

We Walworth Evaluation

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

SUMMARY SEPTEMBER 2023



This report summarises research carried out between May 2022 and August 2023 by Social Life, the research and learning partner in the We Walworth project. We Walworth is funded through the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Partnership for People and Places programme.

1. We Walworth

We Walworth was born out of the Walworth community's response to the COVID pandemic, and especially the work done by the Walworth Community Food Hub which was set up in the first lockdown in 2020¹. We Walworth has drawn on what was learnt from experiences of food-based solidarity in Walworth during the pandemic. It 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 shared experience. Cross-sector joined-up working, tackling food insecurity and increasing social capital have been key to this work.

We Walworth has had three stages: getting a wide group of people involved through neighbourhood events, working in small groups, and tackling local issues collaboratively². The project focused around a series of events 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 insecurity.

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

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

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

2. About the evaluation

The 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 theory of change was developed at the start of the project. Three outcomes from the theory of change framed the research:

1. **developing new models of collaborations between local government, central government, and the local community**
2. **developing and raising awareness of social capital**
3. **developing initiatives around food security.**

Collecting detailed personal and demographic data can be intrusive and has been associated with extractive models of research that prioritise data collection regardless of its impact on people. Extractive research is especially problematic in areas characterised by high levels of disadvantage, where communities feel that research has not led to positive changes in the past. While

documenting people's lived experiences and their journeys through the project was important for our evaluation, an important question was what insights data would give us that we might not already have.

The We Walworth partnership discussed these issues and decided that collecting monitoring data during engagement activities could be disruptive and make it difficult to build trust and accountability, which were key for the work. We used instead a mix of in-depth interviews, surveys and ethnographic approaches to get input from a wide range of stakeholder groups. This included people who had been more involved in We Walworth such as the members of the two Working Groups and the We Walworth core team, and others who had been less involved in it such as social infrastructure providers, people from local organisations and local and central government officers who took part in one-off We Walworth events.

Research activities were kept separate from the engagement process. 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.

3. What we found



I'd say the project activities supported [the development of relations between local government and local communities].

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



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.

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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.

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

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.

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[Things] like this [a We Walworth event] 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



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.



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.

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

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.

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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.



We haven't reached a solution on it, but it's quite difficult when a lot of it exists outside the working group and the processes the council have to go through. It does depend on building a relationship with the council to drive this forward. I think we've gotten closer to the things that the BBQ area needs to be successful but not a proper solution.

Interview with government officer who took part in one of the working groups, January 2022



I think the project has definitely made me more aware of the inequalities in the area, particularly like the food inequality side.

Interview with government officer, June 2023

4. How the evaluation was approached

Like other place-based projects that take on complex issues, We Walworth used an agile and iterative approach to achieve its goals. As the project shifted and evolved, the research flexed around it. This resulted in a robust yet flexible design that foregrounded relationship-building and awareness of power dynamics.

This flexibility allowed us to respond quickly to change in delivery and ways of working. The challenge for the research team was to remain embedded in project activities,

while also standing back and examining the stories we collected and avoiding disrupting the engagement model. 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 mixed methods research design that helped us develop more responsive ways of managing fieldwork and to continuously build rapport with those involved in the project.

5. Conclusion

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 its 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.

To achieve the outcomes We Walworth set itself requires care and time. This is 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.

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 the next steps. Green shoots for future growth have emerged and are growing as this first phase of the project comes to an end.

Across the UK and beyond many people are exploring how to achieve systemic change to support and empower local communities, and to reduce inequalities in resources and power. 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.

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To enact the system change, you need the more senior people, and the more senior people haven't got the ability to get out of their offices.

Interview with core group member at the end of the project, July 2023

About this report

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

The full report is available here:
→ wewalworth.org.uk

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.

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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
→ @SL_Cities



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

We Walworth is a new project to engage everyone in the neighbourhood about food and inequality in Walworth

→ wewalworth.org.uk

Pembroke House is a centre for social action and residential community in Walworth, South London. For over 130 years we've been building a better neighbourhood in Walworth. A neighbourhood where people can lead good lives and work together for a good society.

Working with the community, we provide space for people to learn, eat and enjoy life together, and take collective action on local issues.

→ pembrokehouse.org.uk
→ @Pembroke1885

Walworth Living Room is a new space for our community open to everyone. The Living Room has a social space and community café at its heart, surrounded by shared activity, meeting and office spaces.

→ walworthlivingroom.org.uk



