizens or permanent residents prior to any relocation. The costs of these for parents and for children are another factor to be taken into account.

## **Child maintenance**

In addition to school fees, it may be that the issue of child maintenance can also be agreed prior to



departing. If this is the case, then advice should be taken from Singapore on enforceability of any agreement of Order. Conversely, if relocation is agreed or ordered, it may be worth exploring if costs of travel could be offset against any maintenance obligations.

## Mirror Orders

Singapore is not party to the 1996 Hague Convention. Accordingly, there is no automatic right of registration of the Order. This does not, however, mean that the Order is not enforceable and there is a mechanism of ensuring it is upheld. This is often done by way of a mirror order. Advice (preferably by the instruction of a Single Joint Expert) should be obtained from a suitably qualified expert in Singapore about:

- (a) what mechanisms are available to protect both parties
- (b) how a mirror order can be obtained
- (c) the method for doing so including the Court the application should be made to
- (d) likely fees of doing so
- (e) approximate timescales for obtaining the sealed order

If a mirror order is to be obtained and a relocation application is successful, there should be absolute clarity about who will be responsible for the fees of obtaining the mirror order so that there can be no issue or delay down the line.

## Conclusion

Whilst the above covers some of the factors that should be included in every relocation application, it is certainly not an exhaustive list. Relocation applications are enormously challenging, often highly fraught and understandably exceptionally emotional due to their binary nature. All applications, agreements or defence to any application must be as well thought-out and detailed as possible, always demonstrating a detailed consideration of why the proposed move would or would not be in the child's best interests.

Credit due to my colleague partner James Netto for his contribution in respect of this article.



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