

# S'pore exploring petition platform where 10,000 signatures guarantee ministry response

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SINGAPORE - Singaporeans may soon get a new avenue to voice their concerns through a platform where petitions that garner 10,000 supporters will be submitted to the relevant ministries for review.

A prototype of the platform, known as PetitionsSG, has been up since January this year. Currently, petitions can be started and processed on the site, but nothing will be sent to the Government.

Senior software engineer Alwyn Tan at Open Government Products - the platform's developer - said in response to queries from The Straits Times that PetitionsSG was created with the goal of empowering citizens to push for change and to connect the most important sentiments from the ground to ministries.

He was one of a team of five who worked on the project.

Open Government Products is an experimental development team within GovTech which works on technology for the public sector.

The platform [at this website](#) has instructions on the processes involved:

- Members of the public can use it to draft a petition for a cause which they feel requires the Government's attention.

- They must then get the petition endorsed by three other people, after which it will be published on the site.

- Once published, the petition will be open for the public to be read and sign, and if it receives 10,000 signatures within 180 days, it will be submitted to the ministry which oversees the issue.

- The ministry will then have 90 days to respond.

The website adds that petitions that do not reach 10,000 signatures within 180 days, as well as petitions that are rejected because they received significant reports against them, will be stored in an archive that is available for public discourse.

The petitioner and the three endorsers must submit their names to ensure accountability and transparency, the website says.

However, users supporting the petitions can sign publicly or anonymously.

The website states: "PetitionsSG offers the option to sign a petition anonymously, because we understand public civic participation in Singapore on certain topics could come with some social stigma attached.

"Open Government Products has engineered significant protections for anonymity on PetitionsSG, even in the event of a complete data breach of the platform."

It adds that these features prevent anyone, including the Government and Open Government Products, from personally identifying a user who has signed a petition anonymously.

While users log into the platform to sign petitions using their Singpass accounts to ensure the legitimacy of opinions and to prevent trolling, the website says the platform does not store data like a user's NRIC number or address.

Users who choose to sign anonymously will not have their names recorded by the platform.

The platform was created as part of the Open Government Products' annual Hack for Public Good 2022 initiative, the team said.

There were no petitions on the website as at Wednesday (May 4). ST understands that several petitions have been tested on the site since January.

Assistant Professor Saifuddin Ahmed from Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information said having a dedicated and open online space will provide Singaporean petitioners greater transparency and a gauge for the level of public support for different causes.

He added: "It fills a gap for Singaporeans and may evolve into a formalised petition system.

"Such systems have helped create more transparent and authentic communication between the citizens and the government in several regional and national Parliaments like in the United Kingdom."

Prof Saifuddin said having an online space for petitions may allow more people to participate in civic affairs, including those who have been deterred by the difficulties they perceive in doing so.

He added: "Many citizens refrain from engagement within the public sphere because they consider the costs of participation to be high."

He said these costs may include time, money or effort. However, having an online space for petitioning will lower the costs of participation for many, he said, adding that this could spur young people to start participating in civic engagement.

Singapore Management University associate professor of law Eugene Tan, a former Nominated MP, said the platform is potentially useful but Singapore must be mindful about developing what he called a "petitionary culture".

He said: "This would be a situation where we have a mechanical process of a government response being secured with a certain threshold number of signatures obtained for a petition.

"Ultimately, policymaking cannot be a numbers game and one where a vocal minority prevails."

## Countries with official petition websites

Governments such as that of the United Kingdom have official websites for the public to put up and sign petitions.

In the UK, petitions which reach 10,000 signatures will receive a response from the government, while those that reach 100,000 signatures will be considered for debate in Parliament.

So far, 657 petitions have been responded to and 126 have been debated in the UK's House of Commons since the platform started operating in 2015, according to the UK government website.

Some of the petitions which have received responses or debates are proposals for free parking for healthcare staff, waiving visa requirements for Ukrainian refugees, and a ban on the shooting of badgers.

To create a petition on the platform, users must be a UK citizen or resident.

They must also provide the e-mail addresses of five supporters.

The New Zealand and Canadian governments also have online petition sites for citizens to create and submit petitions.

In Canada, petitions which garner 500 signatures are presented to the House of Commons.

From 2011 to this year, the United States government maintained a petitioning website known as We the People which guaranteed a response at a threshold of signatures which was progressively raised from 5,000 to 25,000 to 100,000 over its lifetime.

It has been defunct since January this year.

In 2012, a petition to create a Death Star - a massive planet-destroying space station from the Star Wars movie franchise - received 25,000 signatures and received a tongue-in-cheek response which read: "The Administration does not support blowing up planets."