Case Study: Rethinking Food Organics - one size doesn't fit all

Overview

Inner West Council approached food waste in a holistic manner in line with the waste hierarchy and mindful of the fact that one size does not fit all. The food waste avoidance program, Food Fix, targeted all residents with face to face engagement and online support. Council subsidised home composting equipment through Compost Revolution and community composting through Compost Huts and Compost Collective. Food waste was recycled through kerbside collection services in some areas.

Background

Kerbside audits undertaken in 2015 across Inner West Council (IWC) revealed that 37% of the red-lid bin is compostable organics. IWC recognised that tackling food waste required multiple solutions to reduce the volume of food waste going to landfill. Council rolled out a number of initiatives aligned to the top end of the waste hierarchy (avoidance and reuse) in an effort to reduce what needs to be dealt with at the lower end of the hierarchy (recovery and landfill). IWC is committed to removing organic waste from the waste stream with a target of zero waste by 2036.

Implementation

The Food Fix program uses a kitchen table conversation model where participants are encouraged to learn through interaction with friends and peers to support each other to avoid food waste longer term. The program initially targeted families with young children however, after a successful trial, the program was extended to include all IWC residents.

The Compost Collective provided support for composting on common property at 96 apartments with 399 participating households. The residents were given free resources, on-site training and follow up advice and assistance.

The Compost Hut Trial engaged 120 households who took food scraps to a Council-managed 'Compost Hut' in two reserves. The Compost Huts have the capacity to accept waste from 60 households per hut (approximately 19 tonnes per hut per annum). Participation in the trial was through subscription and residents were provided with training and a code to access the huts to preserve the integrity of the trial and to avoid contamination.

The Compost Revolution program engaged over 2,000 residents through online tutorials and access to equipment. Residents in IWC are eligible for a 50% discount on composts and worm farms sold through the Compost Revolution. IWC also provided face to face composting workshops and support for schools, residents and community gardens. Composting programs focussed on enabling those already interested in composting with incentives to make the transition to composting easy.
IWC provides a Food Organics Only collection service (FOO), with educational support, to 220 unit blocks (5,200 apartments) in the Leichhardt area. IWC is also trialling a Food and Garden Organics (FOGO) collection service targeting 1,056 houses and apartments in the Marrickville area. Organic waste collected in these services is processed into high grade compost.

Outcomes

The Food Fix program engaged 205 residents through 15 skills building workshops. A further 545 residents participated in food waste avoidance activities or demonstrations across 12 local events or festival stalls. Evaluation showed an increase in participant motivation to avoid food waste, a change in participant behaviour and a reduction in food waste by participants.

The Compost Collective on average diverted 1.8kg of organic waste per household per week. Evaluation showed that residents found it easy to start composting with training and equipment provided. The Compost Huts diverted 2.4 tonnes of food waste over 5 months, with 94% of survey respondents reporting they diverted all eligible waste from their red bin during the trial.

The FOO and FOGO programs were evaluated through pre, during and post kerbside audits. Community participation was 22.5% in the first year and 20.8% in the second year. In the first year of the FOGO trial the total amount of food and garden waste collected was 200 tonnes, and in the second year a little over 175 tonnes. The FOO program collected 106 tonnes of waste in 2016 and 112 tonnes in 2017.

Key Learnings

Food Fix’s face to face engagements led to more significant changes in food waste avoidance behaviours, however online engagement, through newsletters and ongoing tips led to higher than expected self-assessed change.

The Compost Collective program worked best in small multi-unit dwellings of up to 12 units with access to communal open space. There is an ongoing challenge with engaging the much larger apartment blocks, real estate agents and strata managers. In comparison, the community were quick to take ownership of the Compost Huts as they had been involved in the siting and design of the huts since the project's inception. Compost huts were found to work better in well used (multi-functional) spaces.

It's in Council's financial and sustainability interest to continue to push the focus to the top of the waste hierarchy and reduce what is kerbside presentation volumes. There are upfront and ongoing costs in these initiatives, but over time these costs become less than processing and collection costs as uptake increases.

Contact

Name: Helen Bradley  
Position: Manager, Resource Recovery Planning  
Phone: 02 9335 2130  
Email: helen.bradley@innerwest.nsw.gov.au

This project was the 2018 winner of the Community Waste Services Award at the LGNSW Excellence in the Environment Awards