



Understanding Southwark Summary report

Daily life and the impact of COVID-19 across the borough

December 2021

About this report

This report brings together the findings of a year-long research project commissioned by Southwark Council that began in April 2020 and concluded in August 2021.

More about this research is on our website, http://www.social-life.co/project/understanding_southwark/

We would like to thank the local residents, stakeholders and traders who shared their knowledge, hopes and fears with us. We appreciate their expertise and the time they put into this work and hope the report will help bring about the changes they would like to see in their local areas.

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All photos by Social Life.

This is one of four reports bringing together the findings of the research. The other reports are:

- Understanding Southwark. An in-depth account of the impact of change and of COVID-19 in six areas
- Understanding Southwark. Daily life and the impact of COVID-19 across the borough
- Understanding Southwark. Young people's perspectives

All are available from [social-life.co/publication/](https://www.social-life.co/publication/)

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.

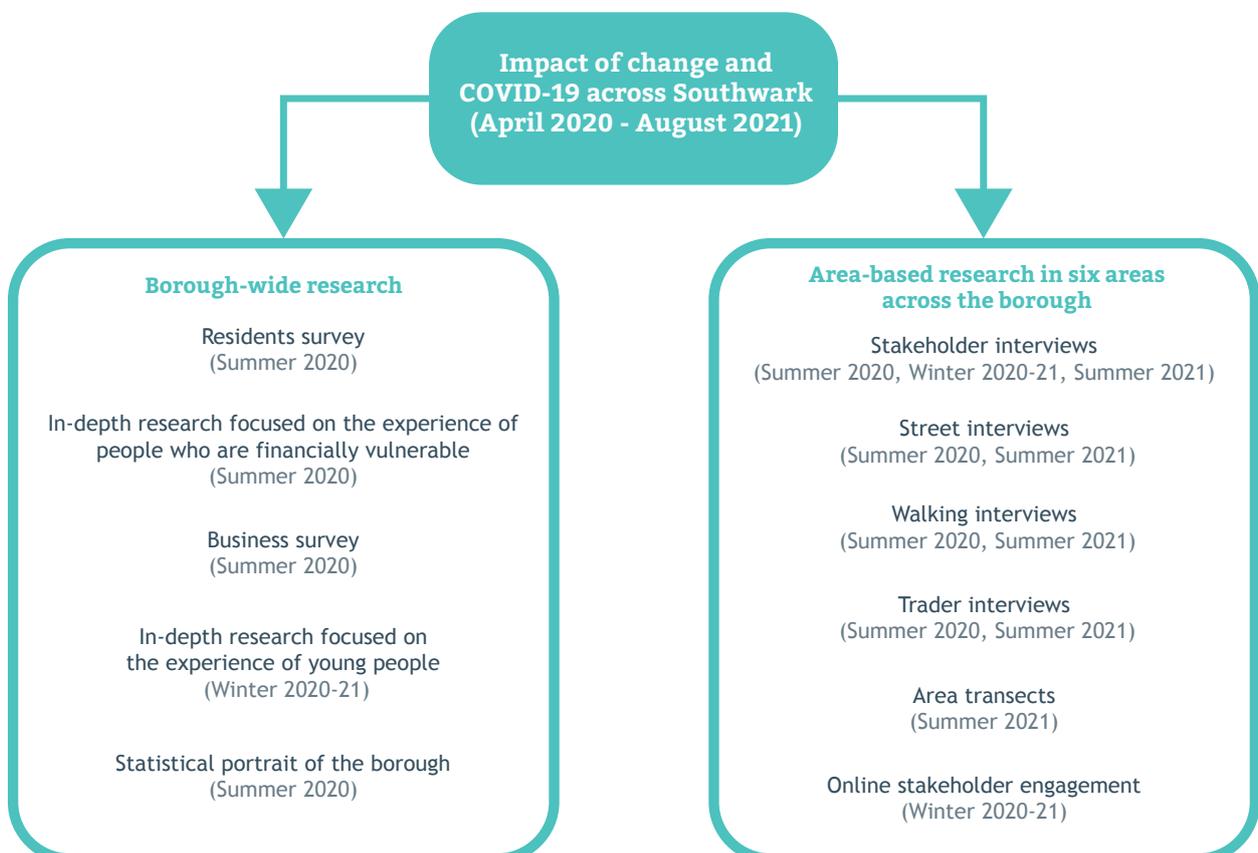
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Summary

This summary brings together the findings of a year-long research programme commissioned by Southwark Council, which started in April 2020 and ended in August 2021. The research explored the impact of COVID-19 across the borough, and daily life in six areas going through change in Camberwell, Elephant & Castle, Old Kent Road, Peckham and Walworth and the social housing estates in Dulwich.

The research had both a borough-wide and an area focus. The area-based research took place over three phases and focused on six themes, drawing on Southwark Council's social regeneration indicators: a healthier life, a place to belong, local change and control, safety, local assets and challenges, and the impact of COVID-19 on everyday life. The research engaged people from a wide range of local settings and backgrounds across the six areas, relying on online or telephone in-depth interviews with stakeholders (including schools, GPs, Tenants and Residents Associations, local agencies, ward councillors and faith organisations, among others), face-to-face interviews with traders, and street interviews and in-depth walking ethnographies with residents. The borough-wide research included a residents survey, in-depth research into the experience of financially vulnerable groups across the borough, mixed-methods research with Southwark young advisors, and a survey of local businesses.



The research programme explored six areas across the borough where limited primary evidence was available to inform the development of the Social Regeneration Charters aimed to implement the Regeneration That Works For All Framework, and to shape the Council's neighbourhood and social regeneration work in the future. The six areas that became the focus of the research were prioritised after discussion with Southwark officers and other stakeholders. The intention was to focus on the neighbourhoods and residents that are most likely to be affected by change and regeneration, and within these to focus on the people likely to be most sharply affected by change. These areas - Camberwell, Dulwich, Elephant & Castle, Old Kent Road, Peckham, and Walworth - broadly correspond to the council's regeneration areas. The approach to Dulwich differed from the other five areas as this is a larger geographic area, and one with a substantial affluent population. Our focus was therefore on people living in Dulwich's social housing estates.

The research built on the socio-economic benchmarking Social Life carried out in four areas of the borough in recent years, in Rotherhithe (for British Land, to feed into the Canada Water masterplan), around the Biscuit Factory in Bermondsey (for Grosvenor Estates), on the Aylesbury Estate (for Notting Hill Genesis) and in the area around the St Thomas Street development (for Southwark Council and Team London Bridge); as well as drawing on Social Life's understanding of the neighbourhood in which we work in Walworth.

This research is part of a longitudinal evaluation of social regeneration in the borough, with the aim of monitoring key indicators as the areas continue to undergo change. The overall goal of this year-long research is to help shape the Council's neighbourhood and social regeneration work in the future, and inform strategies to improve health and wellbeing, and reduce inequalities across the borough.

The research design took account of the demographics, characteristics, social needs and the nature of change in the six areas. Social Life's COVID-19 protocols were followed to ensure the safety of research participants and researchers. In-depth qualitative approaches were designed to ensure that we gathered rich and comprehensive data despite the circumstances enabling us to overcome some of the limitations and biases imposed by the pandemic constraints.

A separate **area-based report** takes an in-depth look at the findings of research in the six areas, drawing on interviews with residents, traders and stakeholders carried out in three phases, in summer 2020, winter 2020-21 and summer 2021. A **third report** brings together key findings from the residents survey, the in-depth study about the experience of people who are financially vulnerable, the research with Southwark Young Advisors, the online survey of local businesses, and the online stakeholder engagement. Finally, the research with the Southwark Young Advisors carried out in December 2020 and January 2021 is featured in a separate **fourth report**.

162	Stakeholders	10	In-depth interviews with Southwark Young Advisors
90	Traders	2	Focus-groups with Southwark Young Advisors
520	Street interviews with residents	115	Businesses responding to an online survey
43	Walking interviews and in-depth interviews with residents	1000	Residents taking part in a phone survey
10	Case studies of online stakeholder engagement		

The research shows that existing challenges have been amplified by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting both the inequalities already present across Southwark but also the valuable assets that supported communities during this time of crisis. A set of themes emerged.

1. Vulnerable populations.

Experiences of local people and groups who are disproportionately affected by poverty are shaped by multiple vulnerabilities that include, but are not limited to, financial matters. There is increased concern that vulnerable people are falling through gaps in government support, including people with no recourse to public funds, people in precarious and poorly paid work, people living in overcrowded housing, and people experiencing mental health problems or those with disabilities. While vulnerable people and communities are scattered across the six areas, different parts of the borough have very different socio-economic profiles. In this regard, Dulwich Village and certain streets across the borough are significantly more affluent than the longstanding lower-income neighbourhoods in Old Kent Road, Camberwell, Peckham and Walworth.

2. Support groups and networks.

Both existing and new networks and groups mobilised community resources to support people struggling financially and those whose wellbeing was deteriorating during the pandemic. Not only did this ensure that those in need were supported by networks of volunteers but the situation also triggered the emergence of dynamic networks of support. By creating a platform for people to participate and by engendering new partnerships with local agencies, local groups have built community resilience and have improved wellbeing since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. These efforts have enabled communities to come together at a time when most forms of social infrastructure had closed.

3. Digital and data exclusion.

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have increased the use of online platforms and services, making the lack of devices, data and skills among certain groups an increasingly pressing problem. To stay in touch with service users, many stakeholders started to offer services and activities online during spring and summer of 2020. This presented a particular problem throughout the pandemic for many older people, low-income groups, and residents whose first language is not English. Concerns about digital and data exclusion were voiced regardless of the type of service provided.

4. Food poverty.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity has been a significant challenge for many residents. The pandemic exacerbated existing levels of food poverty, with the sudden loss of employment or inability to work adding to the economic precarity that many families across the borough were already facing. Self-isolation and quarantine also left many people unable to access food. Existing local networks and mutual aid groups that were galvanised by the pandemic put food at the centre of their activities.

5. Mental health.

Stakeholders and residents from all six regeneration areas stated that mental health issues are a significant challenge for local people, noting that these pressures were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the second and third lockdowns problems of mental health were raised more frequently. In particular, stakeholders and residents linked these problems to increasing isolation, the closure of social spaces and loss of work and income. Young people noted that COVID-19 made it more usual to discuss depression openly among friends. Coping with social distancing measures, missing school events and school routines increased feelings of isolation and anxiety among many young people.

6. Structural racism.

The pandemic shed light on existing structural inequalities between groups, and it galvanised conversations about the impact of discrimination and racism, both socially and economically. Local residents and stakeholders agreed that better knowledge and increased visibility would ensure that minority ethnic communities (including businesses and traders) are supported more effectively.

7. Youth centres and services.

There are concerns about the impact of the pandemic on young people and a widespread perception that there is a need for more provision to support young people. Local hubs, youth centres and services that offer information about mentoring, apprenticeships and employment opportunities for young people were seen as lacking in all six areas. The need for more widely available counselling and wellbeing services was also

stressed by young people. In addition, they flagged that, while some of these services might already be available, better promotion or communication would ensure that those in need become aware of existing resources.

- 8. The provision of decent and affordable housing.** The need for secure and “genuinely affordable” housing and to reduce overcrowding across the borough were brought up time and again by stakeholders and residents alike. Residents feared that new development attracts higher-income residents who are actively displacing people with lower incomes, and increases in housing prices make the area less affordable for the longer-standing communities.
- 9. Difficulties for small businesses and traders.** Many of Southwark’s small businesses and traders have been hard hit by closures, restrictions to their activities and the need to ensure social distancing. Black and minority ethnic traders reported multiple issues that had often been exacerbated by the pandemic and restrictions, from online competition to the impact of anti-social behaviour. Many supported their local communities, donating food, meals, money and supplies.
- 10. Southwark Council’s communication and engagement.** Residents and stakeholders reported that the council needs to improve its communication and campaigns to ensure that local people are aware of the services provided. The need for “genuine” consultation campaigns (as opposed to a “tick box exercise”) was a key thread running through residents’ accounts. Young people highlighted that engagement processes need to be designed to appeal to specific demographics and, whenever possible, need to be co-designed together with those groups to maximise their reach in local communities.
- 11. Conversations about planned and ongoing local change.** There is a widespread perception that the voices of local people make little impact on decision-making in their neighbourhoods. This is particularly the case among people with limited resources (in time and money) and Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups. In addition, there is a pervasive concern among young people that they are not seen as an audience for local change.
- 12. Parks, green spaces, diversity and the strength of local community organisations.** These were seen as major assets of local areas, and they impact on residents’ feelings of belonging and community relations. Green spaces were valued places to exercise, relax and socialise, particularly during the first lockdown. Residents also noted the importance of having clean and well-maintained outdoor spaces on their estates.

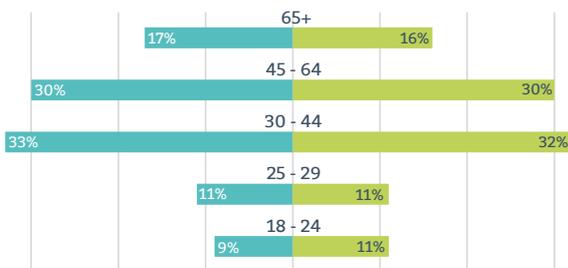
Comparing experiences over time

Street interview demographics of local residents across the six areas
(Summer 2020, Summer 2021)

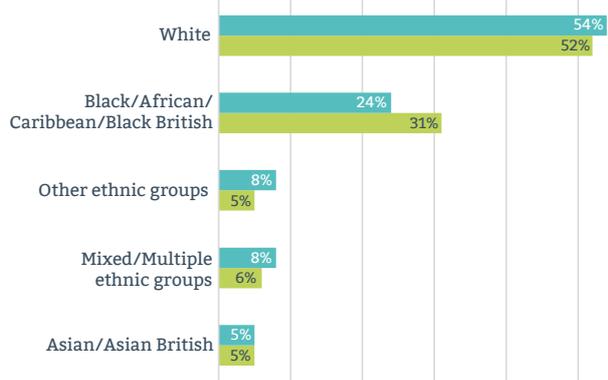
2020 # OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED | 247

2021 # OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED | 273

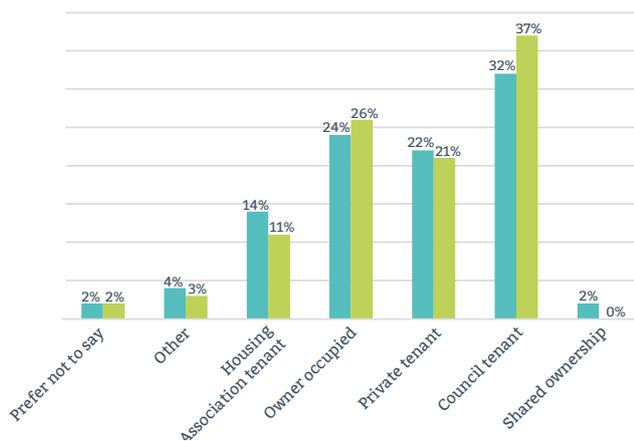
Age



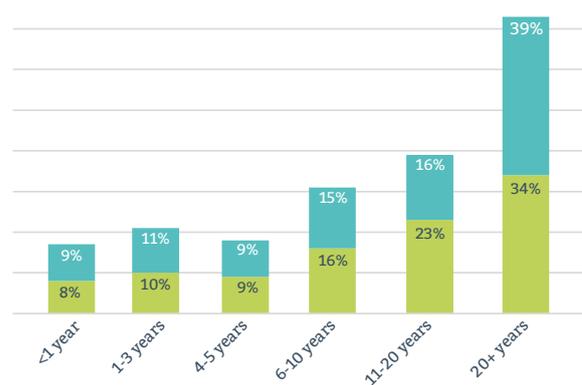
Ethnicity



Tenure



Lived in the area



Many themes that emerged during the first phase of research carried out in summer 2020 continued to resonate in the second and third phases of the research. However, both residents and stakeholders changed some of their perceptions about their lived experiences in local areas. Some of these are rooted in the shifting socio-economic context of the COVID-19 pandemic, others are the result of the ongoing development and change.

1. There has been an increase in the visibility of vulnerable groups as the pandemic continued.

“With families, there’s huge amounts of in-work poverty, barely making enough to make ends meet. The majority are single parent households. In-work poverty is worse, due to [people] not being protected, or having really insecure working conditions.” (Stakeholder)

- By the summer of 2021 there were more concerns about people who are visibly vulnerable such as people who are homeless and destitute on the streets. Particularly strong concerns were voiced about children and young people, parents and older people, as well as people who are more marginalised and disadvantaged.
- There were also increasing concerns about people who are falling through gaps in safety nets. This includes people with no recourse to public funds, people who are invisible to agencies, and some people from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic communities.

2. Assets including parks and support groups have been central to individual and community wellbeing but perceptions about them have shifted throughout the year.

“Memory fades ... mutual aid groups that haven’t been able to enshrine themselves in people’s minds will die out. Some of them will stay to help with the ‘new normal’, others will disappear because their purpose will disappear.”
(Stakeholder)

- The importance of parks and green spaces was highlighted in the summer of 2020 and the summer of 2021. But for young people, these spaces were important throughout the year. Many young people used parks as main spaces to socialise during the 2020-2021 winter lockdowns.
- Local support groups were mentioned as a key asset. However, there were concerns about their future viability. There were also reports of a decrease in volunteering since the second national lockdown and the fear that “the new normal” will erase the role local support groups played during the first months of the pandemic.

3. Local safety concerns have fluctuated during the pandemic.

“Crime eased between the second and third lockdown but now it’s back up. From Christmas to spring there was less drug dealing. But now it’s all back, it’s all very visible, more people out and about, it’s bad. There has been more crime, domestic violence and knife crime, more robberies more assaults, bike stealing, motorcar stealing, alcohol-related violence, drugs.”
(Stakeholder)

- Stakeholders reported an increase in domestic violence during the first months of the pandemic, and especially during the first national lockdown. Some stakeholders noted that the situation worsened as many spaces that had offered safe shelters for those at risk of domestic violence closed during the first months of the pandemic.
- During the first lockdown, residents and stakeholders alike noted a decrease in drug-related violence and gang activities.

Spring 2021 marked a return of many of these concerns, especially drug-related activities and anti-social behaviours.

4. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted local communities at multiple scales. Its impact has been unpredictable, at times weakening existing support networks and at other times galvanising mutual aid groups.

“A lot has changed. Tried to do it slowly, in phases. First two weeks of lockdown, we participated in the scheme for NHS staff, where local people bought food and we cooked and delivered food to them. This helped us to keep going and showed our support to the NHS. Doing home deliveries and collections for online orders increased. We furloughed and cut staff, and changed from being a sit-in cafe to doing only takeaway, expanding the grocery part of the store. Probably won't be a cafe again.” (Trader)

- At a personal level, employment and mental health have been key issues raised by local residents and stakeholders. In the second and third phases of research more concerns were articulated about mental health problems and wellbeing, affecting people across backgrounds.
- At the community level, there has been increased awareness and concern about the economic impact of restrictions and multiple lockdowns, and how this will increase inequality. Questions have been raised about the sustainability of mutual aid and community support networks into the future. In the third phase, stakeholders spoke more about the need for institutional support and additional funding for the local groups that emerged during the pandemic.

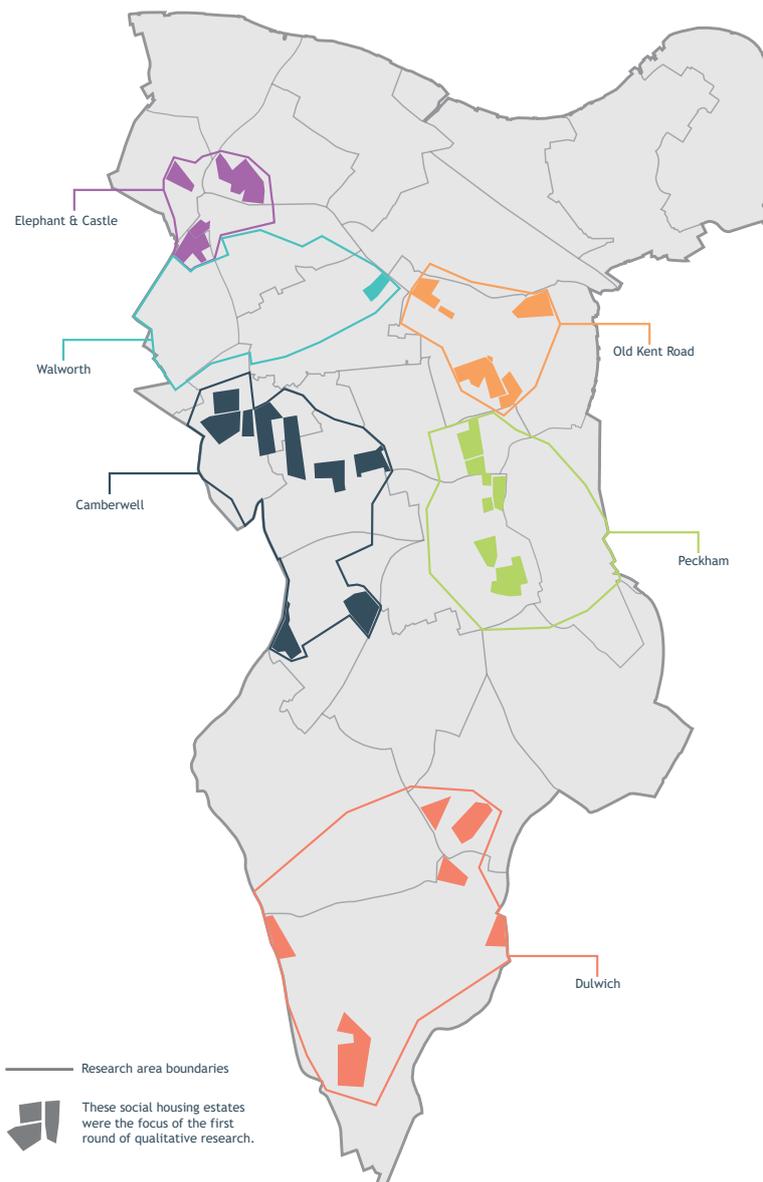
5. Digital engagement has emerged as an alternative to limited in-person contact but its success among users and stakeholders has depended on a series of socio-economic factors.

“Some of the mothers were homeless, some ... used to use internet services at libraries or cafes before the pandemic, but all of those resources disappeared with the lockdown. Other mothers had internet access at home, but either they didn't have devices, or their phones were too old to be able to handle a Zoom session. Some mothers did not know how to navigate internet access, write an email, or look for information online.” (Stakeholder)

- Community organisations noted the impact of not being able to meet in person, or run activities, and how this hampered their work. Services voiced concerns about the impact of closing local services and limiting in-person contact on their ability to meet need and stay in touch with the people they work with. In the first phase of research, agencies spoke about how this was affecting the services they provided and the measures they were taking to adjust to the shifting COVID-19 context.

- However digital engagement was reported to have become easier and to have reached more people during the second and third national lockdowns, as both stakeholders and users became more accustomed to being online. Agencies serving a wide variety of users - such as faith organisations or community groups - noted that they were able to reach more people through digital engagement than they had through in-person activities. Other agencies working with specific groups such as recent migrants, and some schools, reported that online services reached only a small percentage of their usual contacts.

The six areas



Area summaries

The summaries start with Elephant & Castle, to the north and end with Dulwich, to the south.

Elephant & Castle

- Diversity, accessibility of amenities and familiarity with the area were key in making people feel they belong. People enjoy the area's diversity and its distinct identity, highlighting that there is respect for different communities and their cultures. But living side-by-side does not always mean interacting across ethnic and socio-economic boundaries. Many residents felt that different groups only come together when they have a common purpose such as a football game, a parents' group meeting or a mutual aid group.
- Local markets, pubs, the leisure centre (The Castle Centre), and the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre (which was still open during the first phase of research) were key social infrastructure, supporting local relationships and neighbourliness in the area. The Cinema Museum and Imperial War Museum were also mentioned by residents as important places for socialising in the area.
- Proximity to central London, connectivity and the cycling infrastructure are also seen as major assets. However, traffic and pollution were issues of concern. Some connected these to the Elephant & Castle regeneration, which is thought to have increased the severity of both problems. Some residents spoke enthusiastically about how the low traffic neighbourhood measures implemented in summer 2020 improved air quality and street safety.
- The difficulties experienced by 'invisible' groups with an irregular legal status became more noticeable to people in the area during the pandemic. Stakeholders working with migrants reported that these groups can be excluded from formal support or may exclude themselves because they fear the repercussions that might come from engaging with the authorities. They also noted that some Latin American migrants with irregular legal status experienced increased isolation during lockdowns as they had few contacts outside their work, and had to rely on overburdened social support networks.
- Perceptions of safety varied slightly for people from different age and ethnic groups, with Black, Asian and minority ethnic, and young and elderly groups experiencing some unease, especially in the evening and at night. A number of traders and residents noted that there is a need for better lighting and security on Elephant Road.
- People's perceptions of local change were tied to their feelings of belonging in the area. Longstanding residents and newcomers spoke about how the ongoing change in Elephant & Castle is affecting local communities, especially Black, Asian and minority ethnic and lower-income communities.



Photograph taken during a walking interview in Elephant & Castle (Summer 2021)

They felt that there are competing priorities for the redevelopment of the local area. Many people raised questions about which groups get to direct local change and whose needs are prioritised. There are mixed views about the changing 'character' of the area around the Elephant & Castle roundabout and about who will benefit from this long-term change.

- The majority of residents and traders reported feeling a lack of individual control over decisions affecting the area. Some of the people involved in Tenants and Residents Associations, local groups or informal community groups had more positive views about their influence over developments, bringing up experiences of working with others to shape their neighbourhoods. But even those with more positive experiences of neighbourhood initiatives highlighted that there is no clear route to alter planning decisions about larger scale development.
- The changing business landscape is affecting local people and communities differently. Some reported the loss of independent businesses on which they used to rely for shopping, support and socialisation. Others, including both people new to the area and some residents who have lived in the area for over ten years, were positive about the new shops, cafes and restaurants in Elephant Park. They noted that the new amenities have become part of their everyday routines, providing alternatives to the longer-standing ethnic shops, and that they are places to socialise with friends and family.
- Stakeholders and residents commented that the pandemic has affected the small shops in the Elephant & Castle area more than larger stores. Throughout the pandemic, the loss of jobs, and the decline in business footfall remained important concerns for small businesses, especially for traders that had just been relocated from the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre.

Walworth

- Most people experience Walworth as a place where people from different backgrounds are accepted and get on, although not necessarily mixing. Diversity is often mentioned as an asset. The accessibility of Latin culture - the music, dancing, football and restaurants - were described as facilitating relationships with people from other backgrounds. Some tensions between groups were highlighted, particularly around social class and the people moving into the area into new developments.
- There is a strong sense of belonging in Walworth, though this can be hyperlocal, to particular estates or small areas. East and west Walworth have a different feel: the west is dominated by century-old squares and mid-rise modern estates that have changed little in recent decades. The east has experienced a long period of substantial upheaval and



Photograph taken during a walking interview in Walworth (Summer 2021)

population churn, and the redevelopment of two major social housing estates - the Heygate and the Aylesbury. These two developments, both going through a process of demolition and rebuilding, dominate the north and south of the area, and colour local perceptions.

- Living in Walworth has different meanings to different groups, the well-established white working class community strongly associate with East Street Market and mourn the loss of a particular sense of community; for others it is a convenient place that provides relatively cheap food, good transport, and an accepting environment. For some it is just a place to pass through, with few local attractions and amenities.
- Residents generally feel they have little control and often distrust the council. There is discomfort about some new development, and questions about who will benefit. There are different perceptions of regeneration, some welcome new public spaces and facilities, others see it as symbolic of loss of a way of life.
- Walworth is characterised by its greenness, with many local parks and Burgess Park to the south. There are pockets of community gardening and activism around greening. Walworth Road is another asset, many shops support local identity and promote a shared experience. The strength of local community organisations, and the activities of many residents working to improve the area make it work better for all the different communities in the area.
- The COVID-19 pandemic generated extreme anxiety in the early lockdown, because of fears of illness, tense and difficult living situations through lockdown, financial insecurity and about the future loss of employment as furloughing ends. Lockdown and COVID-19 restrictions drew attention to the number of people living precarious lives, on very low incomes. Agencies worked together well and quickly galvanised new ways of working, particularly around food solidarity, local networks and mutual aid groups formed quickly and supported vulnerable people throughout subsequent lockdowns.
- Concerns about mental health and wellbeing were frequently voiced, residents were aware of the impact of the pandemic on themselves, and on others, particularly on young people. By the winter, more people were worried about the number of people on the streets visibly experiencing mental health problems, often linked to destitution.
- The reopening of different venues and community centres in summer of 2021 was welcomed. However, by this time opinions were polarising around road closures and the council's Low Traffic Neighbourhood policies.
- Change is affecting the area differently, Walworth Road is more financially fragile to the south towards Camberwell, exacerbated by the closure of some big shops. This is a concern to local traders, many businesses being owned by people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, who are vulnerable to the economic shock of the pandemic.



Photograph taken during a walking interview in Walworth (Summer 2021)

- The range of types and style of buildings and of use support a hyper diverse population in terms of ethnicity, age and social class and this cushions the impact of change. The stable social housing estates provide continuity and a different experience from the rapid change to the north and south. Although they are close to Walworth Road, the residential areas to the east and west have a much slower pace that encourages play and socialising.

Old Kent Road

- Community life and the sense of belonging were frequently described as the Old Kent Road's key strength. For some a sense of belonging was linked to socio-economic solidarity, pride in the industrial and working-class history of the area, and its role as a gateway to London for newly arrived migrants. Weaker sense of belonging was linked to perceptions of racism, crime, weak neighbourliness, lack of opportunities to connect, and negative feelings about the regeneration.
- The area was described as having multiple identities, northern parts associate more with Bermondsey, The Blue, or Rotherhithe, and areas to the south associate with north Peckham. The Old Kent Road's council estates are distinctive, with Avondale Square and the Ledbury Estate towering high over the area. A coherent Old Kent Road identity is created by TRAs and community groups as well as the large number of faith spaces, which are particularly used by Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.
- High levels of ethnic diversity were often mentioned by residents as a strength, and occasionally as a source of tension. This was sometimes explained as being a result of a lack of opportunity for different ethnicities to meet, others reported experiences of direct racism.
- Green spaces were valued places to exercise, relax and socialise, particularly in the first lockdown. However, many felt they were poorly maintained, and were frustrated by litter and fly tipping in parks and across the area. Other strengths were the bus links and the supermarkets, although traders were more likely to see these as competition. Many people would like to see more amenities like banks, shops and pharmacies; many pubs have closed and were missed. The amount of social housing was praised, although there were complaints about maintenance. Traffic and pollution along the Old Kent Road were seen as significant problems.
- The most frequent concern, voiced by a wide range of respondents, was about the lack of support, spaces and opportunities for young people in the local area. Fights over territory were believed to be common, between young people within the neighbourhood as well as outside.
- Perceptions of safety varied, some believed the area had moved on from a more violent past, while others - including many traders - believed crime and anti-social behaviour had worsened. Those who believed crime was not significant



Photograph taken during a walking interview in Old Kent Road (Summer 2021)

associated this with their longstanding relationship with the community and the area.

- In general, residents, stakeholders and traders did not believe that they could influence the regeneration. However, many had been involved in engagement and consultation; barriers to engagement were identified including language, and unfamiliar structure and processes. By summer 2021 some new initiatives were mentioned positively, including the work of the Southwark Young Advisors, workshops for younger people, and better relationships with community groups.
- Views were polarised about plans for regeneration. People living further from sites to be developed were more likely to welcome the changes, believing that the area needs investment and improvement. Others living in homes more directly affected by demolition and construction voiced more concerns. Many feared that the needs of the local community or the shortage of affordable housing, would not be addressed, voicing fears about building at height and increasing density. Smaller local traders worried about rents rises and declining footfall - particularly businesses in light-industrial estates and those with Black and minority ethnic-owners.
- Many residents reported a stronger sense of community during the COVID-19 lockdowns and afterwards, and describing how a neighbourhood-wide mutual aid group connecting TRAs and faith groups managed to get support to those who needed it. Closing community halls and faith spaces in the second and third lockdowns had a big impact on social relations, many struggled to stay in touch and connect digitally in the winter.
- In the second and third lockdowns problems of mental health were raised more often, linked to isolation, the closure of social spaces, overcrowding and loss of work and income. As restrictions continued, more concerns were raised about poverty and its impact on everyday life.
- As the pandemic progressed, stakeholders described a sense of fatigue and how some residents felt overwhelmed by constant information on the dangers and risk of the virus. Traders voiced many concerns about the economic impact of the pandemic and the future viability of their businesses.
- As restrictions eased in 2021 there was a renewed emphasis on green spaces, and the importance of the reopened social spaces, from faith spaces, barber shops, hairdressers and schools. New community spaces like the Livesey Exchange were welcomed. However new issues like the impact of housing infill surfaced. While some individuals remained isolated and anxious, many described how improved neighbourliness continued after the initial lockdown, valuing the stronger connections they feel with the local community.
- By summer 2021 there were some signs of increased tensions within the community. The perception of race inequality was more prominent than in 2020. There were more concerns about young people using parks and public spaces to socialise at night and a rising perception of knife crime and violence among young people, as well as the impact of stop and search. There



Photograph taken during a walking interview in Old Kent Road (Summer 2021)

were more mentions of gender-based safety, and how domestic violence was exacerbated by lockdown.

Camberwell

- Diversity is seen as a key strength of the local area. While residents perceived Camberwell to be home to a mix of people, residents were uncertain whether those from different backgrounds interact regularly. Residents and stakeholders noted that more community events and activities would encourage wider participation and would help develop networks of support across groups.
- Burgess Park and other green spaces are highly valued by residents. These have been important places where people connected to each other throughout the pandemic, many people reported meeting friends and socialising with neighbours in the park.
- The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups and lower-income communities was a concern raised during the three phases of research. Stakeholders spoke about how vulnerable people, including those with dementia or living in overcrowded households, have struggled. Residents and stakeholders reported that the pandemic put a further strain on people working informally, in precarious work or on zero-hours contracts.
- There are mixed views about the changes that are taking place locally. Camberwell residents were generally sceptical about their ability to influence what goes on in their area. A common feeling is that the regeneration will not bring opportunities for longstanding residents, and there are fears that this group might be pushed out of the area. A smaller group of residents was more positive about the current pace of development and appreciated that the area is attracting new visitors.
- Several residents raised concerns about the amount of community engagement that has moved online in the pandemic. They hoped that opportunities for face-to-face participation will return once lockdown measures are lifted.
- Pollution, noise and air quality were among the major concerns for those who took part in the research. Some residents noted that areas around Camberwell Green, where the traffic moves slowly and buses and lorries are idling, are most affected by noise and pollution.
- The majority of Camberwell residents felt safe in their neighbourhoods. Some characterised their local area as 'quiet,' though a few residents and traders thought that a post-COVID uptick in the night-time economy might increase anti-social behaviour on the streets.
- Residents were also worried that lockdowns had affected people's physical and mental health. Some commented how reduced physical activity and eating processed foods is having an impact on their bodies. A majority of residents and stakeholders reported that issues such as anxiety, loneliness, and loss of confidence were affecting people from all age



Photograph taken during a walking interview in Camberwell (Summer 2021)

groups, with younger and older people identified as being most at risk.

- Volunteering with local groups increased during the first lockdown in March-June 2020. Residents spoke about working with local groups to deliver groceries or prescriptions to people who were shielding. This made them feel more involved in their local communities at a time when other community activities had stopped. In the third phase of research, fewer residents spoke about their volunteering activities and participation in mutual aid groups, suggesting that there had been a drop in involvement as the pandemic entered its second year.
- In June and July 2021, with the easing of the third national lockdown, Camberwell residents and stakeholders reported that their local area was slowly coming back to life. However, many traders said that they were still struggling with the effects of lockdowns and noted a sense of reluctance among their customers to come into their stores.

Peckham

- Most people living and working in the local area reported strong positive feelings towards Peckham's communities, highlighting the benefits of their diversity, community links, and cultural life. Many noted the cultural richness of local groups, the variety of faith organisations and the thriving arts and cultural scene as contributing to the sense of community.
- Support networks are seen as a key feature of the longer-standing Peckham communities, and it was highlighted that people with strong local social support showed more resilience during the pandemic. But rising housing costs across Peckham are seen to be undermining family and neighbourhood networks, and there is fear that social isolation and feelings of exclusion will increase.
- Places of worship, particularly larger churches and mosques, were identified as important spaces for social mixing. Hair and beauty salons, shops and pubs were seen as key places for people from similar backgrounds to socialise.
- While diversity is seen as a local asset, and it is an experience shared by many Peckham residents, local groups are rarely reported to mix. Some mentioned the contrast between the predominantly white, high-income groups using Bellenden Road and the more ethnically diverse and lower-income communities using Rye Lane. People often reported that groups use different shops and facilities in Peckham. At times, awareness of racial inequality was expressed in connection with the new high street cafes and bars, which people felt catered specifically to wealthier white residents.
- There is agreement that more widely available open community spaces across Peckham would bring different communities closer together and support broader participation in the area's arts and cultural spaces. The absence of social



Photograph taken during a walking interview in Peckham (Summer 2021)

spaces, such as community hubs, was also highlighted, as well as the fear over a further loss of recreational spaces, which are struggling to remain open.

- Residents and traders reported low levels of voice and influence in the area. Some stakeholders and traders highlighted the need for a formal traders' forum, with a dedicated point of contact within the council, to address trader issues in a sustainable manner.
- A majority of local people brought up concerns about ongoing and planned developments, particularly in terms of their impact on housing affordability, the local business landscape and rising income inequality. There is a desire among the people interviewed to avoid any consequences that would disproportionately affect or exclude more vulnerable residents and traders.
- There are strong activist and community groups in Peckham but stakeholders voiced concern that participation in community activism and the governance of voluntary groups is not representative of local demographics, especially Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and people from lower-income backgrounds.
- Most residents felt generally safe around local neighbourhoods during the daytime, but there is some concern related to young people becoming victims of knife crime, grooming and gang activity. Local people felt that these problems have been amplified by increased social isolation, lack of opportunities for work and career development, poor relationships with the police, and the reduction in youth services and activities.
- In the first months of the pandemic, there was an increase in neighbourliness at hyperlocal levels in Peckham, with residents devoting more of their time to their homes, neighbourhoods and local high streets. Online platforms and volunteering spurred new relationships between neighbours and became spaces of resource sharing, help, advice, and signposting. Although some local residents and stakeholders still noted that the pandemic had brought a renewed emphasis on community, by spring 2021, the levels of engagement were reported to have decreased.
- With the gradual lifting of restrictions from May 2021 onwards, Peckham, and especially Rye Lane, experienced a return of its former dynamic atmosphere. However, mental health problems concerns in summer 2020 and winter 2020-2021 were ongoing, particularly for low-income families experiencing financial burdens, insecurity at work and overcrowding.



Photograph taken during a walking interview in Dulwich (Summer 2021)

Dulwich

- Parks, open spaces and the local woods were among the features enjoyed by Dulwich residents living on social housing estates. A majority of residents thought that parks and green spaces provide a range of leisure spaces and outdoor sports, and make the area feel peaceful and child-friendly. Residents

also noted the importance of having clean and well-maintained outside spaces on their estates.

- Neighbourliness is seen as a key local asset that contributes to social integration across age groups. Residents reported that they value the longstanding and supportive relationships they have developed over time with their neighbours and the opportunity to take part in local community groups. Church gatherings, community centre activities and local volunteering were described as anchors of community life before the COVID-19 pandemic. When these shut after March 2020, isolation became a problem for many residents.
- Since March 2020 stakeholders and residents from all the Dulwich social housing estates included in the research reported that both estate facilities and some of their shops shut. They observed that these closures had a significant impact on their neighbourhoods' social life. Stakeholders located on the smaller social housing estates in Dulwich, with access to fewer facilities, described feeling isolated, as social centres closed.
- Residents have mixed views on whether they have control over change in their area. Whilst some reported that they feel involved in the decisions about development through their local TRAs and communications with their MP, others described frustration at not having their voice heard - for instance, some residents complained about protracted repairs on estates and delayed maintenance work.
- The lack of services and provision for young people was a common concern for residents and stakeholders. Some added that young people are left with nowhere to gather but outdoors, which sometimes has negative consequences for the relationships between young people and their neighbours.
- Most local people reported feeling at ease in their neighbourhoods and did not raise concerns about safety during the day. However, a number of residents and stakeholders noted that they have some concerns about walking alone at night on their estate. They also noted an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic, especially during the first lockdown.
- Stakeholders noted that people lacking digital skills, digital infrastructure or internet access have been the hardest group to engage during lockdown. There is increased awareness that these groups have been left out of online community meetings and activities. Faith organisations and statutory early learning providers mentioned that they had been unable to run their usual programmes that bring different groups in the community together.
- The first and second lockdowns increased residents' engagement in volunteering on the different estates. Stakeholders and residents thought that this created an opportunity for older people to get to know their neighbours better, which strengthened local relationships.



Photograph taken during a walking interview in Dulwich (Summer 2021)

Comparing experiences across the six areas

Comparing emerging themes findings across the six areas, we found that the similarities outweigh the differences. Some of the similarities were in the assets or positive features, while others represent challenges shared by residents and traders across the six areas.

Similarities between the six areas

- **Parks and green spaces.**
Residents across the six areas identified these as important assets in their local areas.
- **Feelings of belonging.**
Most residents feel attached to their local areas, often this is because they have grown up in the area or are long-term residents. Newer residents also reported that the local area has become a home.
- **Individual and collective control over decisions affecting the local area.**
Residents and traders reported low levels of voice and influence in local areas, the reasons for this varied. There is a widespread cynicism around consultation and the impact that local voices have on decision-making, particularly among people with fewer resources (in time and money) and Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. It was widely noted that opinions about new housing developments polarise feelings.
- **Social relationships.**
Across the six areas, a majority of residents reported that they have local connections they can turn to for help or support. Residents noted lower levels of interaction between people from different backgrounds than people who consider themselves to be similar. This was further exacerbated by the closure of formal and informal social infrastructure spaces during the pandemic, which added to people's sense of isolation and disconnect from others.
- **A lack of provision for young people.**
The lack of activities, spaces or educational and employment opportunities for young people was one of the biggest concerns amongst residents, stakeholders and traders.
- **Mental health.**
Stakeholders and residents from all six regeneration areas stated that mental health issues represent a significant challenge. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures have aggravated existing difficulties.
- **Inequality.**
In all the areas, differences between the life experiences of people who were struggling to get by, and more affluent residents, were highlighted as an important factor shaping everyday life, and experiences of COVID-19 and lockdown.

Differences between the six areas

- **Transport connectivity.**
In Walworth, Elephant & Castle and Old Kent Road, this was seen as a major asset of the local areas.
- **Diversity and walkability.**
These aspects of the local population and the streetscape were seen as major assets in Camberwell, Elephant & Castle and Walworth.
- **Change in the built environment.**
Whether they supported or criticised the ongoing development, residents living in Camberwell, Elephant & Castle, Old Kent Road and Walworth described how changes in the built environment and the transformation of social spaces are a defining experience of living in the area, affecting their daily lives and activities.
- **Safety.**
In Elephant & Castle, Peckham and Old Kent Road perceptions of safety amongst residents and traders varied. Some felt more at ease, whilst others - often traders - reported that safety has not improved. In Peckham, knowing people locally and having “eyes on the streets” were important to residents’ perception of increased public safety. In Walworth and Camberwell particular streets were highlighted as more dangerous although overall the area was felt to be safe.
- **Community life.**
While community life was brought up in interviews across the six areas, Old Kent Road’s stakeholders and residents were more likely to cite this as the key local asset or strength.
- **Support for migrant groups.**
The need for more support was brought up by a number of stakeholders who work with migrant groups in Elephant & Castle, Peckham and Dulwich. They described a lack of translation services for migrants and the impact this has on inclusion, access to local services, and health and education outcomes. Findings from the third phase of research shows that some local services have made substantial improvements in this area.

About Social Life

Social Life is an independent research organisation created by the Young Foundation in 2012, to become a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. Our work is about understanding how peoples' day-to-day experience of local places is shaped by the built environment - housing, public spaces, parks and local high streets - and how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas.

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