

# We Walworth Evaluation

Building the evidence base for a new way of working across central and local government and local communities

SEPTEMBER 2023



## About this report

This report describes the findings of a year-long evaluation carried out by Social Life between May 2022 and August 2023.

We would like to thank the We Walworth participants who shared their experiences and views with us. We are grateful for their expertise and the time they put into this work and hope this work will help bring about the changes they would like to see in Walworth and beyond.

The report was written by Olimpia Mosteanu with Nicola Bacon and Lavanya Kumaran.

Research team: Nicola Bacon, Kevin Dykes, Clara Fiti, Izzy Gibbin, Toni King, Lavanya Kumaran, Olimpia Mosteanu and Susherrrie Suki.

## About Social Life

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.

[www.social-life.co](http://www.social-life.co) @SL\_Cities

# Table of contents

1. Summary	3
2. A few words from the Social Life team	8
3. Evaluation results	9
New models of collaborations across government and with the local community	9
Developing and raising awareness of social capital	13
Developing initiatives around food security	18
4. Conclusion	22
5. Looking ahead	24
6. Appendix: a note on research methods	25

# 1. Summary

Social Life was the research and learning partner in the We Walworth project. This evaluation report summarises the results of research carried out between May 2022 and August 2023. It documents the project's journey, as those involved with it understood it, at specific moments in time. We Walworth is funded through the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Partnership for People and Places programme.

## We Walworth & the evaluation

We Walworth was born out of the Walworth community's response to the COVID pandemic. It drew on the work of the Walworth Community Food Hub which was set up in the first lockdown in 2020 and built a cohort of over 2,000 food bag recipients, 600 volunteers and 40 partners<sup>1</sup>.

Food was a vehicle for connection during the pandemic. By drawing on what was learnt from experiences of food-based solidarity in Walworth, the project has 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. Cross-sector joined-up working, tackling food insecurity and increasing social capital have been key to this work.

This report brings together the findings from baseline research carried out in summer and early autumn 2022 before the project started working intensively, focused research on the experience of two working groups, and research carried out at the end of the project in June and July 2023. A wide range of stakeholder groups took part in this research. These included people who had been more involved in We Walworth such as the members of the two working groups and We Walworth core team, plus others who had been less involved, such as social infrastructure providers, people from local organisations and local and central government officers who took part in one-off We Walworth events.

We Walworth has had three stages: getting a wide group of people involved through neighbourhood events, working in small groups, and tackling local issues collaboratively<sup>2</sup>. The project focused around a series of events that were known as "Neighbourhood Welcomes", bringing together people from within the community with central and local government to carry out mass engagement in the local area after a brief training. Two working groups investigated particular challenges, which were identified through the wider conversations that happened through Neighbourhood Welcomes. 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. They engaged the local community to surface ideas to tackle food inequality.

The first working group focused on outdoor eating and the barbeques in Burgess Park, which have been closed since 2020. Its work began in October 2022 and finished in January 2023. The second working group focused on a new vision for East Street Market. This took place between March and May 2023. Each working group took on an eight- to ten-week challenge. This involved reaching out to allies, engaging sceptics, identifying challenges, opportunities and necessary resources, and narrowing down ideas to

---

<sup>1</sup> More information about the Walworth Community Food Hub is available here: <https://www.pembrokehouse.org.uk/food-hub/>

<sup>2</sup> More information about the project and its goals is available on the We Walworth website: <https://coda.io/@we-walworth/project>

create a vision that was pitched to decision makers in Southwark Council. The working group combined out-and-about outdoor sessions with indoor reflection meetings.

### The ward forums

**BBQs:** Over 40 local residents, organisations, councillors and people from local and central government gathered for the Faraday Ward Forum on 13th December at Walworth Living Room. The ward forum offered Working Group 1 the opportunity to share their vision for BBQs in Burgess Park with a wider neighbourhood audience. On 18th January, members of Working Group 1 met with Southwark Council decision makers.

**East Street Market:** 90 local residents, organisations, councillors, local and central government people gathered for a special East Street Market Ward Forum on 11th May at East Street Baptist Church. The ward forum offered the Working Group 2 the opportunity to share their vision with a wider neighbourhood audience. A meeting between members of Working Group 2 and Southwark Council decision makers was scheduled for early June but did not take place.

A theory of change was developed to link project outcomes to the ecosystem of resources, relationships, and people with a stake in this work - including central government representatives, Southwark Council and people living in Walworth. From the onset, We Walworth embraced an agile and iterative approach to achieve its goals of working across institutions and alongside the local communities to tackle complex local issues. As a result, some of the planned activities and ways of working were altered to reflect the needs and opportunities on the ground. In February 2023, the theory of change was updated in conversation with stakeholders involved in the wider programme funded by Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Partnership for People and Places programme. The goals of the project were not amended. **However, three key questions were developed to tie together the outcomes of the theory of change developed for We Walworth:**

1. How do the engagement activities support or hinder the development of new models of collaborations between local government, central government, and the local community?
2. How do the engagement activities support or hinder the development and raising awareness of social capital in the local area?
3. How do the engagement activities support or hinder the development of new initiatives around food?

Social capital is defined and measured through a variety indicators and metrics, which creates challenges for experts across different disciplines and evaluation programmes<sup>3</sup>. Three core dimensions of social capital have however gained widespread recognition: (1) people's relationships and the networks in which individuals are embedded, (2) material and intangible resources associated with them (for instance social support, feelings of belonging), and (3) trust (interpersonal and institutional). These three aspects of social capital guided our evaluation.

The evaluation had three stages: **baseline research**, which took place in the first months of the project; **case study research** focused on the activities of working groups 1 and 2; and **end-of-project research** that took place as the second working group wrapped up between June and July. Research activities were kept separate from the engagement process.

---

<sup>3</sup> The OECD iLibrary and the Institute for Social Capital websites offer comprehensive information about definitions and guidelines on measuring social capital and its key dimensions. Resources are available here <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9789264307278-12-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/9789264307278-12-en> and here <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/guide-to-social-capital-the-concept-theory-and-its-research/?ref=samrye.xyz>

The mix of methods we used for the evaluation provided a detailed account into how We Walworth impacted those immediately involved in the project, as well some of the wider, ongoing changes for people less directly connected to it. Across the three stages of the research, we interviewed 84 people, surveyed 109 and carried out 18 observation sessions at working groups meetings, ward forums and at Walworth Living Room. Detailed information about methods and interviewee selection is available in Appendix 1.

**This evaluation captures the project’s journey, but it remains grounded in the timeline through which those who took part in the research experienced the project.** The evaluation results reflect our conversations and interviews at the specific moment when we ended the research in July 2023. Further progress or project developments that shaped stakeholders’ experiences afterwards are not therefore included in this report.

We identified the themes that cut across individual experiences and the accounts we collected. We used thematic analysis to understand how the members’ experiences shed light on the theory of change outcomes. The quotes used in this report have been edited for clarity.

## Evaluation results

### **Outcome 1: Developing new models of collaborations between local government, central government, and the local community**

#### **Key Finding 1: Bringing together different voices**

Throughout the project’s journey, there was consensus across stakeholders, from the different groups who took part in the research, that We Walworth was successful at bringing together different voices, facilitating interaction, and supporting a positive learning environment. This reflects the views of those who had been more involved in We Walworth such as the members of the two Working Groups, and others who had been less involved in it such as social infrastructure providers, people from local organisations and some local and central government officers who took part in one-off We Walworth events. Working group participants, who had been most closely involved in the work, reported that working collaboratively and flexibly to understand an issue and coming up with a vision that considered a variety of views, experiences, and challenges was the key strength of We Walworth.

#### **Key Finding 2: Clarifying goals**

Participants in the two Working Groups mentioned that project goals became clearer as the project progressed. Central and local government officers had a clearer understanding of the wider goals of the project, while residents were more focused on the concrete objectives of the “challenges”. People interviewed from the wider community who had been less involved in the project, including social infrastructure providers and participants in one-off We Walworth events, wished they had a clearer understanding of the project’s wider goals. They felt such an understanding would have helped them better appreciate the ways in which We Walworth was complementing and tying into other community initiatives and networks.

#### **Key Finding 3: Building a place-based engagement model**

The “deep dive” engagement model, which relied on people from different backgrounds to come to Walworth and work in the neighbourhood for a few weeks, was seen as successful by most of the working group members. At the end of the two working groups, local and central government officers reflected that the project activities had been effective in teaching them how to speak to communities. The majority of those who took part in working groups felt the sessions left them with a better understanding

of the value of local solutions. Many of the people we interviewed from the wider community did not feel they had a good enough understanding of the overall engagement model even if they took part in one-off events, pointing to the need for better communication between We Walworth and local groups and networks.

## **Outcome 2: Developing and raising awareness of social capital**

### **Key Finding 1: Developing relationships across groups**

The majority of the participants in the working groups who were interviewed said the project was successful at developing relationships across groups. They agreed that project activities facilitated new connections, strengthened networks, and provided access to information. Government officers found that We Walworth activities improved their understanding of the importance of local, place-based solutions. For the people we interviewed from the wider community who had been less involved in the project, including social infrastructure providers and participants in one-off We Walworth events, the gains were less clear, raising questions about how the project was benefiting the local area. Some mentioned that the project facilitated new connections but probed how those fitted with the wider goals of the project and its longer-term sustainability.

### **Key Finding 2: Building trust**

Alongside people's networks and the resources associated with them, trust in individuals and institutions is a key dimension of social capital. Raising awareness of social capital also involved understanding people's perceptions of trust in local and central government institutions. There was agreement across participants in the two working groups that individual behaviours and views were being changed by working in partnership across government and with communities. Stakeholders across the different groups that took part in the research however felt that changing perceptions of trust in central and local government institutions is a long-term process that takes time and requires sustained engagement, which could not be accomplished during the short timescale of this project. Some of the participants in Working Group 2 noted that the cancellation of the meeting with decision makers could have had a negative impact on trust between local government and the wider community in Walworth.

### **Key Finding 3: Connecting people and resources**

As We Walworth progressed, it created more opportunities for regular users of the Walworth Living Room community space to take part in its activities, and for people who took part in the project, especially working group members, to engage with Walworth Living Room. These opportunities allowed people to strengthen their connections and provided access to information about the local area. In turn, this had a positive impact on developing social capital as it connected local people - who had been less involved with We Walworth - to project resources, while linking working group members to existing local assets.

## **Outcome 3: Developing initiatives around food security**

### **Key Finding 1: Enabling conversations through food**

Stakeholders across the different groups that took part in the research thought the focus on food had created an environment that allowed conversations to take place with ease, allowing people to easily engage with one another regardless of their backgrounds and interests. However, many stakeholders who had been less involved with the project were not clear on how food security was reflected in the project goals.

## **Finding 2: Addressing local challenges related to food**

The majority of the working group members felt the project was successful in listening to what community members and local stakeholders had to say about their experiences, and in developing 'visions' to address food-related local challenges. At the same time, they felt that We Walworth was not able to deliver on the visions that were developed - at least at the moment. Many pointed to the slow pace of decision-making processes and resistance to cultural change within local and central government as key blockages.

## **Key Finding 3: Building on local food visions to re-imagine cross-sector joined-up working**

The engagement model allowed local and central government officers to gain a better understanding of local food challenges and neighbourhood working. The majority of the working group members felt that taking up food-related challenges opened up a space to re-imagine, grow and test alternative ways of working. However, there was agreement that embedding new ways of working across institutions, even when developed organically from the ground up, would be difficult without support from senior officers and officials.



## 2. A few words from the Social Life team

Social Life was very happy to become involved with We Walworth. We are based in the area and have over the last decade come to appreciate the richness of its local community life and the strengths of its community agencies. Our local work, which includes documenting the impact of the pandemic and of disruptive change in the built environment, together with our everyday experiences spending time in the area, made us starkly aware of the need to address inequalities and support communities facing multiple difficulties. As the cost-of-living crisis intensified in 2022 we were alarmed at the impact this would have on local people.

When we joined the We Walworth partnership in early 2022 we saw the project as having both potential and ambition to understand and find ways of tackling the long-term underlying problems the area faces. But we always knew that developing the sort of change needed would take many years and that new ways of working and new structures will need to emerge to do this.

Our evaluation embraced the agile and iterative approach of We Walworth. As the project shifted and evolved, our research flexed around it. This way of working together had important implications for our research journey and resulted in a robust yet flexible research design that foregrounded relationship-building and awareness of power dynamics<sup>4</sup>. Key to this work was to incorporate all perspectives and to make sure everyone was part of the learning journey, without disrupting project activities.

This flexibility allowed us to respond quickly to emerging challenges. The research team needed to remain embedded in project activities, while also standing back and examining the stories we collected and avoiding off-putting the engagement model. We built on experiences with open research designs, which were important to our work during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>5</sup>. We adopted a mixed methods design that helped us develop more responsive ways of managing fieldwork and helped us to continue to build rapport with those involved in the project.

Collecting detailed personal and demographic data can be intrusive and limit participation. This is especially true in areas characterised by high levels of disadvantage where there is little trust that research leads to positive change. We felt this evaluation had to develop an approach that resonated closely with the project goals, which included listening to people's stories, creating common ground, building trust and accountability. While documenting people's journeys through the evaluation was key, an important question for us was whether our data collection supported the wider work. After much discussion, the project team decided that collecting monitoring data during engagement activities could be disruptive. For us, this was an important moment because it reconciled project priorities with new approaches in the research field which highlight collaborative, non-intrusive processes.

The 'extractive logic' of research is a concern<sup>6</sup>. We felt it was an important issue to tackle even if it meant that we had to build our evaluation less on numbers and more on qualitative accounts. Extractive practices are part of a model of research that prioritises data collection regardless of its impact on people. Many researchers, including the Social Life team, are now exploring community-based models that highlight partnership-building and lived experience. By embracing a flexible mixed methods research design and prioritising relationship-building in our process, this evaluation was able to document the experience of We Walworth and allow the project to develop and support ways of working across institutions and alongside local communities.

---

<sup>4</sup> Others have called this approach "slow cooked evaluation." See for instance, <https://www.systeminnovation.org/learning-festival-2022-ressources>

<sup>5</sup> One example is our work across Southwark in 2020-21 [http://www.social-life.co/publication/understanding\\_southwark\\_daily\\_life\\_and\\_COVID\\_19/](http://www.social-life.co/publication/understanding_southwark_daily_life_and_COVID_19/)

<sup>6</sup> See for instance the Chicago Beyond report, "Why am I always being researched?" available here: <https://chicagobeyond.org/researchequity/>

## 3. Evaluation results

### 1. New models of collaborations across government and with the local community

#### Summary of changes in experiences and views on collaboration

- 1) We Walworth was successful in bringing together different voices, facilitating interaction, and supporting a positive learning environment. This view was shared by stakeholders across the different groups that took part in the research, and it was maintained throughout the project.
- 2) Project goals became clearer as the project progressed. This was however only true of people closely involved with the project. People interviewed from the wider community who had been less involved in the project felt their interactions with the project did not entirely clarify its goals.
- 3) The engagement model was seen as successful by most of the working group members, allowing them to gain insight into the value of local solutions. The people we interviewed from the wider community who took part in one-off events reported that they lacked information about the overall engagement model and its objectives.

#### Learning together

For the duration of the project, both Neighbourhood Welcomes and working group sessions were seen by stakeholders across the different groups that took part in the research as an opportunity to work and connect with people from a range of backgrounds. Similarly, throughout the project, stakeholders felt the Neighbourhood Welcomes and the working group model were successful in bringing together different voices, facilitating interaction, and supporting a positive learning and working environment.

The central and local government officers who took part in working groups found that the Neighbourhood Welcomes and working group sessions gave them the opportunity to experience local issues first-hand and learn about locally rooted solutions. At the end of the two working groups, central and local government officers said that the project activities allowed them to learn how to better engage with communities and reported a better understanding of the importance of local, place-based solutions.

---

*“I think the project has definitely made me more aware of the inequalities in the area, particularly like the food inequality side, that wasn't something I was aware was such an issue before taking part in the program. [...] [Before getting involved in We Walworth] I didn't probably realise the range of community assets. I didn't know, Walworth Living Room was there, for example, it's not on a main road. So it's not something you would necessarily know unless you happen to live on a very nearby road. And I think I know more about that particular community, the infrastructure side...just understanding how many more other kinds of community groups there are across the borough.”*

*Interview with government officer, June 2023*



The central government officers who took part in the working groups learned about the local area and its challenges by taking part in working groups, few of them had any specific knowledge about Walworth before the project began. The online survey of central and local government officers shows an increase in knowledge about challenges facing communities in Walworth compared to the baseline research.

Many of the central and local government officers who completed the online survey said that they learned about the importance of community power. Some felt the We Walworth project demonstrated the community's capacity to work together to address local issues. They mentioned that the project allowed them to better appreciate the value of learning from local communities. When asked if taking part in the We Walworth project changed their approach to policy making, a few officers mentioned that they learned the value of community input in informing policy and the importance of place-based approaches. The need to be present in the community was highlighted in some of their accounts.

People interviewed from the wider community who had been less involved in the project, including social infrastructure providers and participants in one-off We Walworth events saw the project's value in bringing people together to explore different experiences with local issues and gather views through engagement activities. They appreciated the positive energy of the events they attended.

---

*“It was warm, it was nice. People were sort of optimistic about what opinions we had, what we had to say and everything; everyone was more or less helpful. And people had an interest to actually do something or say something, and it was good.”*

***It was the voices to be heard, the voices that probably you want, or the things you don't know.***

*Interview with local organisation representative less involved with We Walworth, June 2023*

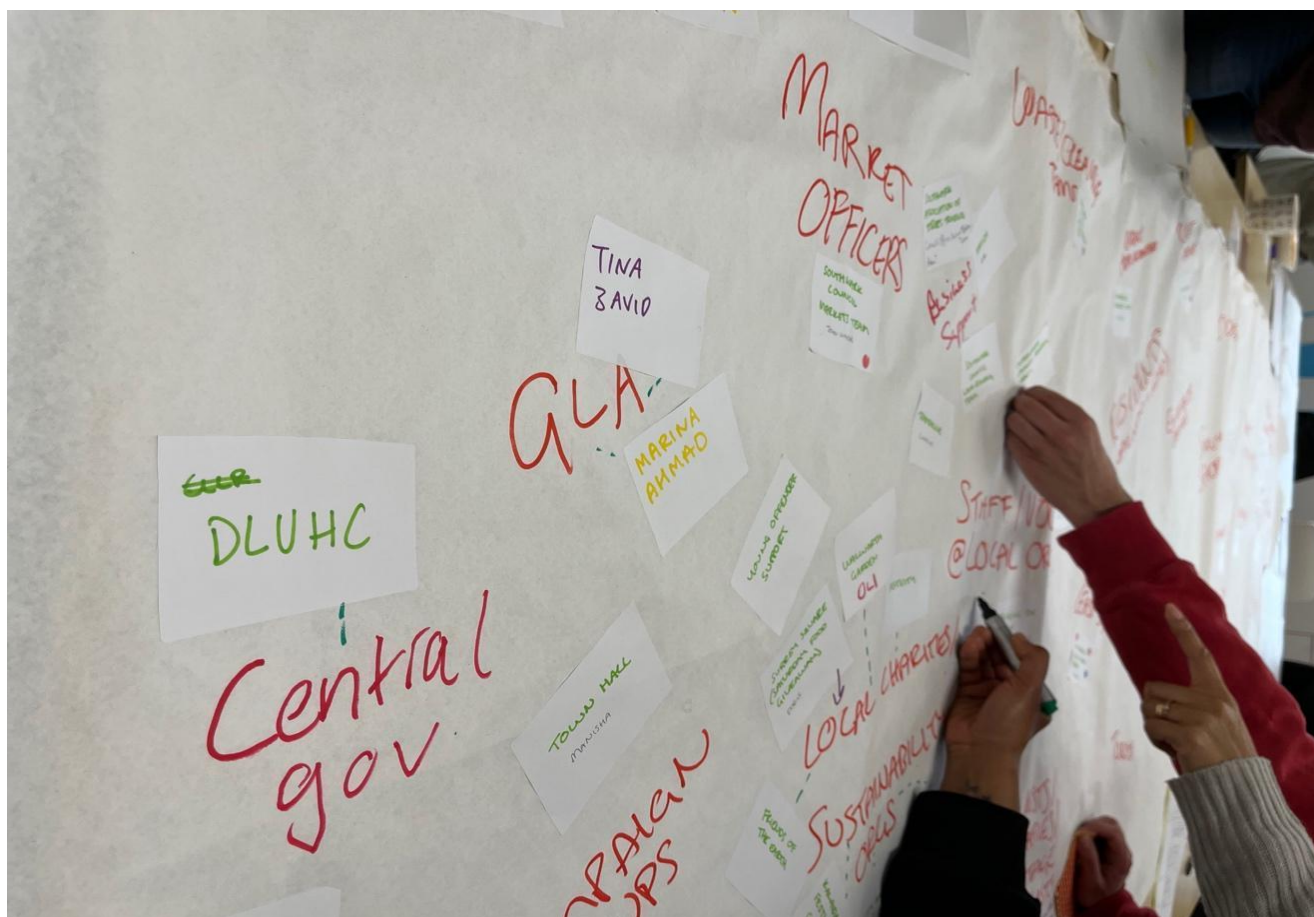
### **Problem setting and taking a bottom-up approach**

The majority of the working group participants interviewed felt the project was effective at taking a bottom-up approach to local issues or challenges. The engagement model, which included the Neighbourhood Welcome events, working group engagement sessions and ward forums, was seen as being different from council-led consultations. Working group participants said the strength of the approach was working collaboratively to understand an issue and coming up with a vision that considered a variety of views, experiences, and challenges. Both residents and local and central government officers said the project allowed them to work alongside people they would not have had the chance to meet otherwise.

---

***“I'd say the project activities supported [the development of relations between local government and local communities], I definitely don't think it inhibited it. I think where I've seen inhibitions has come from a lack of good communication.”***

*Interview with government officer who took part in one of the working groups, July 2023*



Most of the central and local government officers who completed the online survey agreed that the working group approach, each focused on a local challenge, contributed to positive outcomes. It was mentioned that working groups made it easier for the members to manage their workload and that it created a positive environment.

---

*For me, it [the working group] broke things up in manageable chunks, instilling a 'can do' message to getting things done.*

*Online survey of central and local government officers, June 2023*

Central and local government officers who completed the online survey also felt the working group environment encouraged everyone taking part to build good working relationships and trust. Some local and central government officers however expressed reservations about how successful the working groups efforts had been. The focus of those comments was not on the format or the approach they championed, instead they pointed to the wider barriers and systemic challenges faced by We Walworth, which the working groups could not overcome. Yet other central and local government officers noted that it was too early to make a final assessment regarding how successful the working group approach had been.

---

*“There was so much energy and life in the meetings, unfortunately the project [faced] barriers that have prevented final successes.”*

*Online survey of central and local government officers, June 2023*

Stakeholders across the different groups who took part in the research said more clarity about the wider goals of the project and project activities would have improved the engagement model.

#### **Partnership building: opportunities and barriers**

Local and central government officers who took part in the working groups valued the flexibility of the project, feeling that the project had to be agile and adapt to the local needs of places and communities. In hindsight, many of them noted that flexibility could have been balanced better with clearer project expectations, which would have improved their experience of the project.

Some of the barriers identified by the local and central government officers who took part in the working groups included clearer roles for participants from central and local government, better alignment with Southwark Council, and a clearer process for feeding back project learning into government strategies.

---

*“I think there's probably a balance to strike between the project being outside of the council and within the council. [...] In that sense, that new way of working wasn't quite realised. [...] I suppose you could argue that it wasn't co-design, it was community design. [...] And I think if it was co-design, it maybe needed more senior people to be brought along on the journey [...] I think the best thing is to bring people along the journey [so] council officers see how effective it can be. I think probably this working group could have done more of that. I appreciate it's difficult and some of the councillors didn't attend the meetings.”*

*Interview with government officer who took part in one of the working groups, June 2023*

Many central and local government officers who completed the online survey were doubtful that We Walworth would change the way their department or organisation works. Resistance to change, limited support from senior staff and limited resources to implement change were listed as important barriers. However, some central and local government officers acknowledged the value of having had members of their organisation involved in the project. The insight and knowledge gained by their colleagues were

shared with others. This allowed others in their organisation to learn about new ways of working across government and with local communities.

---

*“Quite simply [We Walworth will not change how the organisation works due to] lack of senior organisational capacity to stop and listen to feedback from the project. The whole PFPP scheme is £5m so this is fairly small compared with other government funding streams. I’ll share my experience with colleagues, but I imagine it’ll be seen as a ‘nice to have’, not a call to change our approach to policy design.”*

*Online survey of central and local government officers, June 2023*

---

*“I think we’d originally envisaged that people might be able to be involved, who were then able to influence policy at the centre as a result of [...] the issues that were being discussed. I think that that hasn’t happened. [...] [They] [the working group members] lacked a kind of mandate, and levers and seniority to then go and do something that could influence decisions. Whereas someone more senior who might have had that mandate wasn’t able to commit the level of time that was needed.”*

*Interview with government officer less involved with We Walworth, June 2023*

Many of the **local government officers who took part in working groups** felt the project both supported and inhibited the development of new ways of working. Many connected this assessment to the barriers they experienced with the implementation of the working groups’ visions, citing the fact that the meeting between Working Group 2 members and decision makers did not take place and the lack of clarity around next steps. Central government officers felt more distant from the implementation phase and focused less on the meeting with the decision-makers.

## 2. Developing and raising awareness of social capital

### Summary of changes in experiences and views on social capital

- 1) The project facilitated new connections, strengthened networks, and provided access to information among participants in the working groups, but to a lesser extent among the people we interviewed from the wider community, who had been less involved in the project.
- 2) Stakeholders across the different groups that took part in the research felt that changing perceptions of trust in local and central government institutions takes time and requires long-term engagement, which the project could not achieve given its short timeline.
- 3) As the We Walworth project progressed, it created more opportunities for developing social capital within the local community. This was the case for regular users of the Walworth Living Room community space - who took part in We Walworth activities - and for some of the local people who took part in We Walworth - who became involved with Walworth Living Room.

### **Facilitating connections and strengthening networks**

The local and central government officers and the residents who took part in the working groups that were interviewed thought the project was successful at developing relationships. They noted however that it might be difficult to sustain those relationships over time in the absence of regular project meetings.

The central and local government officers who took part in the working groups also spoke about how important it was to them to get to know the local communities in Walworth. Many talked about how this allowed them to gain a better understanding of social capital and trust between local communities and government.

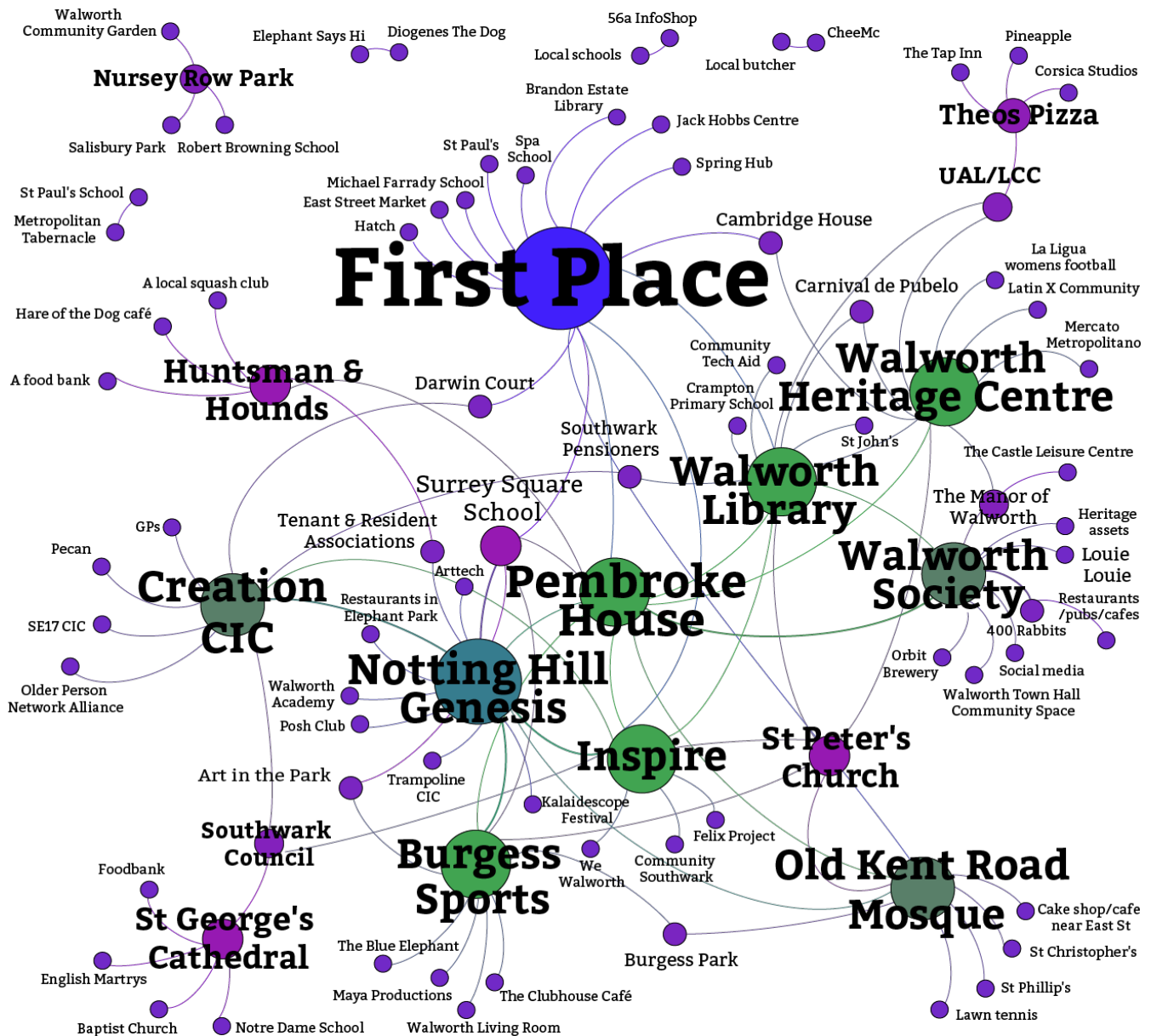
---

***“[We] didn't use the word social capital so much. But I'm thinking of the fact that the community, there was a really big, strong sense of community around Walworth. And that was really quite obviously valuable to that area. And that's something that I learned. I also learned that if it's valuable there, then it's something that is valuable in any area. And without knowing it, people do prioritise social capital and community values and that sort of stuff, rightfully so.”***

*Interview with government officer who took part in one of the working groups, July 2023*

An important part of this work was to map local resources and networks. This allowed the research team to track existing relationships in the neighbourhood and understand how community services, open spaces, amenities, among other social infrastructure providers, are used and by who. In-depth interviews supported our knowledge about the local ecosystem of relationships and assets, identified underexplored links and illustrated where possibilities for action lie in the ecosystem.

This map shows the importance of networks between large community-based organisations, including community hubs, childrens' centres, faith organisations, housing associations and local groups. The map is based on the data we collected through a survey of 21 social infrastructure providers for the baseline research in September 2022. The size of the node in the network visualization indicates the number of times social infrastructure providers were mentioned by other providers as being collaborators or partners. The width of the line indicates the strength of the relationship.



Relationships between social infrastructure organisations in Walworth, autumn 2022

We could not replicate this approach for the end of project research; instead, in-depth interviews were carried out with five social infrastructure providers to allow us to better understand the social infrastructure ecosystem. Those conversations helped us gain insight into how the project was seen by the wider community and future opportunities.

For some of the social infrastructure providers interviewed who had been less involved in the project, gains from attending We Walworth events were less clear. Many expressed a lack of clarity about how We Walworth expected local networks and the wider community to feed into the work. Some of the social infrastructure providers noted that clear project goals would have made a difference in terms of strengthening local networks and partnerships.

The majority of the social infrastructure providers interviewed highlighted that the Walworth area needs better coordination across groups rather than another community group. Other barriers they identified to their longer-term engagement with the project included a lack of project updates and clarity about how they could keep in touch with the people they met at project-related events.

People from local organisations interviewed who had been less involved in the project thought We Walworth had been helpful in bringing people together and allowing people to exchange views. However, they felt this approach to relationship building would have benefited from taking the long view. They said



the atmosphere of the one-off event attended was positive but found it difficult to determine the project's impact on the wider community, given their limited engagement with the project and lack of updates about next steps.

---

*“And in some ways, it's hard to tell [if the event changed perceptions of trust between residents and council] without asking residents, but what I would say is, I thought there was a positive atmosphere. And sometimes when you go to meetings, there isn't. I think having food, for instance, just helps because it puts people in a good mood, you're eating together, you're sharing food that builds trust, I believe. And, and I think the kind of floating around [at the ward forum] and being together is good.”*

*Interview with local organisation representative, less involved with We Walworth, July 2023*

### **Taking small steps towards developing social capital**

Walworth Living Room is a space for local communities to come together in Walworth. It is located next to Surrey Square. It is a project of Pembroke House that opened in 2019. It has a Community Cafe, a Community Fridge, and offers classes and other social activities. One of the rooms of Walworth Living Room housed the indoors activities of Working Group 1 and 2, and the main room was used for the first ward forum.



As We Walworth progressed, it created more opportunities for regular users of Walworth Living Room to take part in project activities, and for people who took part in We Walworth, especially working group members, to engage with Walworth Living Room. Some of the **regular users of Walworth Living Room** felt more motivated to learn about the issues addressed by the We Walworth project, as the project's activities went on. Some of the **members of We Walworth working groups** also took an interest in the events and classes that took place at Walworth Living Room. The ethnography we carried out at Walworth Living Room showed that this happened organically, through people chatting about activities on offer or through the connections people made. WhatsApp and newsletters helped facilitate cross-over between We Walworth and Walworth Living Room activities.

---

*“[At the neighbourhood welcome] 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, it shows that they care about the locals, that they do their job.”*

*Interview with user of the Walworth Living Room, less involved with We Walworth, July 2023*

Stakeholders across the different groups that took part in the research felt that changing perceptions of trust in government is a long-term process that takes time and requires sustained engagement. Most stakeholders did not think this could be accomplished during the timeframe of the project. **Some of the participants in Working Group 2** noted that the cancellation of the meeting with decision makers from Southwark Council might have had a negative impact on trust between local government and the wider community in Walworth.

---

*“For the people who are involved, heavily involved, it probably has had a negative view on their perceptions of the council. [For] people who are more [at the] periphery, there is this work [...] which is showing lots of consultation and for people who aren't necessarily getting too deeply involved, potentially it creates this suggestion that there's good consultation being done.”*

*Interview with government officer who took part in one of the working groups, June 2023*

### 3. Developing initiatives around food security

#### Summary of changes in experiences and views on food security

- 1) The focus on food created an environment that facilitated conversations between people from different backgrounds and with different interests. The connection between food security and the wider project goals however remained unclear to many stakeholders who had been less involved with the project.
- 2) The project was successful in listening to people's experiences and developing 'visions' to address local challenges. The majority of the working group members endorsed this view, however, the time we conducted the final interviews, many felt that We Walworth was not able to deliver on the developed visions.
- 3) The engagement model allowed local and central government officers to gain a better understanding of neighbourhood working and tackling local challenges. Support from senior officers and officials was seen as key to embed new ways of working across institutions, but sometimes missing.

#### Connecting through food

Alongside developing new ways of working and building social capital, We Walworth focused on two challenges, outdoor eating and barbeques in Burgess Park and East Street Market. **Two Neighbourhood Welcomes in July and September 2022 helped identify the challenge for the first working group. The second challenge surfaced during neighbourhood events in November 2022 and February 2023.**

A number of stakeholders contributing to the end of project research reported that that project goals were not always clear. In particular, **some stakeholders across the different groups who took part in the research** felt uncertain about how food security was reflected in the project's goals.

**For some working group members**, the overarching goal around food security were less clear than the weekly tasks of the working group. Others felt that bringing residents and local and central government together was central and food was successful in achieving this objective. Some of the local and central government officers interviewed who were involved in the working groups felt they gained a clear understanding of project goals by the end of the project. However, some of the residents who took part in the working groups felt they focused all their time and energy on the two narrower challenges rather than the wider project goals.

**Most central and local government officers who completed the online survey** felt that the focus on food had created an environment that allowed conversations to take place with ease. It is important to note that people who took part in this survey had been involved in a range of We Walworth activities. They described how the focus on food allowed project participants to discuss local issues while enjoying the social aspects of the project, including building social connections. Some central and local government officers also felt that food acted as a tool to draw people into the experience, enabling the project to attract more participants from the community. However, a few central and local government officers felt that the focus on food was not important. At times, they felt that it took away from the issues the We Walworth project was trying to address, which were connected to rebuilding trust in local government as an institution that can make change locally.

This uneven knowledge about project goals affected how stakeholders understood the impact of the project. Stakeholders who were aware of the connection between We Walworth and Pembroke House's partnership work during the COVID pandemic were in a better position to understand how the different

project goals were linked. They were also more likely to think that the project had a mandate from the wider community. They spoke about how We Walworth built on what happened during the pandemic when the council's way of working changed and embraced collaborative and horizontal work. However, other stakeholders who were unfamiliar with Pembroke House's pandemic work felt We Walworth had been less successful in communicating its goals.

---

*“[The goal was] something that was born out the pandemic [...]: the food insecurity element but also the new ways of working that happened as a result of the pandemic that brought people together in different ways. [...] I think the initial aim was to talk to 80% of the target area, that was initially identified at the start of the program, to have that really intense engagement with the neighbourhood. And that was saying something that really stood out to me from the project was that importance of reaching out to the whole or as much of the local community as possible to understand what local priorities and issues are. [...] A really rigid evaluation wouldn't have worked for this type of quite complex place-based project where, especially when you're looking at something that's more difficult to evaluate, like social capital, compared to say, a more obvious outcome that you might have.”*

*Interview with government officer, June 2023*

---

*“[The goals were about] what [building connections] mean for people's resilience and for people's ability to kind of withstand a crisis and challenges.”*

*Interview with government officer who took part in one of the working groups, June 2023*

### **Addressing food security**

The social infrastructure providers interviewed who had been less involved in the project felt there was a lack of clarity about project goals and were not sure how the wider ambitions of the project, including food security, were connected to concrete events and the two challenges taken up by the working groups. Some social infrastructure providers said that they were not aware that the first challenge around the barbeques had been chosen through the wider conversations that happened through the Neighbourhood Welcomes.

Many social infrastructure providers noted that they did not receive information or any feedback about what was going to happen after they attended events. They also spoke about a lack of clarity about whether there was buy-in from local institutions or information about who ran We Walworth. They were unclear about the partnership with Southwark Council and how it was supposed to be embedded in the local community and how it was going to work with wider local networks. Some also noted that there was some confusion around the identity of We Walworth, especially the overlap with Pembroke House and the Walworth Living Room. For these individuals, the short timeframe was an important barrier to meeting the ambitious goals of the project. Some felt that achieving these goals would have required broader whole systems approaches and a significantly longer timeline for project design and delivery. Half of the social infrastructure providers interviewed questioned whether the project was resourced properly, given the quick timeframe of the project and its multiple goals.



The people from the local organisations that were interviewed who were less involved with We Walworth also spoke about their lack of knowledge about next steps and lack of information about what was going to happen after the events they attended. Like the social infrastructure providers, they reported that they had limited knowledge about who ran the project and how it was being embedded in the local community.

---

*“I'm not entirely sure kind of who runs it and how it's run. Is it basically a Pembroke House Project, or is it bit wider, or? [...] Well, I can clearly see Pembroke House are involved, and I see that the Council were involved...[It] wasn't entirely clear...is that it? Is it Pembroke House and Southwark Council?”*

*Interview with representative of local organisation less involved with We Walworth, July 2023*

Many residents who were part of the two working groups reported that addressing the challenges of outdoor eating and barbequing in Burgess Park and the East Street Market were their core motivations for getting involved in We Walworth. Many of them worked to ensure that the visions generated through We Walworth's work reflected the wishes of the broader community.

---

*“Probably [it did] not make a difference in the community but it has made a difference in some community members' lives, but they are not very many considering how expensive this project is. [...] If you would actually count how many of those conversations [we had] led to anything...to that person engaging with We Walworth, or engaging with the Walworth Living Room, or engaging with the ward forum, I think that number would be quite small. [...] If you would go out and ask people “what We Walworth is or what it does,” I think a lot of people were like, “I'm not completely sure,” even if they attended a neighbourhood welcome. I think a lot of people wouldn't be sure about what the point is, or they would have had different answers to such an extent that it makes it difficult to have a clear enough identity.”*

*Interview with resident who took part in one of the working groups, July 2023*

The engagement model allowed **central and local government officers** to gain a better understanding of neighbourhood working and ways of tackling local challenges. There was agreement that embedding new ways of working across institutions would be difficult without support from senior local and central government and a wider change in the culture of the organisations. **Working group members** were not sure what to expect next and how long it would take for decisions to progress through the council.

## 4. Conclusion

### **Evaluating We Walworth**

The short length of this project made working with a theory of change challenging. The narratives presented here are snapshots of impact and short- to medium-term change, grounded in specific moments of time. We found that qualitative methods such as in-depth interviewing and ethnographic observations were better at capturing the complexity of ongoing change than quantitative surveys. The work we did shows that a flexible and mixed-methods research design is well equipped to approach an agile place-based project that tackles complex issues. A single method or a rigid research design cannot robustly document how place-based ecosystems may shift power relationships and change ways of thinking and working in partnership.

### **Creating opportunities in the present and shaping the future**

The majority of the working group members felt We Walworth was successful at listening to what community members and local stakeholders had to say about their experiences and at developing 'visions' to address local challenges. Working in a place with a range of stakeholders from different 'levels' of government and being part of an intensive community engagement process were seen as valuable lessons, changing people's views on what successful 'consultation' looks like. At the same time, most working group members felt that We Walworth was not able to deliver on the developed visions by the time when we wrapped up the evaluation. The slow pace of decision-making processes and institutional resistance to change were seen as key blockages.

Local and central government officers who took part in the working groups valued the flexibility of the project, feeling that the project had to be agile and adapt to the local needs of places and communities. The engagement model allowed them to gain a better understanding of neighbourhood working and tackling local challenges. The local and central government officers and the residents who took part in the working groups we interviewed thought the project was also successful at developing relationships. They noted however that it might be difficult to sustain those relationships over time in the absence of regular project meetings.

There was agreement that embedding new ways of working across institutions would be difficult without support from senior level government representatives, which proved to be a lot more difficult to secure than it was initially expected. Setting aside time to work "in place" alongside other project participants, and competing priorities were seen as systemic and administrative barriers difficult to overcome at the moment.

Most core team members felt the project was successful at developing new ways of working across sectors and enabling the development of visions to local challenges. The implementation of the visions developed by the working groups and the delivery of new initiatives around food security were seen as unsuccessful parts of the overall work. Core group members agreed that individual learning was successful, while institutional and community-wide learning was less so.

### **Facing barriers and challenges**

There was agreement that the implementation of working group visions was not possible due to systemic barriers as well as administrative ones, of which difficulty to get buy-in for the project's goals from senior staff was key. Different members had different takes on this: one view was that the We Walworth activities enabled the development of new ways of working but that those ways of working are quite difficult to integrate into current systems, and a slightly different view was that there was no mandate from the council to help them to change their ways of working.

Some of the barriers identified by the local and central government officers who took part in the working groups included clearer roles for participants from central and local government, better alignment with Southwark Council, and a clearer process for feeding back project learning into government strategies.

The identity of Pembroke House as a community organisation was seen as unclear, and some of the core team members felt this could have created some challenges. Some members of the core team also felt that the connection between Walworth Living Room and Pembroke House could have been better explained. They flagged that it was not clear to themselves, to working group members or to the Walworth Living Room staff. However, there was consensus that locating the We Walworth project at Walworth Living Room created opportunities for social interaction and learning for people from different backgrounds.



## 5. Looking ahead

### **Bringing together multiple visions into a clear story**

We Walworth set out to achieve ambitious goals within a defined neighbourhood over a compressed timescale. It had successes: in setting up a new engagement model, in building a strong core team, in empowering and enriching the lives of residents and local and central government officers intensively involved in its work and in developing new ideas and propositions. Inevitably, We Walworth's impact on its intended outcomes was limited by the 12-month timescale and by the scale of its task.

We Walworth aimed to achieve relational and systems change, taking on a transformational agenda in a neighbourhood with many strengths and assets, but where many residents live precarious lives and where the impacts of poverty, inequality and discrimination colour everyday life. Delivering this ambition in a year proved difficult. The project struggled to establish a clear external story, to build relationships with grassroots and institutional stakeholders, and to communicate changes in delivery and approach.

### **Developing new ways of working while tackling food security**

To achieve the outcomes We Walworth set itself requires care and time. These are needed to test different ways of working, to shift and pivot in response to external change and when things don't go as planned, and to deal thoughtfully and effectively with dynamics around power within the community and between agencies. This type of change needs long-term investment over a decade or more. Everyone involved from residents to community anchors need to be given latitude to fail and iterate and to set up a continuous programme of learning over time.

This evaluation has explored the multiple impacts of the programme against a theory of change set at the outset, to meet the demands of the government's Partnerships for People and Place funding that imposed its own aims and imperatives. While the activities set out in the original theory of change altered, the outcomes stayed constant. Over the timescales of the project, it was not possible to gather qualitative data to show how outcomes had been met but rich qualitative data was captured that demonstrates impact and where the project needs to learn.

### **Green shoots**

We Walworth has established a sound platform to develop strong future work that can achieve its outcomes over a longer timescale. It sets the foundation for future work. Green shoots for future growth have emerged and are growing as this first phase of the project comes to an end.

This evaluation highlights where, in its next phases, We Walworth needs to pay particular attention. This includes how it sets goals for specific activities, planning and allocating resources; the need to pay continuous attention to building excellent relationships across local groups and agencies and embedding with existing community networks; and to engagement, listening to a plurality of voices and being constantly alive to dynamics of power and privilege.

Across the UK and beyond many people are exploring how to achieve systemic change that transforms local communities, to transition to a better future for people and planet. The lessons of We Walworth and the learning from this evaluation has resonance across this work, telling the story of how ambitious intentions met the practical realities of working with communities and agencies in one neighbourhood of south London.

## 6. Appendix

### A note on research methods

For this project, the research team built on our experiences with open research designs, which were important to our work during the COVID-19 pandemic. We adopted a flexible research design that helped us develop more responsive ways of managing fieldwork and to continuously build rapport with those involved in the project. The results captured outline the project's and participants' journeys as they were understood at specific moments in time.

This flexibility allowed us to respond quickly to the emerging challenges of an agile place-based systems change project. The challenge for this role was to remain embedded in project activities, while also standing back and examining the stories we collected from all those involved in the project and avoiding disrupting engagement.

The core project team felt that collecting monitoring data changes the nature of engagement conversations. The We Walworth partnership discussed this issue when it was brought up at the start of the work and decided that collecting monitoring data during engagement activities could end up having a negative impact on them. It was also determined that it might make it difficult to build trust and accountability, which were key for the work.

**The baseline research** used a combination of surveys and in-depth interviews. This included online survey of local and central government officers (11 local government and six central government), survey of participants engaged through events (52 completed, of which 35 are residents), survey of social infrastructure providers (21 completed), six in-depth interviews with local and central government officers (three local government and three central government), six in-depth interviews with residents, 13 in-depth interviews with residents who had not been involved in the project but might have benefitted indirectly (residents who use the Walworth Living Room), and three observation sessions at Walworth Living Room.

**The case study research** focused on the two working groups. The team carried out 12 ethnographic observations during working group 1 and 2 sessions and at the two ward forums. Although we were not able to interview everyone involved in the working groups, the interviews we carried out were rich in detail and experiences and they allowed us to gain a fine-grained understanding of the views of those who took part in Working Group 1 and 2. The first in-depth interviews took place as people joined the working groups. These helped us understand their initial views on the group and the wider We Walworth project. Another round of in-depth interviews took place as the working group was coming to an end, and focused on the impact of the working group on its members, and their wider networks and communities.

The selection criteria for interviews aimed to balance the views of residents with government officers. We interviewed a comparable number of local and central government officers with different levels of seniority. For the second round of interviews, nine in-depth interviews were conducted, a combination of follow-up interviews with some of the people who took part in the first round, and a handful of new interviews with people who had not been able to join before. In total, for the Working Group 1, the research team carried out 16 in-depth interviews with local and central government officers, as well as people living and/or working locally. Working Group 2 replicated this design, the team carried out seven initial in-depth interviews, while the second round of interviews overlapped with the end-of-project research.

**The end-of project research** also used a combination of surveys, in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations. This included an online survey of local and central government officers (11 local government

and eight central government) and a range in-depth interviews: four with local people (residents and local organisations) who had been involved in project but not in the two working groups, six with local people who took part in the two working groups, five with social infrastructure providers, five with central and local government officers, five with core team members, and 11 in-depth interviews with residents who had not been involved in the project but might have benefitted indirectly (users of Walworth Living Room), and three observation sessions at Walworth Living Room.

