

Got ideas on recycling household rubbish? Join a new ‘citizens’ workgroup’

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SINGAPORE — In the drive to make Singapore cleaner and greener, the Government is giving 50 Singaporeans from diverse backgrounds the chance to form a “citizens’ workgroup” to come up with strategies to improve the way households recycle rubbish.

Senior Minister of State for the Environment and Water Resources Amy Khor announced the plan on Wednesday (July 17) at the Partners for the Environment forum held at the Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre.

Now in its third year, the annual event is organised by the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources (MEWR) and is attended by the ministry’s partners from the public and private sectors.

The ministry said participants of the planned workgroup would be able to consult experts in the waste management and recycling industry.

Dr Khor added: “The citizens’ workgroup will be given access to policy-relevant information like household recycling surveys, as well as resource persons who can share their expertise and help with piloting and exploring solutions.”

MEWR’s Year Towards Zero Waste website said that the recommendations by the workgroup will go towards increasing the recycling target in Singapore from 20 per cent to 30 per cent, as set out in the Sustainable Singapore Blueprint, a MEWR initiative.

Dr Khor also called for partners of MEWR to support the workgroup: “Your insights, experiences, professional knowledge and resources will be invaluable, both at the discussion stage as well as when we move into piloting and implementing solutions proposed.”

MEWR said that all recommendations proposed by the workgroup will be considered and implemented if feasible.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) will also collaborate with MEWR to conduct surveys during the discussions to measure the effectiveness of the workgroup in meeting the ministry’s objectives.

How to join the workgroup

According to the Year Towards Zero Waste website, only Singaporeans or permanent residents may join the workgroup, and they must commit to attending four full-day sessions held over two weekends in September and October.

The website stated that MEWR was seeking a diverse group of people including those who actively recycle, do not recycle and those who are keen to recycle but feel that they do not have enough information to do so.

It was also looking to attract people who had not previously participated in other engagement platforms such as the Zero Waste Masterplan consultation sessions.

Those interested may register to participate in the workgroup by completing a form available on www.towardszerowaste.sg by Aug 23.

MEWR said that it would work with the IPS to select participants for the workgroup. Those selected will be informed by mid-September.

Moving discussions beyond blue recycling bins

Manager at local non-profit Zero Waste SG, Ms Pek Hai Lin, said that the workgroup was a good opportunity to seek people's views on the ground.

Ms Pek, who attended the forum, said that while the public was keen to recycle, many were unsure about how to do so, as they did not know what could be recycled, for example.

"Some people currently have the perception that whatever goes into the blue recycling bins will be sorted. They end up doing 'wishful recycling' where they throw in items into the bin like their old shoes or mattresses in the hope that it will be recycled," said Ms Pek.

She added that more could be done to educate the public on what could go into the bins.

"For instance, community centres could have a guidebook on what could be recycled or a website could be set up to allow people to search for what they can or cannot recycle."

Another attendee at the forum, Ms Melissa Low, raised the concern that the workgroup could be too "onerous" for individuals, given that they had to commit to four full days of discussion.

"That said, I believe that if you want to ensure there is meaningful dialogue and exchange, you may need to commit that amount of time. I think only committed individuals will make themselves available," added the research fellow at the Energy Studies Institute at the National University of Singapore.

She also called for transparency in the selection of participants in the workgroup so that various groups, such as educators and the young, could be represented.

Ms Low said that one area the workgroup could look at was how to incentivise or penalise people to get them to throw only items that can be recycled into the blue bins. Currently, many people throw perishables which contaminated other recyclables in the bin, or threw out reusables which could be donated to charities, she said.

She hoped that discussions within the workgroup would move beyond how to improve the blue recycling bins.

“Recycling right doesn’t necessarily mean throwing the right items into the blue bins. It could also mean how we design future Housing and Development Board flats and if we should still keep the rubbish chutes,” she said.

“Maybe citizens could discuss if chutes are still relevant in a future where we want to encourage less wasteful patterns of consumption and reduce waste.”