Alice drives a convertible car, spends all her cash on having fun and has a cigarette wedged between her fingers. So far, so normal.

Except that Alice is not a real person. She is a cartoon character devised by a group of students in Singapore as part of a campaign to encourage young women in the city state to start families earlier.

Alice is just one out of a collection of characters in Singapore Fairytales, a compilation of drawings that includes another figure, Golden Goose, whose egg-laying capacity diminishes the longer she waits to reproduce.

Singapore Fairytales is a project run by final-year undergraduates at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University.

Its nannyish approach to the subject – Alice is described as “wild and rash” – is public education, Singapore-style. But the issue of delaying child-rearing – or bypassing it altogether – is no fairytale in Singapore. It has become a matter of national concern amid a declining population and ageing workforce.

With a persistently falling birth rate, Singapore’s native population is shrinking, threatening to deplete the pool of working-age people and undermining the economic miracle that has dazzled the world for decades.

In a sweeping population white paper issued in January, the government laid out the challenge in stark terms.

What it calls the “citizen population” – that is, the core population of native Singaporeans, as opposed to foreigners living in the country – reached a turning point last year as the first cohort of baby boomers reached 65.
Singapore is set for an unprecedented age shift until 2030 as more than 900,000 baby boomers – more than a quarter of the citizen population – reaches what the government termed their “silver years”.

From 2020, the number of working-age citizens is set to fall, as working-age Singaporeans retiring outnumber younger ones starting work.

Singapore’s birth rate of 1.2 per woman is well below a replacement fertility rate of 2.1. That would mean continuing to allow an influx of immigrants, albeit at a slower rate, Lee Hsien Loong, the prime minister, says.

“It will become increasingly difficult to grow our workforce through our citizen population alone, unless we succeed in reversing the declining fertility trend,” the white paper said, produced by the prime minister’s office.

As part of its campaign – launched on a website heybaby.sg – the government dangled fresh incentives worth S$2bn (US$1.6bn) to encourage would-be couples to reproduce.

That was a 25 per cent increase on the value of existing incentives. First-time parents will receive S$6,000 in “baby bonus” cash, up from S$4,000 under an old scheme.

Singapore’s birth rate is low largely because young women are putting off starting a family – as the Alice character indicates.

Much of that has been blamed on a culture of overachievement, where success in the 1990s was measured by whether citizens achieved the “five Cs” – of cash, car, credit card, condominium and membership of a country club.

Whether throwing money at the problem will work is open to question. Many young Singaporeans have welcomed the cash handouts but point out that the real cost of raising a child is child care.

“This is one area in which the package could be criticised, that it may have put a bit too much emphasis on incentives,” says Eugene Tan, assistant professor of law at Singapore Management University.

“Essentially it’s a question of whether this can actually engender a mindset shift towards marriage and parenthood in general.”

Singaporeans work among the longest hours in Asia. Sky-high property prices mean it is not uncommon for people, in their mid-30s still to be living at home with their parents.

Wayne Chan, 35, is a PR manager, while his wife works in marketing. They have been married for more than three years but see too many barriers to starting a family.

“I’m just an average Singaporean and I don’t feel like having kids to be honest. I feel that it’s really too expensive. There are just so many factors that are against a person having children here. It’s all the fees that are related to it, it’s getting harder and harder and the schools are so competitive,” he says.
At the same time as trying to encourage the population to reproduce, the government says it will try and boost the productivity of local businesses while slowing down the influx of foreign immigrants that are still crucial to maintaining economic growth.

Yet that has come in for criticism from many quarters in Singapore, including grassroots protest movements opposed to population growth that could see the island nation with up to 6.9m people living on it by 2030, the government has indicated.

One group, “Say ‘No’ To An Overpopulated Singapore”, is organising a rally at Speakers’ Corner – the only place in Singapore where public protests are allowed – for May 1. Organisers expect a turnout of 10,000 – which would make it one of the biggest demonstrations in Singapore’s history.

That shows the depth of feeling as the Singapore government tries to address its biggest challenge in decades. Its solutions, perhaps inevitably, are highly prescriptive. But it remains to be seen whether that will work.