

Experiences of the Walworth Living Room

An ethnographic account

September 2023



1. Experiences of Walworth Living Room

This report summarises the results of an ethnography carried out at Walworth Living Room between 19th and 28th July 2023. The work updates the early findings from September 2022, carried out as part of the wider evaluation of the We Walworth project. Here we explore themes around how the space is experienced by its visitors and how it relates to other sources of support and connections in Walworth.

1. We Walworth and the Walworth Living Room

The We Walworth project fell into three stages: getting a wide group of people involved through neighbourhood events, working in small groups, and tackling local issues collaboratively.¹ The project focused on a series of events that were known as “Neighbourhood Welcomes”, bringing together people from within the community with central and local government. These took place at Walworth Living Room. Two Working Groups investigated particular local challenges. Members of the working groups and We Walworth partners aimed to create a space where a group of individuals coming from different backgrounds could work together to develop new ideas.

We Walworth was funded through the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Partnership for People and Places programme. The project was born out of the Walworth community’s response to the COVID pandemic, and especially the work done by the Walworth Community Food Hub which was established in the first lockdown.² By drawing on what was learnt from experiences of food-based solidarity in Walworth, We Walworth aimed to develop new ways of working across central and local government and with the local community, and to make decisions and resolve issues collectively out of a shared experience. Social Life was the research and learning partner in the We Walworth project and worked to understand the impact of project activities on those closely involved with the work and on those who only attended one-off events such as “Neighbourhood Welcomes”.

Walworth Living Room is a space for local communities to come together in Walworth. It is located next to Surrey Square; it opened in 2019 and is a project of Pembroke House. It has a Community Cafe, a Community Fridge, and it offers classes and other social activities. One of the rooms at Walworth Living Room housed the indoor activities of the We Walworth Working Groups 1 and 2, Neighbourhood Welcomes were run from the space and the main hall was used for a ward forum where ideas from Working Group 1 were raised.

The first round of ethnographic fieldwork at Walworth Living Room, which took place between 15th and 29th September 2022, was part of our baseline research for the We Walworth project. The second round, which is the focus of this report, took place at the end of the project between 19th and 28th July 2023. Informed by an ethnographic methodology, the two rounds of fieldwork used a combination of participant observation and semi-structured conversations with Walworth Living Room visitors. In total, across the two rounds of fieldwork, we carried out about 25 hours of observations and 24 conversations (13 in the first round and 11 in the second).

¹ More information about the project and its goals is available on the We Walworth website: <https://coda.io/@we-walworth/project>

² More information about the Walworth Community Food Hub is available here: <https://www.pembrokehouse.org.uk/food-hub/>

2. Note on the method

The ‘extractive logic’ of research is a current concern in research with communities. Extractive practices are part of a model of research that prioritises data collection regardless of its impact on local relationships and that shows little consideration for who owns the knowledge that is co-produced in those exchanges. Many researchers are now exploring alternative, community-based or community-aware, models of participatory research.

Walworth Living Room is a community space that seeks to be inclusive and non-hierarchical. The team was told that, in the past, Walworth Living Room visitors reacted negatively to structured research methods such as surveys. In September 2022, it was decided that a more ethnographic approach that foregrounded relationship-building and awareness of power dynamics was more suitable for Walworth Living Room. Getting to know the Social Life researchers made visitors and staff feel more at ease with the research process. Multiple interactions between visitors of Walworth Living Room and researchers helped increase the accountability of the research. The informal and semi-structured way of collecting data also encouraged participants to speak at ease and shape what was discussed.

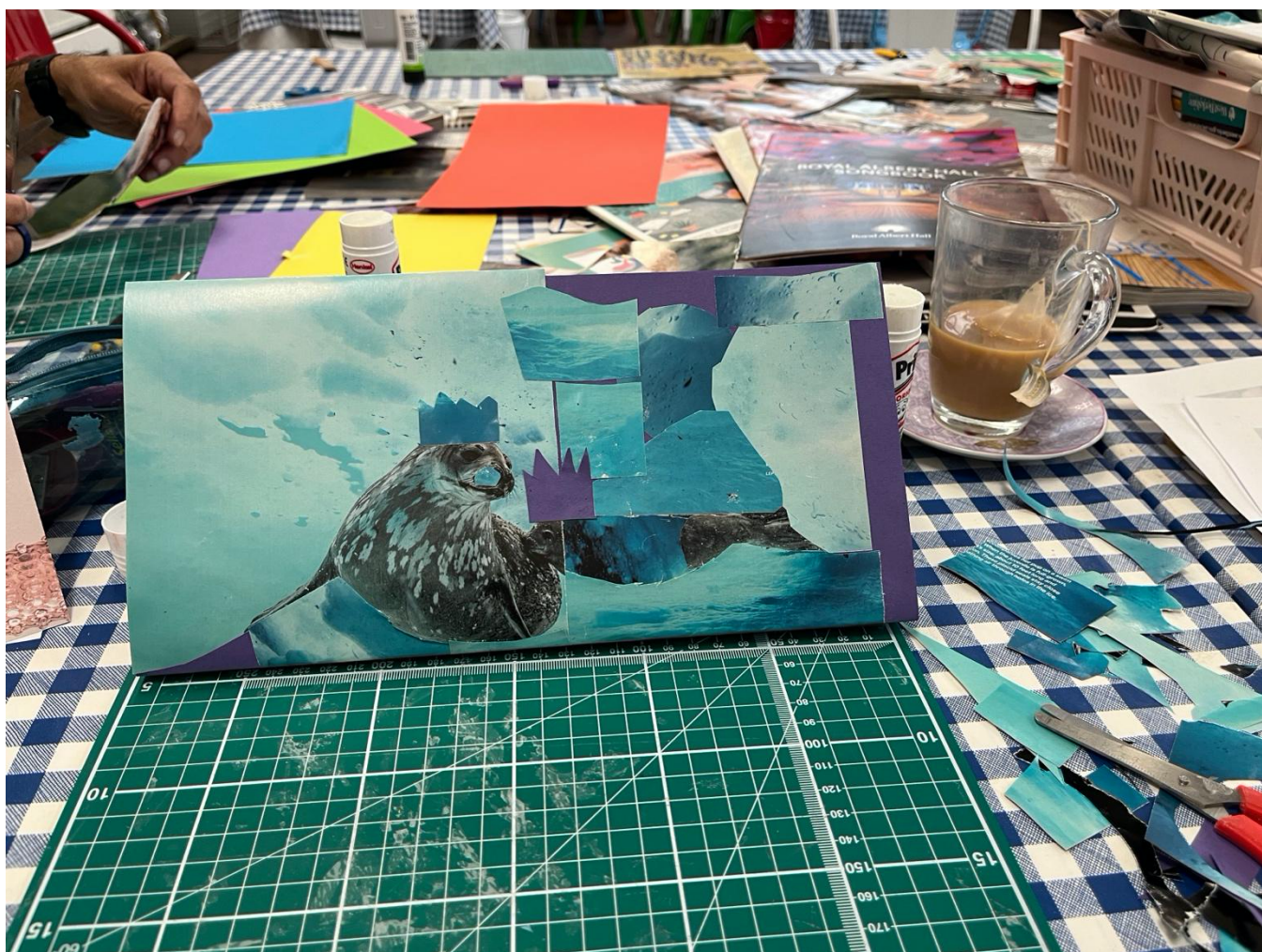


Ethnography usually involves long-term engagement with a site or group of people, but this was not possible in this case given limited available resources. However ethnographic approaches informed the two rounds of fieldwork with Walworth Living Room in several important ways:

- During our first session at Walworth Living Room in September 2022 and October 2023, time was dedicated to getting to know the Living Room’s visitors and staff. The Social Life researchers took part in activities and observed the interactions between people and the space. This allowed us to

learn more about who and how the Living Room is used by visitors. We paid attention to language and accessibility needs, and we tried to find the appropriate ways to introduce the research once we became a familiar face to those using the space.

- Participant observation, where researchers participate in the activities of a space alongside observing them, was the key research approach. During our time at the Living Room, we were hanging out, making collage, playing scrabble, drinking tea, and chatting alongside other visitors. This helped us build an understanding of the differences between the people using the space and the ecosystem of relationships within the space. Examples include differences between ‘regulars’ and less frequent visitors, or between people who come to Walworth Living Room mainly to collect food from its Community Fridge and those who come by to see other people and socialise.



- Field notes were taken on the use of space and furniture, movement through space, relationships between users and events taking place. These notes provided the context of people’s experiences of the space. They were used to inform how our conversations with visitors were interpreted. Recorded conversations were bracketed off by consent and data protection agreements, and participants were made aware that they were speaking to researchers.
- Conversations were loosely structured around a few questions concerning visitors’ experience of living in Walworth and being involved with Walworth Living Room. These were recorded using handwritten notes. If people wanted to go off-topic, what they said was given equal weight. What people chose to tell us was considered relevant to our research. This contrasts with a more formal survey approach which is oriented towards finding the answers to specific questions.

We identified the themes that cut across individual experiences and the accounts we collected. We used thematic analysis to build an understanding of the visitors' experiences and to gain insight into how they shifted between the two rounds of fieldwork. The quotes used in this report have been edited for clarity.

2. Themes

1. Getting involved with Walworth Living Room

Our conversations captured a wide range of voices. Some visitors were regular users who came to Walworth Living Room multiple times during the week for no activity in particular. Others were 'activity-driven' regulars; they got involved because of an interest in a particular activity such as the collaging club or activities for their children. Yet others were occasional visitors or first timers, who came to know the space because of a specific event that they attended at the Living Room.

As we found in the first round of fieldwork, people got involved with Walworth Living Room in a variety of ways. Some lived nearby and came across the place on their way home. Some had been brought in by a neighbour or friend. A few parents learned about the space from nursery or school contacts and their interactions with Walworth Living Room were mostly limited to their children's activities. Some other visitors first got involved with Pembroke House through volunteering or taking their children to classes at the Pembroke House building on Tatum Street, and only later learned about the Living Room. Yet others learned about Walworth Living Room from leaflets or newsletters or had been referred by a social prescriber.



“Regulars feel a commitment to it [Walworth Living Room].”

Walworth Living Room visitor

The key motivations to get involved with Walworth Living Room revolved around taking part in the local community, socialising, and food. Like in the first round of fieldwork, we noticed a difference between regular visitors and people who came weekly or monthly to attend or bring children to specific classes (for example, the collaging club, the African drumming workshop, music for kids). Regular visitors felt more at ease with the space, and they were more aware of other events going on at Walworth Living Room.



This difference between visitors was also seen in the way that different people who used Walworth Living Room engaged with the We Walworth project. As the project progressed in the winter and spring months of 2023, it created more opportunities for regular visitors of the Living Room to take part in its activities. This marks a departure from the results of the first round of fieldwork, when most visitors told us that they were not aware of the We Walworth project.

“I saw a leaflet, a member of the Walworth Living Room staff explained what it is about. I attended a neighbourhood event for East Street Market. I attended because I wanted to be part of the community, I wanted to be involved, I wanted to talk to the council, local authorities, nice to see they wanted to learn what people think, to get our opinions. I got emails, texts, talked to the staff.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

In the second round of fieldwork, in July 2023, some of the regular visitors said they had attended a We Walworth event. As the project went on, We Walworth activities continued to be advertised at Walworth Living Room and sometimes the staff brought them up in conversations with visitors. In time, some of the regular visitors felt more motivated to learn about the local issues addressed by the We Walworth project. Participation in We Walworth events allowed them to meet other regular visitors, to feel part of the larger community, and it made them more aware of what was happening in the local area. For some of those we spoke to, this translated into a wider sense of ownership over the local community. However, many of the regular visitors we spoke to had fixed routines. This meant that, in most cases, the longer-term activities of the We Walworth project clashed with their prior commitments, making it difficult for regular visitors of the Living Room to engage with the project beyond the one-off events.

“[At the We Walworth neighbourhood welcome event] I met new people, friendly faces, people were easy to talk to. The topics were interesting: people's concerns, after COVID things were getting worse, things like this make you think the council are not just sitting in the office, shows that they care about the locals, that they do their job.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

“Community, food, togetherness, that’s what I remember [about We Walworth event]. I went because I wanted to be involved, loved the idea! I wanted to make a positive impact and enjoy the positive impact of being involved! I couldn't work on it; I was committed to many other projects. My best input here is being relaxed, generosity, enjoyment. I stayed in touch with 5-6 people whom I met through We Walworth. They're friends on WhatsApp, kept in touch, they're all local.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

As the project activities went on, they also created opportunities for people who took part in We Walworth, especially local people who were part of the working groups, to engage with the Living Room. Some of the members of We Walworth working groups took an interest in the events and classes that took place at Walworth Living Room. The second round of fieldwork showed that this happened organically, through people chatting about activities on offer or through the connections people made. WhatsApp and newsletters played a role in facilitating cross-over between We Walworth and Walworth Living Room activities.

“Being here [at Walworth Living Room] brings back lovely memories of coming here every week [when the We Walworth working group used to meet]!”

Walworth Living Room visitor

However, not all the interviewed local people who took part in the We Walworth working groups had the same experience of Walworth Living Room. Some felt Walworth Living Room was only a working environment, which did not generate new routines nor richer connections to the space.

“Coming to the weekly sessions didn't make me use Walworth Living Room more. With the We Walworth project I felt like...I'm here [in this space] for a purpose! It was a working environment! I didn't stay in touch with people, not really.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

2. Food or community or a bit of everything?

People shared different stories about their journeys with Walworth Living Room. No journey was alike and most of the stories we heard showed that Walworth Living Room has multiple meanings, as individuals' experience of the space is multifaceted. For its regular visitors, Walworth Living Room is about a mix of experiences that allow people to feel and share a sense of belonging, friendship, support, and food.

Like in the first round of fieldwork, the energy and flow of the Living Room changed from being busy, as people joined a specific activity or queued for the Community Fridge, to times when only a few regular visitors were around. In September 2022, many of those we spoke to felt that there were tensions around the use of the fridge, however, in July 2023, visitors noted that lately things have become calmer.

“I can take charity food and spend time here. I come for the community fridge on Thursday and Friday when I have time. There's a lot of people here on Friday especially around 1:15pm when school ends and parents and kids come.”

User of Walworth Living Room visitor

“About the community food fridge, before, the volunteers would put their people first, would move food etc. Now some people are not coming because they cannot exploit it. Some people [still] think it's a food bank, they come and leave.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

This round of fieldwork suggests that the Community Fridge has become better integrated with the rest of activities at Walworth Living Room. In the stories we heard, the split between the people who come 'just for the food' and those who come to socialise was less marked. Some of the accounts we heard suggested that fridge volunteers, staff and regular users had streamlined the activity earlier in the year. For many of those we spoke to, food was only one of several motivations to be involved with the Living Room.

Visitors noted that Walworth Living Room is not only about the Community Fridge and many emphasised that it is not a food bank but an inclusive community space. It is important to mention that this might reveal a bias in our fieldwork (both in September 2022 and July 2023) because it was easier for researchers to chat with people who were spending more time in the space than with people who just dropped by to use the fridge and left immediately afterwards.

“It's a community space for everyone, helps with food, it's good, it gives support especially for people with young kids, there's always something going on.”

Food is nonetheless an important part of what Walworth Living Room means to people. This happens in part because of the Community Fridge, but also because of the other ways in which food is incorporated into activities. The Community Café and the Hot Meals after-school free lunch programme offered to kids and parents on Fridays also shape how the space is experienced by its users. Many visitors noted that the food from the café has changed since they started coming to Walworth Living Room. Some of the regular visitors spoke to us about the positive side of this change, highlighting an increase in quality, but they also mentioned its negative side related to an increase in prices.

“Food [at the café] has changed since I started coming. The cooks have always been good but worked fewer days. Now it's a proper café. It's always there with proper drinks, they didn't have this before, with a permanent cook three days a week. Some of the people who used to go to Pembroke House [the building on Tatum Street] used to go to the lunch club but they did not come here [Walworth Living Room]. Some only started coming here after COVID, when Pembroke House closed.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

“Food [at the café] is expensive so fewer people are buying it. It's a poor area, make it community prices, coffee for £1 or £1.5 not £2.8!”

Walworth Living Room visitor

“The cost of living has gone up, I bring my own meal and most of my friends too. There are no more free meals on Thursday, people used to take leftovers home...The ‘pay it forward’ is difficult, asking about it can be difficult, it can feel like begging. I help others asking about ‘pay it forward’...if people feel ashamed to do it. Friday afternoon there's food for kids and parents, it's funded, but not for the whole community, for regulars, they don't get the free food, there's other people who are hungry [not just parents and kids]. It should be made fair! The cake is £3, I can bake a whole cake for £3. It all comes down to funding. We had a meeting the other day with the staff, we were told they had to meet the costs otherwise it will close. It didn't go anywhere it all comes down to cost, everything has gone up but what about us? Apply for the council funding to cook meals for the community, even if it's once a month. School kids get a meal at school, then here...”

Walworth Living Room visitor

These conversations suggest that some of the sensitivities surrounding food in Walworth Living Room have shifted slightly since September 2022 - food appears to be shaping the experience of the Living Room differently from before. New arrangements and activities have left their mark. Now the space contains a wider range of more subdued splits - between those who come ‘just for the food’ and those who come to socialise, those who can enjoy the café and those who find it overpriced and bring food from home, as

well as those who can take advantage of free lunches and those who would like to see free lunch made available to the wider community.

3. Support and socialising in Walworth

Visitors saw Walworth Living Room as a key place for socialising and support in Walworth. This finding is consistent with what we learned in the first round of fieldwork. For those we spoke to, opportunities for socialising and support seemed to be tightly connected. Most of the visitors who are familiar with the area said they hang out and get support from community-oriented spaces, such as community hubs, choirs, parks, and faith organisations. The visitors who knew the area surrounding Walworth Living Room said they use two or three other places in addition to Walworth Living Room.



“There are quite a few places in Walworth! But you prefer what you know.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

In their conversations, people usually mentioned informal types of support, such as hanging out, having something to do in the daytime, and access to free food. For many visitors, having a routine that gives them a reason to go out of their house was a crucial part of the experience of Walworth Living Room. This seemed to be especially important for parents who bring their children along for classes. For them, Walworth Living Room appeared as a stimulating environment that offers opportunities for growth.

“It’s good for [my daughter] to be around people, it’s stimulating...she likes looking at the high ceiling and people. At home, it would just be the two of us!”

Walworth Living Room visitor

“I come only here [Walworth Living Room]. I spend most time by myself [when I’m not here].”

Walworth Living Room visitor

“It feels like a living room, it’s not a cliché, I can just come, people know me, I know them. I’m learning the moms’ names; we’re picking up tips from each other.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

For a few people, Walworth Living Room encapsulated their social life. In contrast, some of the one-off visitors and some of the people who are involved with the Living Room only for a specific activity were not that familiar with the surrounding area. Their networks of support were located outside of Walworth.

4. A welcoming space

The friendly and comfortable atmosphere was a common thread in people’s accounts of Walworth Living Room. As in our first round of fieldwork, the stories we heard show that visitors see Walworth Living Room as a comfortable space that makes people feel at ease. A place where neither ‘old friends’ nor ‘new faces’ create discomfort.



“It's a space for everybody.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

“It feels like you can come in by yourself and be comfortable, there are few places like this in London. The spirit in the spaces is generous, a warm spirit, it helps that other people are comfortable in the space and the activities help too.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

“I feel welcomed here for nothing and everything.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

“From home to home, it's friendly, it's lovely. It has good activities. If you're at home and feel down you can come here, have a cuppa, have something to eat, chat with everybody, I know most people...”

Walworth Living Room visitor

Visitors felt that the friendly staff of the Living Room is a key ingredient to creating the welcoming atmosphere. A few visitors mentioned that the staff know how to make people feel comfortable and do not rush them to interact or take part in activities. This corroborates the findings from the previous round of fieldwork when we learned how important the non-judgemental ethos of Walworth Living Room was to people, and especially to those who felt less inclined to quickly open up to others.

The staff are really cool, kind, know not to push, are friendly. They feel it [when it's a good time to chat with you and when it's not] ...you must feel it [to know when to talk, when to let people be].”

Walworth Living Room visitor

Some visitors also spoke about the ‘generosity’ of the space and the lack of hierarchy between staff and visitors. In our observations, we noticed that visitors, especially those who use the Living Room a few times a week, moved through the space of the Living Room with the ease and confidence one has at home. For instance, there was familiarity with the furniture, the board games, the sofas, and so on.

“The encouragement people get here...people get out of their shells to be themselves, are encouraged to do that.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

“The staff are lovely, all friendly, it's not like staff versus people! They treat you with respect, there is no discrimination. With every new staff member...you have to get used to them; the new staff is just as good.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

Like in the first round of fieldwork, it was easy to identify a group of regulars who seemed comfortable to take part in whatever was going on at the Living Room, showing familiarity with the regular flow of activities and the events that have started more recently. This was especially noticeable during busier times when multiple activities took place simultaneously. For instance, on late Friday mornings, children were running around, some screaming some crying, while other regular visitors were quietly sipping their drinks. A couple of visitors, however, wondered whether Walworth Living Room activities could be better planned to avoid some of the clashes in how the space is used and shared.

5. Improving the experience of Walworth Living Room

Visitors shared with us some of their thoughts on what could improve their experience of Walworth Living Room. A number of them mentioned that it would be good to have more activities on offer - acupuncture, yoga and back massage were among those cited. Parents said that some art classes or knitting clubs for children would make them return more often.

Many visitors noted that Walworth Living Room could be more accessible to people with different needs, to those who work during the day, and to those who need on-site childcare. Parents acknowledged that the Living Room already offers some childcare for events, but they felt it could be extended to cover younger children and more activities. They said extra childcare would help them mingle more and make more friends.

“Have it [Walworth Living Room] open five days a week, more people would come, it would be good to have disabled people here, you need to make it more accessible. Advertise better so people can come here instead of sitting inside [in their homes] cooped up! [...]. Make a connection with the council or elderly homes to find ways to get people here.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

Visitors noted that opening the Living Room for weekend parties and events would increase its visibility as a community space. Better communication about upcoming events and activities was another important theme, as visitors felt that many people from the community do not know about Walworth Living Room. Visitors felt that there should be better signage and advertising to get more people to find out about the space and what it currently has on offer.

A few other visitors talked about securing funding to offer free lunches for the community. The Hot Meals after-school free lunch programme offered to children and parents on Fridays made some visitors feel that more can be done to ensure that anyone in the community can have a free lunch one day a week.

There should be food available for free one day a week for anyone who comes in. That would make a lot of sense for the people who live around here.

Walworth Living Room visitor

The price of the food and refreshments at the café was another key theme. People recognised that the cost-of-living crisis has affected the costs of running the café but wondered if the prices could be lowered to better reflect the incomes of the people from the community.

“The food [at the café] is a lot of money! [...] We keep telling them [the staff] but they ignore it! [...] It's a poor area, the prices should reflect that. There's no way the soup can be £4 or a halloumi wrap £5. People bring food from home, they can't afford it. [...] It used to be cheaper at the beginning.”

Walworth Living Room visitor

3. Conclusion

A key theme that cuts across visitors' journeys and their experiences of Walworth Living Room is its welcoming atmosphere. The space brings people together around a range of activities and it makes visitors feel at home, among familiar and new faces. This theme is common to the two rounds of fieldwork. Visitors praised the 'generosity' of the space and the lack of hierarchy between staff and visitors. Regular users moved through the space of the Living Room with the ease and confidence that people have at home, proving that the name of the space - the Living Room - suits its activities and adequately captures visitors' experiences there.

The second round of fieldwork shows that, for many visitors, the Community Fridge has become better integrated with the rest of activities on offer at the Living Room. The shift was made possible due to the active efforts of staff, volunteers, and regulars. From our conversations, we learned that the division between those who come to the Living Room 'just for the food' and those who come to socialise were more subdued in July 2023 than they were in September 2022. Food, however, was on people's minds, and visitors noted that it is a key component of what the space offers. When visitors spoke about food this time around, they also mentioned the café and the free lunch available through the Hot Meals programme. The observations and conversations we had with people in July 2023 indicate that food is shaping the experience of the Living Room in more ways than before.

Another important difference between the two rounds of fieldwork relates to the We Walworth project. As the project continued into the winter and spring 2023, it created more opportunities for the regular visitors of the Walworth Living Room to take part in its activities. A few users we spoke to mentioned that they had attended a We Walworth event. They talked about how the We Walworth events they attended allowed them to run into other regular visitors of the Living Room and meet new people, increasing their feelings of belonging and providing them with information about what is happening in Walworth.



About this report

This report brings together the findings from two rounds of ethnographic research carried out by Social Life at Walworth Living Room in September 2022 and July 2023. This is part of the wider evaluation of We Walworth.

We would like to thank the people who shared their experiences and views with us. We are grateful for their expertise and the time they put into this work.

The report was written by Olimpia Mosteanu with contributions from Nicola Bacon and Izzy Gibbin.

Social Life is the evaluation and research partner for We Walworth.

wewalworth.org.uk

Social Life was created by the Young Foundation in 2012, to become a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. All our work is about the relationship between people and the places they live and understanding how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas. We work in the UK and internationally.

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