

# Involving **communities** in clean air policy development.

**OUR AIR, OUR VOICES Briefing Document**



**June 2026**

Words from...

# SARAH SLEET



Every year in the UK, up to 43,000 people die prematurely because of toxic air pollution. But this burden is not shared equally. Communities from lower-income and ethnically minoritised backgrounds are being hit the hardest – facing higher exposure, worse health outcomes, and often excluded from decision-making. Too little is being done by government to address this.

Asthma + Lung UK is working to shine a light on this injustice through our project in partnership with Impact on Urban Health. The partnership brings together the latest evidence and the voices of those most affected by toxic air to make the case to government for equitable, bold policy change.

The government wants to create a new era of local power, and have acknowledged that co-production ensures that communities affected are at the heart of policy.<sup>12</sup> Participation is not a favour to these communities, or a nice-to-have – it's essential to creating equitable policy that the public are on board with. Communities most impacted by air pollution must be meaningful partners in shaping government action on air quality.

OUR AIR, OUR VOICES is a project working with young Londoners, especially those disproportionately affected by poor air quality, to co-design clean air policy calls. We feel this method of policy development is vital for positive action to create fairer and healthier air with the support of communities across the UK.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah Sleet".

Sarah Sleet

**Chief Executive of Asthma + Lung UK**

**“Every year in the UK, up to...**

**43,000**

**people die prematurely because of toxic air.”**

Though you might not be able to see it, **air pollution** levels across the UK pose a very real danger to our **health**.



# Introduction

This technical report captures learning from Asthma + Lung UK's first inclusive policy development project, OUR AIR, OUR VOICES. The report documents the principles, processes, and methodological choices underpinning Asthma + Lung UK's approach, alongside reflections on what worked well and the challenges encountered. It is intended as a sector resource for organisations seeking to adopt more meaningful forms of participation.

## What is inclusive policy development?

'Inclusive policy development' is a broad term often used alongside concepts like co-design and co-production to describe a process of participation in policy-making. At its core, inclusive policy development views the public's ideas, knowledge, and lived experiences as essential to shaping policy decisions.

In government policy-making, traditional models of consultation tend to simply inform or consult citizens after key decisions have already been made, for example by creating a narrow scope of policy measures that will be considered. Under an inclusive approach, government could move towards partnering with citizens throughout the process of solving problems and creating preferable solutions.

The overall aim is to match policy to the needs of the public, preventing assumption-based policies that risk being ineffective or having unintended negative consequences.<sup>4</sup> When done well, this approach should strengthen the evidence base on which decisions are made.

There are several methods of inclusive policy development, and choice should be guided by the research goals, scale, budget and time constraints.<sup>5</sup>

As the approach is gaining traction, several examples of inclusive policy development illustrate how they can improve policy-making. This includes IPPR's Environmental Justice Commission<sup>6</sup>, Climate Assembly UK<sup>7</sup> as well as the wider organisational work from Transport for All<sup>8</sup> and Possible<sup>9</sup>.

## Why inclusive policy development matters

Trust in institutions of government is at a record low in Britain. According to the 2024 British Social Attitudes survey:

**45%**

**almost never trust governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party.**

**79%**

**say the system of governing Britain could be improved 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal'.**

**72%**

**of those struggling on their household income almost never trust politicians to tell the truth.<sup>10</sup>**

In recent years, negative press and poor communication of policy goals have opened up space for misinformation and the erosion of public trust, meaning that public conversations about clean air have been a somewhat toxic debate.

Change is possible. According to the Air Quality Expert Group (AQEG), air quality action requires public buy-in. They suggest that involving communities in policy development can mitigate feelings of disenfranchisement and lead to better outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

**About...**

# OUR AIR, OUR VOICES

**We want fairer and healthier air to be a reality, so through our influencing activity we'll work hard to get government to involve communities for better policy. But, we have to practice what we preach. This is why we developed our project, OUR AIR, OUR VOICES (OAOV), to build Asthma + Lung UK's capacity to conduct inclusive policy development.**

OAOV is our participatory policy research project designed to engage Londoners aged 16-24, especially those disproportionately impacted by air pollution, in the co-creation of fair and effective clean air policies. OAOV is grounded in the belief that communities, particularly those typically underrepresented in public policy and most affected by air pollution, should be involved in shaping clean air policies.

In summer 2025, OAOV culminated in two days of creative and conversation workshops to explore air pollution and solutions to achieve clean air equitably. Since then, we've been working with the same group of young people to develop recommendations to the UK government as they seek to create a new Air Quality Strategy.<sup>12</sup>

Our aim is to influence the design and the results of the government's Air Quality Strategy, due for review in 2028, to ensure it is created with and for communities most affected by the scourge of poor air quality, and results in fair and effective policy backed up by community buy-in.

# Our methodology

## Guiding principles

This is Asthma + Lung UK's first attempt to adopt an inclusive policy development approach to clean air policy. To ground this process, we set four guiding principles:

- First, communication will be approached as an ongoing two way-process rather than a one-off consultation.
- Second, we are committed to empowering people from underrepresented and disproportionately affected communities by providing the support they need to contribute confidently and meaningfully to the process.
- Third, transparency will underpin the process, with a focus on clearly explaining how decisions are made and how participant views are taken into account.
- Finally, we aim to build trust by sharing progress through regular feedback loops to ensure that the outcomes remain grounded in participants' experiences and priorities.

## Literature review

At the start of the project, we carried out a review of academic literature and sector practice on inclusive policy development. The aim was to learn from existing approaches – understanding what has worked, what pitfalls to avoid, and how to adapt these lessons for the context of air pollution.

One of the ideal outcomes of inclusive policy development is creating more equitable policy. This is sorely needed in air pollution, a policy area where inequality is stark. While air pollution affects everyone, it disproportionately harms people in deprived and ethnically diverse communities, who are both more exposed and have less power to influence the decisions that could protect them. This power imbalance is reflected in a wider hierarchy of knowledge within the environmental movement, where institutional and technical expertise are often valued over lived experience.

## Role of creative practice as a tool for knowledge production

Traditional policy making has long privileged institutionalised forms of knowledge such as academic research, policy briefs, and technical consultations. These formats often rely on expert knowledge and highly-technical language, the use of which can silence people outside of institutions. In contrast, non-institutionalised forms of knowledge like storytelling, art, poetry and everyday conversation are frequently undervalued, despite offering equally valid insights. Over time, this imbalance can lead people outside of institutions to doubt the knowledge they hold.

The OAOV project deliberately sought to redress this imbalance by giving greater weight to non-institutionalised knowledge. We embedded creative practice not only as a form of expression but as a recognised method of producing knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Widely used in work with young people and marginalised communities, creative methods can open more equitable, less extractive spaces for participation. They allow people to explore complex issues like air pollution and injustice on their own terms, sharing insights that are often missed in traditional consultations.

## Widening participation and accessibility

Participatory research should not be viewed as the silver bullet for inclusion. Genuine inclusion requires both accessibility and sustained support. This is because within participatory spaces, differences in socioeconomic status, communication skills, and confidence can lead some people to silence themselves.<sup>14</sup> Without deliberate effort to counter these dynamics, participatory research risks reinforcing inequalities rather than reducing them.

Direct recruitment of marginalised communities can be an effective route to mitigate this risk. Inviting underserved groups directly to take part recognises and affirms the value of their experience. Working through the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector is particularly effective as these organisations often have pre-established trusted local relationships<sup>15</sup>. Such partnerships can help ensure that the cultural requirements of the targeted participants are understood and met.

To make certain that participation was accessible, remuneration was vital. Providing remuneration is not only a matter of equity, but also an important enabler of inclusion. Without financial recognition, people facing financial pressures or caring responsibilities are far less able to take part. We adopted a remuneration approach that followed the principles set out in the Social Change Agency's *Payment for Involvement Playbook*<sup>16</sup>.

## Recruitment and selection strategy

Recruitment for OAOV was approached with the aim of centring the voices of those most affected by air pollution. We decided to recruit young people aged 16-24, recognising that this age group is already growing up breathing dirty air as a result of successive government inaction, and many of them will be eligible to vote for the first time in the next general election.

Our recruitment strategy was to reach out and engage directly with existing VCSE organisations and spaces, whose trusted relationships opened pathways to engage with groups within and beyond environmental spaces.

Recruitment ultimately generated 39 sign-ups, reflecting strong ethnic diversity.<sup>17</sup> With project resources allowing for 20 participants, we had to make a careful decision on selection. Several approaches were considered, each reflecting different strategic goals around representation and inclusion, along with their respective risks and ethical considerations.<sup>18</sup>

After weighing these options, we chose random selection. Since our outreach strategy had already generated a broad and diverse applicant pool, randomisation offered the fairest approach while avoiding the risks of tokenism or over-identification associated with quotas. In line with Asthma + Lung UK's charitable purpose to represent and support people affected by lung conditions, we guaranteed four places for applicants with lived experience of respiratory illness, reflecting the reality that one in five people in the UK live with a lung condition.



# WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

**The workshops formed the core of our participatory research process, bringing together 19 people aged 16-24 to explore how clean air policy could better reflect their lived experience and aspirations for the future. Held over two days in London in partnership with grassroots organisations, the sessions were designed to build trust, knowledge, and imagination – moving from understanding the causes of air pollution to envisioning fairer, healthier futures.**





# DAY ONE

## “What is fairer and healthier air to you?”

The first workshop focused on building a shared understanding of air pollution – its causes, its impacts, and its connection to broader questions of fairness and health. Activities were guided by the following questions:

- What is air pollution? Where does it come from, and who contributes to it?
- How is the problem defined, and by whom?
- What is the effect of being exposed to air pollution on our health? Who is most vulnerable, and how does it contribute to structural discrimination?
- As young people, how do we respond to these challenges?
- What does environmental justice mean to us?

Time	Schedule	Activity
10:30am – 11:15am	Arrival, breakfast, welcome, icebreaker, and collaborative boundary setting.	The day opened with an introduction to Asthma + Lung UK and our inclusive policy development project, outlining the aims of these workshops. The group worked to set shared boundaries to encourage a safe space for sharing.
11:15am – 12:30pm	Clean Air Fresk activity.	A collaborative mapping activity we adapted from the Climate Fresk model. Working in small groups, they visually traced the links between sources of air pollution, pollutants, health and sociological impacts. This exercise aimed to ensure that all participants developed a shared baseline understanding of the complexity of air pollution.
12:30pm – 1:30pm	Lunch	
1:30pm – 4:30pm	Participants split into two groups and alternate:  <b>Activity one:</b> gardening and clean air.  <b>Activity two:</b> group reflection and creating collaborative clean air utopias.	The afternoon shifted into hands-on horticulture with Garden Organic, using gardening to connect air pollution with human health and climate health. The day concluded with participants reflecting on the morning’s learning and imagining utopian “clean air futures”, setting a future-oriented tone for the policy work to follow.



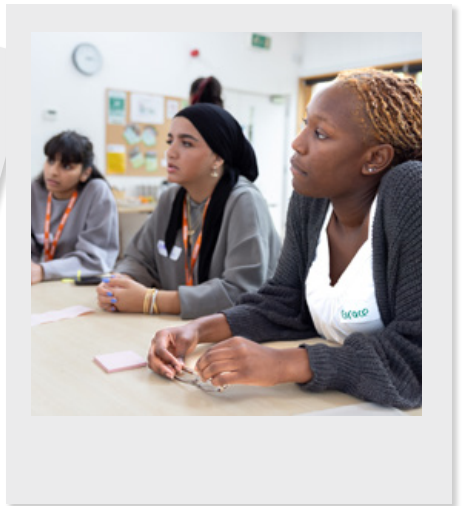
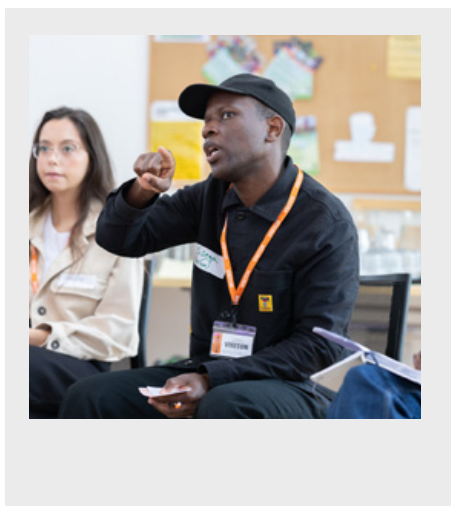
# DAY TWO

## “How do we realise fairer and healthier air?”

The second day built on the learnings from the first workshop, moving the focus from understanding air pollution to imagining and demanding change. Activities were guided by the following questions:

- What role does fairness play in achieving cleaner, healthier air for all?
- How can individuals and communities influence decision-makers to act?
- What do we want government to do to show that it takes young people’s voices seriously?
- How can we demand politicians to listen to our policy calls and prioritise population health?

Time	Schedule	Activity
10:30am – 11:00am	Arrival, breakfast and welcome.	
11:00am – 12:30pm	Discussion on ideas and options to create cleaner air led by: Love Ssega, Founder of Live + Breathe Beau Boka Batesa Co-Founder of Choked Up	Participants explored examples of youth-led campaigning through the guest speakers’ organisational campaigns for environmental justice and then worked in groups to develop their own campaign, coming up with a mission for clean air.
12:30pm – 1:30pm	Lunch	
1:30pm – 4:30pm	Creative writing workshop with Poetic Unity	Guided by Poetic Unity, the participants shared reflections as a group and worked on their own piece of spoken word imagining a clean air future and expressing their demands for government.
4:30pm – 4:45pm	Next steps from A+LUK team	We set out the timeline of what would happen next, when the participants could expect to hear from us, and what we were building towards with their involvement.



# Feedback loops

Following the workshops, all ideas shared by participants were systematically reviewed and categorised. These demands were co-created with the participants and finalised through a series of planned feedback loops to foster a sense of shared ownership.

The feedback loops were as follows:

- August 2025: Immediately after the workshops, participants completed evaluation forms reflecting on their experience of the project and listing their key priorities for clean air action. These priorities reflected the key themes identified through our thematic analysis of workshop discussions.
- September 2025: Responses to the key priorities question in August 2025 informed the draft list of policy recommendations. Once prepared, participants were invited to review each recommendation via an online survey.
- February 2026: Participants took part in a workshop online to feedback on the draft policy report and had the option to submit additional thoughts through an online survey. They were also invited to participate further in the production of the report as case studies.

Participation in all of these additional feedback loops was remunerated.

# Impact and learnings

To understand changes in knowledge, confidence, and perception over the course of the project, participants completed short snapshot surveys at the start and end of the workshops. These surveys asked participants to rate their agreement with six statements on a five-point scale, with higher numbers indicating stronger agreement.

Average scores increased across all six indicators.<sup>19</sup> The most significant improvement was in participants' confidence to talk about air quality issues. This evidence demonstrates how the workshop style deepened understanding of air pollution, but also importantly built participants' ability to take part in future discussions about clean air. At the end of the workshops, participants were also asked to rate their agreement with an additional five statements to capture their views on their enjoyment and perception of the value of the workshops.<sup>20</sup>

For several, the experience helped reframe what participation in policy could mean. During the course of the workshops, participants described now feeling aware of the value of their lived experience and more motivated to use it for change.

**“ Communities are the heart of our country, and their involvement is what will ultimately create change. They know better than the government what people in their area need and want. They are the people who have real life stories to tell. ”**

**“ We need to understand people's perceptions of the issue, their ideas for solutions – overall they experience things day-to-day and we need to understand that. ”**

**“ Our voices do matter, we have a say, and there are things we can do and get involved in to help. ”**

Alongside participant feedback, the OAOV project generated important organisational learning that will strengthen Asthma + Lung UK's capacity to conduct inclusive policy work in the future.

# Successes

## In-person workshops

- Recruitment strategy yielded a large and diverse list of sign ups.
- Varying the format of activities valued different communication styles/personalities.
- Creative sessions helped participants feel at ease and build confidence. We found that conversation sessions after a creative component were more energised, with participants seeming more confident to speak up.
- Hosting the workshops in a venue with access to green space, alongside providing nutritious refreshments, supported a relaxed environment and participant wellbeing.

## Online feedback loops

- Maintained engagement with more than half of the 19 participants for each round of feedback:
  - August 2025: 15 completed evaluation form
  - September 2025: 11 completed survey to review initial draft recommendations
  - February 2026: 6 participated in an online workshop and 12 completed survey to review final recommendations in February 2025

## Examples of positive feedback

“ I want to say that I found the project in August extremely engaging as it wasn't all focused on asking us questions. I really enjoyed the diversity of activities from making tiktoks, to planting trees and it was really nice to meet people from all different ages and backgrounds. This created a really relaxed atmosphere where I felt I could freely express my opinions. ”

“ I think this is a beautiful project and I genuinely feel hopeful that it will work. I hope it brings justice to those most affected by air inequality. ”

“ I feel like the report is very comprehensive, like it covers a lot of different parts of air pollution, like the causes and the solutions. It feels like it tackles a lot. ”

“ [The workshop was] engaging while being very informative. ”

“ I enjoyed learning how air quality directly affects people and seeing practical examples of what communities can do to improve clean air. The interactive activities made the topic more engaging and easier to understand. ”

# Learnings

## Time and resourcing

- Despite careful facilitation, it remained challenging to draw out the perspectives of those less confident speaking in group settings. Building the trust needed for people to share openly takes time.
- Sustaining momentum after the workshops during the policy development phase proved difficult – even with remuneration offered.
- Future iterations would benefit from a longer project arc and clearer mechanisms for continued involvement.

## Strengthening insight generation

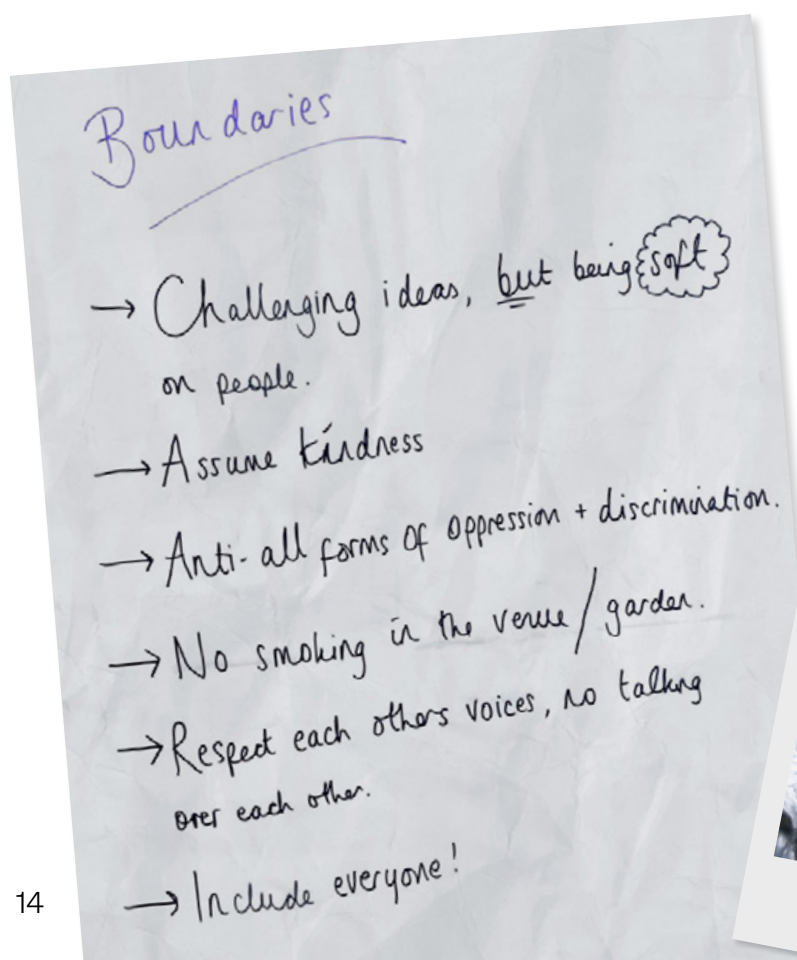
- Certain sessions like the messaging activity stimulated imagination, but yielded less insight than anticipated into which air pollution narratives resonate most strongly with communities. To address this gap, the post-workshop survey did include additional questions asking whether participants had discussed what they learned with others, and if so, what they shared.
- Other workshop sessions such as the fresk activity were successful in engaging participants, but would have benefited from more structured guiding questions to help embed learning. A slightly longer format would give participants more time to absorb information and process their ideas.

## Creative methods need greater intention

- While the gardening workshop played a valuable role in fostering participant engagement, the session did not necessarily provide a source of policy insight. Striking a balance is key, but future projects should be more intentional about translating creative workshops into meaningful outputs.

## Trust depends on transparency

- Some participants raised early concerns about whether their contributions would genuinely shape Asthma + Lung UK's work.
- A transparent plan for how participants' perspectives will shape decisions and demonstrating that follow-through in practice is key to the co-production process. Without this, participatory approaches risk feeling extractive rather than collaborative – the group were quick to identify this distinction.



# Examples of constructive feedback

“Some parts felt a bit rushed, which made it hard to take in all the information. It could be improved by having more time for discussions or hands-on activities so we can explore the topic in more depth, but overall it was a great experience.”

“I wish it was more days.”

“More information [needed] on the solutions – what can people do.”

“[The workshop could have been improved by] more opportunities to talk about our stories.”

These reflections show both the strengths of OAOV's approach and the areas for development. They provide a foundation for us to establish inclusive policy development as standard procedure, designing future participatory policy projects that are more inclusive, better resourced, and grounded in long-term relationships with the communities we aim to serve.



# Appendices

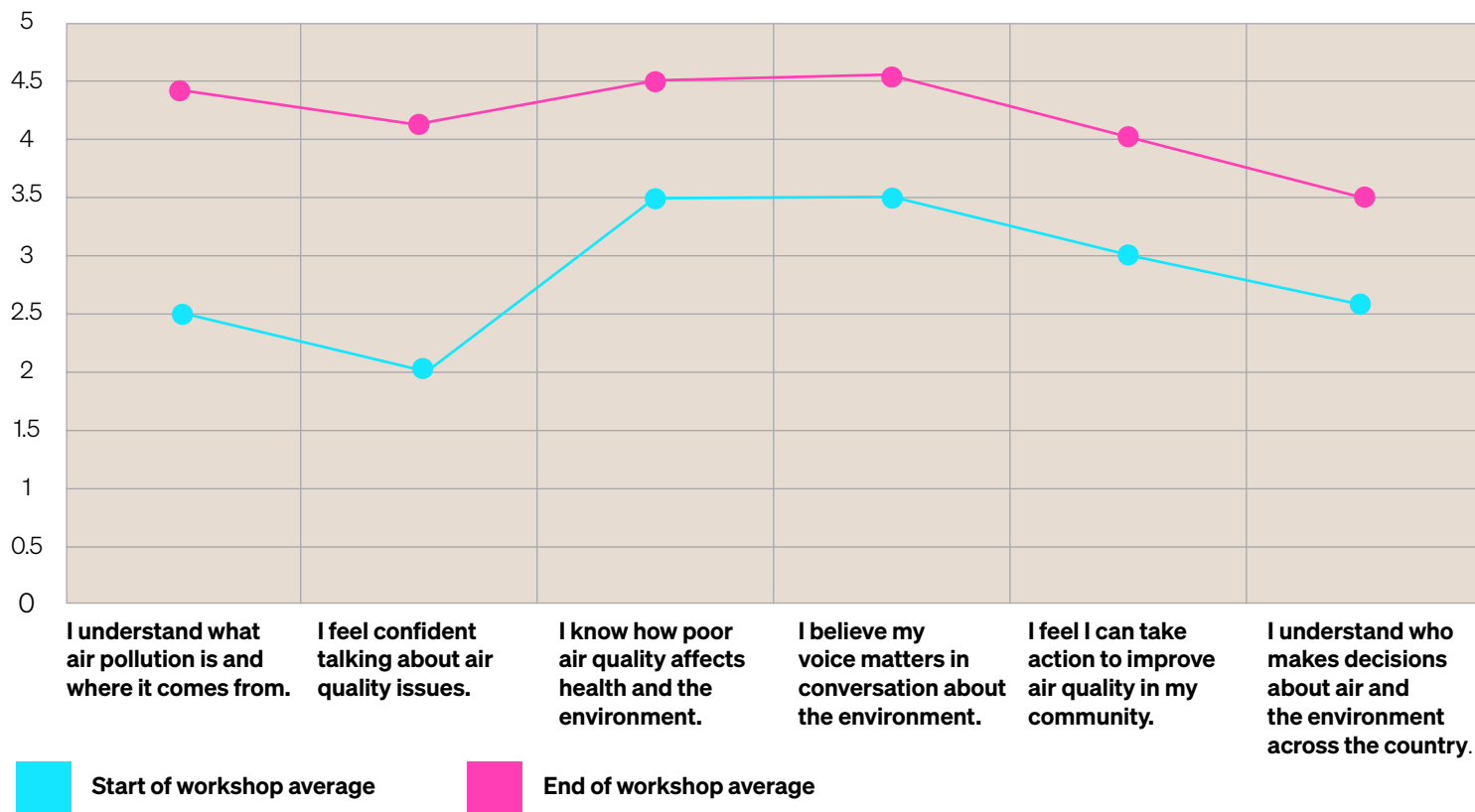
## Appendix 1 – Summary of sign-ups by ethnic background

Ethnicity	Count
Mixed	7
Black	15
Asian	5
White	10
Other – Arab	1
Prefer not to say	1

## Appendix 2 – Breakdown of selection options and analysis

Selection method	Benefit	Risk
<b>Microcosm of London’s youth (using sign-up data such as age, ethnicity, and postcode).</b>	In theory, provides a representative snapshot of young Londoners’ experiences and views on air pollution.	Limited data generation from sign-up survey makes it difficult to create a true microcosm. Air pollution disproportionately impacts certain groups, and policy making does not actively reach out to these groups, so this approach may fail to redress those key issues.
<b>Targeted recruitment of underrepresented groups (including a minimum of four participants with lung conditions, reflecting Asthma + Lung UK charitable purpose).</b>	Elevates voices of communities disproportionately affected by toxic air and historically excluded from policy conversations.	Risks generalising participants’ experiences, or over-identifying individuals with key facets of deprivation. Care must be taken to avoid framing participants solely through disadvantage.
<b>Random selection of applications (from a diverse sign-up pool generated through outreach to community organisations and networks).</b>	Fair and transparent approach that avoids tokenism and mitigates risks of overrepresentation linked to quotas. Maintains credibility if the recruitment pool is already diverse.	May yield a less diverse group if the sign-up pool is not sufficiently broad; diversity depends heavily on the quality of initial outreach.

### Appendix 3 – Baseline and post-workshop survey responses (averages across 15 responses)



### Appendix 4 – Additional end of workshop survey responses



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17. See appendix 1 for more information.
18. See appendix 2 for more information.
19. See appendix 3 for more information.
20. See appendix 4 for more information.

Rebuilding **trust** in clean air policy requires the government to develop policy in **partnership** with the communities it seeks to serve.



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