

Perspectives: one year on

Views of London's youth workers
on the riots

August 2011 - August 2012

Perspectives: one year on

In August 2011, over a period of days the news agenda was dominated by images of riots and widespread disorder in parts of London and other cities. Although it was certainly not the case that only young people were involved, much attention has focused on their role, and we were keen to understand the impact and consequences of the events on them. During the days immediately after the riots, we asked a number of experienced youth leaders for their reactions, about what had happened, why it had happened and what could be done about it.

A year on, we went back to the same youth clubs to see whether things had changed, whether the views of those youth workers – or the young people they worked with – had evolved, so as to try and understand what was needed within communities to stop the kinds of disturbances that happened in 2011 from happening again.

We acknowledge that there have been many robust examinations of what happened during the riots, including Reading the Riots, the Resilience Forum and other studies. Each of these has helped shape understanding of what occurred and what needs to be done.

This is not a scientific survey of opinion, or an enquiry on the same scale as some of those other pieces of work. However, where this report is different is that it is based entirely on the unmediated input of youth workers. These are professionals who work with young people every day, in youth clubs that are integral parts of communities across London, some of which were affected by the riots. All of the youth workers who contributed their views work within well-established centres which have

good reputations for serving the needs of diverse young people throughout London. All the quotes have been kept anonymous, but information about each of the youth clubs which were contacted is provided at the end of this report.

The opinions of these youth leaders are worth hearing because of their understanding of the young people within their clubs. Some of those young people may have been involved in the riots. Many of them would have reacted the way most adults did – with fear and confusion. And others would have been involved in the clean up or other activities afterwards.

Soon after the riots, in November 2011, London Youth published *Hunch, a vision for youth in post austerity Britain*. This

presented a compelling case for investment in and reinvigoration of youth work because of what it could do to help young people develop confidence, character and strong bonds with their communities, their peers and with adults. Many of the themes that we explored in *Hunch* – from the need for structured activities for young people, the link between parents, school, communities and clubs and the importance of better relationships between young people and authority figures like the police – come out strongly from the interviews with the youth workers, both at the time, and a year on from the riots.

Perspectives: one year on, our new report, looks first at what was said in the immediate aftermath of the riots, gauging the youth leaders' thoughts about causes, reactions, the role of youth work and what needed to be addressed in the future.

The second part of the report is about their reflections a year on. What has changed, what the views of young people are now, how perceptions of those young people have shifted, and again, the role of youth work and what is needed to support young people in the future.

Unsurprisingly, not all of the youth leaders agreed on everything either at the time of the riots, or now one year on. And we do not seek to draw firm conclusions or offer simplistic solutions.

The most striking thing for me is that far from being a set of incidents that

restrict a generation, a sense emerges from the interviews conducted in 2012 that what happened last summer may have created amongst young people a greater sense of political awareness, about the opportunities and challenges they face as well as about broader questions of community cohesion – and the consequences of law breaking.

At the same time, there is clearly a belief that some serious barriers exist for young people, in particular around relationships with the police, the role of parents and wider families and their interactions with other parts of the community.

We believe that what emerges from these interviews should give pause for thought for policy makers and anyone else with an interest in young people and stronger communities.

We'd welcome your thoughts and comments.

Rosie Ferguson
Chief Executive, London Youth
August 2012

Part One: Immediate responses

What youth workers felt in August 2011

■ The causes

- Opportunism and criminality
- The role of the media
- Wider social factors
- The role of the police

■ The reactions of young people in the youth clubs

■ The reactions of youth workers, and the role of youth clubs

■ What else needs to be done in the future

The causes

In 2011, it was apparent to everyone interviewed that the trigger for the riots had been the shooting in Tottenham. However, there was more debate about the reasons why things unfolded in the way that they did.

Opportunism and criminality

For some, their immediate reaction was that the riots were something spontaneous, driven by opportunistic and at times anti-social behaviour that once it began, took on a life of its own:

"The initial anger was the unexplained shooting. After that, it was opportunism. This was organised chaos and a chance to cause as much damage as possible."

"The riots themselves seemed to not be focused on attacking the police but on theft and damage to property. There was a sense of 'as long as you can get away with it'."

"I believe that much of what was seen was about criminality and opportunistic behaviour and not political protest."

The role of the media

There was much discussion in 2011 about the part that social media played as a vehicle for sustaining or facilitating the disturbances. In their immediate reactions, youth leaders considered the wider role and impact of the media and some felt it had been a factor:

"The media were in a difficult place as they were caught between reporting what was happening which in turn acted like an advert for others to get involved."

"For some there must have been a sense of 'excitement' and there was a lot of hype – and this was not helped by the fact that it was the middle of the school holidays."

Others also suggested the wide exposure in the media of phone hacking and MPs' expenses was used by some young people as a justification to be cynical or disengaged:

"Young people are not lacking in aspiration but they are influenced by what they see in the media. Sometimes their aspirations can be unrealistic in the short term: they want instant

gratification and some are not prepared to work towards their goals. But they see others in society doing the same: MPs' expenses; phone tapping; bankers taking short cuts to increase profit."

Wider social factors

Most of the youth leaders we spoke to thought that social and financial exclusion, and lack of opportunities for young people were important indirect factors leading to more young people becoming involved, particularly once the troubles began to spread:

"Young people are aspiring to live a dream that some of them will never reach. The cuts will affect communities with fewer opportunities and fewer resources across London and the UK."

"They have consistently been let down with hollow promises; options for young people are shrinking."

"Young people are upset about a lot of issues: the loss of EMA; the draconian school curriculum that forces all young people down a certain route and the limited chances to do more practical subjects; and of course about youth unemployment. But it is also about poverty, schools struggling to keep a lid on tensions, and about parenting."

Not every youth leader agreed with this analysis, with one saying:

"I am unsure as to exactly why it happened, though I don't think it was because of the cuts in youth provision."

The role of the police

The consensus in the immediate aftermath was that the police had found it difficult to handle events. Either they had lost control, taken too long to address the flash points, or had simply been absent when they were needed:

"There is a lot being made about the police's reaction and there are conspiracy theories about why they let it get so bad on Monday night."

"At midnight on the Monday evening, the area was absolutely packed with people and no police presence. It wasn't just young people as there were a lot of adults involved too."

"There was a sense that the police did not seem to respond straight away."

"Given what happened at the G20 riots (when a police officer pushed over a man who subsequently died) each police officer might have thought twice this week before dealing with someone."

Part One: Immediate responses

What youth workers felt in August 2011

The reaction of young people within the youth clubs

In August 2011, a number of youth workers suggested that trouble may have been brewing for a while:

“While the trigger is linked obviously to the Tottenham shooting, something has been brewing for some time.”

“It was not entirely unexpected but the force of it was. There has been a feeling of unrest generally.”

Many young people reacted in the same ways as many adults did. Some were said to be shocked or frightened:

“The young people we work with have been disgusted by what went on. But they are very nervous about it too.”

“Young people we encountered we shocked and frightened. They feel that people may be looking at them and thinking they are responsible.”

In the period immediately after the riots, youth workers witnessed a complex range of responses, which included some excitement as well as fear:

“They young people I have been in touch with had a wide range of emotions and voices from excitement and statements such as ‘this is a good thing’ and ‘it is a statement about the government’ through to it being damaging and a problem.”

“Many of the young people who were on the streets will not know why they got involved. For some there must have been a sense of excitement.”

In a few clubs, the young people were said to be very angry at the rioters:

“The young people at our club have been very, very anti-riots. Possibly more than Middle England. One boy said: ‘That’s not a riot – you can’t call it a riot. A riot is when you do things for a reason. That’s just robbing.’ They are very angry that they couldn’t go out of their homes because their safety was in danger and the youth club had to close.”

The reactions of youth workers, and the role of youth clubs

Youth workers were, of course, sad and disappointed to see young people causing damage to their communities, each other and themselves. Whatever their beliefs about the causes of the riots or the role of the police and the media, they were clearly deeply affected by the events of those days in August 2011:

“My initial reaction to the events was to be sad, angry and disgusted. When this immediate response had subsided, I began to think about how widespread it was and the sheer numbers involved.”

“As a youth worker I am disappointed with the events of last week in particular the perception that young people on the whole were responsible for the looting and rioting that occurred.”

“My first reaction was to be horrified - and this was very much influenced by my own experience and reaction as an adult dealing with my own son and journey home, especially on the Monday evening.”

While most did not want to rush to judgment some did feel the riots raised questions about young people’s needs – and perhaps about the role, scope and ambition of youth work:

“Perhaps we’re not providing young people with the ability to control themselves and make decisions about what is right and wrong.”

“Young people do not have a sense of their own community and this needs to be addressed. It’s about giving young people leadership roles.”

“We need to provide opportunities within our communities which help young people to develop a sense of ownership about where they live. We need to give young people a real voice to express their views and opinions and have them acted upon. We also need to provide facilities and opportunities within communities for young people to engage and socialise.”

What else needs to be done in the future?

Many reactions voiced in the media and by policy makers in August 2011 were instinctive. Most of the youth workers we interviewed argued at the time that more reflection was needed before bold policy proposals were made. A number of suggestions were made at the time, however, in terms of what government, local authorities, communities and others could do. Some reflected the need for parents to be engaged and supported:

“More investment is needed particularly in things like early years’ services. These would help revitalise the trust and input of parents.”

“We need resources for parents and other adults to spend more time with children before they become too disillusioned; and there need to be more training and job opportunities for the older young people.”

Others suggested that longer term social economic rebalancing was needed:

“In the long term, it is about dealing with inequality and the gap between those who have and those who don’t. It is a generational issue that subconsciously causes resentment.”

“There are lots of ‘responses’ which simply aren’t solutions. There is no talk of actually what is going wrong. There is no feeling of pride at all amongst citizens in the UK. It is a massive job. We need to build up confidence in system, government, community.”

And most were agreed that knee jerk reactions were not helpful:

“A hardline approach won’t work. Sending young people to prison just criminalises them. This will harden them, they will come out able to commit more and worse crimes and be even less likely to find jobs. It’s the same with kicking people out of council flats – this leads to homelessness and young people still being housed by the state but costing us more. This could lead to poorer education, mental health disturbance and a whole load of other issues.”

“The initial feelings of anger and indignation will need to pass. Any investment that might come needs to be spent in a ‘different way’, and quick answers are not the solution.”

Part Two:

What the youth leaders felt one year later

- What has changed since August 2011?
- Perceptions of and attitudes toward young people
- Could it happen again?
- The role of youth work in prevention
- What else is needed for a better future?

What has changed?

A year later, when we spoke to youth workers in summer 2012, many thought little or nothing had changed. For some, there had been hardly any progress on some of the core issues that they believed initially had led or contributed to the riots – the relationships with the police and the broader lack of opportunity:

“There has been little positive change or improvement regarding opportunities available for young people. Perceptions of young people by the wider community have not improved, and relations between young people and the police are still bad.”

“Nothing has changed a year on from the riots in terms of the relationship between young people and the police – things were dreadful then and still are now, due to an absence of trust and consent.”

“There has been no improvement in the relationships between young people and the police. Employability schemes are not really delivering and the job market for a young person is still difficult. There has been no real improvement on this front.”

Despite this, the year that had passed had seen some positive things emerge for some of the youth leaders:

“It is a good thing that we are seeing more young people who may be at risk of offending being referred to the youth club rather than being sucked into the criminal justice system.”

“Although the relationships with police in the community are problematic, in fact the schools-based officers are excellent.”

Others felt that the consequences of the riots had made a positive impact on some of the young people in their clubs, in terms of their political and social awareness:

“Young people themselves have become more politically aware and involved as a result of all the discussions in the aftermath of the riots. While they are less keen to participate in forums on gangs, they seem more interested in debating the impact of cuts and political decisions.”

“On reflection, it is possible that the publicity from the court cases and the outrage this attracted might have changed young people’s attitudes, making them less likely to participate in rioting in the future.”

However, it was clear for many of the youth leaders that some things had worsened in the year since the riots. The concerns tended to focus around the police and the levels of support and opportunity available to young people:

“There seem to be fewer police out on the streets. This is having a twofold negative impact. For one thing, fewer police out and about means there is no longer such a deterrent, and secondly there are fewer chances for the police and young people to build more positive relationships. If anything, this situation has worsened.”

“If anything, there is now less support for youth clubs and organisations who engage with young people.”

“I suspect young people may actually feel worse off a year on from the riots, largely because the fact that those fundamental problems - the economic environment, employment opportunities etc - remain unsolved.”

Perceptions of and attitudes toward young people

Immediately after the riots, many of the youth leaders – and the young people within their clubs - felt that young people generally had suffered as a result of the negative perceptions that the riots had created. For some the passing of a year had meant that this negativity had reduced:

“Maybe there has been a slight change in mind-set regarding young people; more people are now aware of the issues surrounding opportunities for young people and the lack of provision for their needs. Possibly people have become more sympathetic.”

However, more of the youth leaders felt that attitudes toward young people have hardened, particularly in relation to crime:

“There has been a significant rise in the number of older people who report minor and very minor offences by local young people to the club itself rather than the police. More generally, this past year has seen a heightened sensitivity to crime and a shift towards more negative perceptions of young people in the community.”

“One thing that has changed is that local shopkeepers felt let down (by the police and official responses). Some are still waiting for compensation. A year later some local businesses are still taking matters into their own hands – such as having ‘no more than two school kids’ in at a time. The effect is that the dynamics in the community have changed.”

Could it happen again?

For many agencies – particularly those responsible for community safety and crime prevention – the key question they are trying to address is whether something like what happened in August 2011 could happen again. Some of the youth leaders felt that it definitely could:

“I am 100% sure that the riots could happen again, although I am less sure about the scale. Already during the summer holidays there have been two big gang fights in my local area, and with the Olympics occupying all the attention there will be a real risk to communities if riots were to break out.”

“The riots or something similar will happen again. It is just a question of when”.

Part Two:

What the youth leaders felt one year later

“There is no way to prevent another riot. This generation of young people do not care, the generation is lost”.

Others felt less certain, as although things were difficult, the combination of factors that led to what happened in August 2011 may not be repeated:

“There is definitely the potential for rioting this summer, particularly with talk of things like cut to housing benefit to under 25s. But maybe events since the riots have made young people more aware of the consequences of their actions which could deter future disturbances on the same scale.”

“For something similar to occur again this summer, there would have to be a trigger of some sort although the underlying issues and frustration is still there.”

The youth leaders did acknowledge the complexity of young people’s experience within their communities, which made it hard to predict exactly what might happen:

“A number of underlying social, economic and environmental issues create the risk of rioting; if one of these fails young people this risk arises, if they all fail then the risk gets greater. In this sense the situation remains unchanged a year on, with the added factor that young people are possibly even more despondent.”

Role of youth work in prevention

In the immediate aftermath, all of the youth leaders felt that “youth work” had a really strong role to play in building resilience and rebuilding trust and confidence in communities

after the riots. A year on, they still held that belief, and a strong sense of where youth work could contribute more widely:

“There is real potential for good youth work to prevent disturbances, particularly with regards to young people teetering between participating and not. These are the ones who might rely solely on their youth club for support and character-building, which are the key safeguards against involvement in rioting. Cuts to youth work provision could prove very dangerous in this respect.”

“We need greater investment in targeted youth services, as opposed to ‘chucking money at all the youth services’. At a local level, there is still a long way to go to integrate the different types of services, and there is insufficient recognition of the high quality, diverse provision available out there for young people.”

“Although youth work plays an important part in preventing disturbances like the riots, it is not necessarily the most important factor. Home, school and community form the key triangle, youth work contributing to the community element.”

What else is needed for a better future?

A year on, some youth leaders were firmer in their views about what was needed. Some of this was focused on more investment for the kind of youth interventions described above.

“While there is a bit more funding available for youth work, it is not necessarily being targeted in the right places. More is being directed to special ‘glossy’ projects that are

only short term and fail to get to the root of the problem, which is that young people need reliable spaces in their local area where they can go to broaden their experiences and develop. More funding ought to be directed to existing provision on a long term basis, helping to maintain the most basic services that are struggling; things like paying the rent or fixing the roof.”

“Government and council are too far removed from young people. Voluntary organisations outside the government do a lot but there is no overall aim and nothing bringing them together. Unfortunately investing in young people will always be low priority.”

There were also thoughts on the role of wider family and community level support, and on the role of the police:

“We should focus on the young generations of tomorrow. Families can be unaware of what goes on amongst young people, and we need to help them.”

“The key to tackling these issues is working with whole families, the parents as well as the young people, particularly with regards to unemployment where it affects multiple generations.”

“There is a real need to reverse the policing cuts and get more police officers out into the local communities.”

Participating clubs

The youth leaders who contributed their views in August 2011 and August 2012 work in the following youth clubs (NB not all youth leaders were interviewed in both years):

Alford House

Alford House is a youth club based in North Lambeth, for young people aged 8-21. The club offers a variety of sports, games, creative and recreational activities such as art, music production, and vocational training, in a safe and secure environment. Weekly sessions include Youth Support, Health and Fitness, Boys Night, Girls Night, and various off-site activities and events. Alford House is also the base for the North Lambeth Connexions Personal Advisor. The club is a registered charity, funded through donations, grants, fundraising and rents and lettings.

The Bradfield Club

The Bradfield Club is a youth and community centre based in North Peckham and partnered with All Saints Church and Bradfield College. The club aims to empower young people in Peckham to live life in all its fullness, by providing a wide range of activities. These include DJ workshops, youth drop-in sessions, pool, music and table tennis training, art workshops, tennis coaching, and even a healthy eating programme and free fitness gym. The artist in residence, Ally Clarke, is established in her beautiful art studio on the top floor of the Club. The Bradfield club offers sessions for children of all age groups from 4-20, funded through the generous support of various partners and the goodwill of individual donors.

Brixton Road Youth Centre

Brixton Road Youth Centre a youth project that enables young people to take responsibility, ownership and change the delivery of services to young people. It is a charity supporting young leaders in London and particularly the Lambeth community, managed by a group of voluntary trustees and members of their management board. Their ethos is “For young people by young people”. The youth club meets twice weekly, alongside a weekly ‘Girls Talk’ session. Every month the centre also provides young people with the opportunity to attend an Awareness workshop and Youth Surgery.

EASE

EASE (Empowering Action and Social Esteem) is based in Ealing and aims to support personal and community development, acting as a Community Resource Centre as well as a youth club. The club is open to young people every night, offering sessions for homework, dance, fitness, art, peer education and, for young people aged 19+, adult learning and DIY classes. During the school holidays, special Holiday Schemes involve young people in making a positive and lasting mark in the local community. EASE also offer many volunteering opportunities and a Youth Volunteer Training and Development programme.

Laburnum Boat Club

Laburnum Boat Club is Hackney’s community boating project, providing social education for young people aged 9-24 through the medium of watersports. The youth club meets daily in the school holidays, giving young people the chance to try out canoeing and other water-based activities, as well as dry activities including art projects, games, narrowboat trips, rock climbing, trips to the cinema and adventure play grounds. Older children can undertake formal watersports training, and the club also runs sessions for children with disabilities. Once or twice a month the club organises day-trips away, such as to the large Thames weirs and dinghy sailing on reservoirs, alongside five or six weekend residential trips where young people get to try out their skills on open moving water. There is a monthly cycling club where safety, cycle maintenance and trips are organised.

North Paddington Youth club

Located in Maida Vale, North Paddington Youth club serves the young people of Westminster on behalf of Westminster City Council. The purpose-built facilities house a range of weekly sessions and workshops providing informal education and opportunities for personal self-development. From drugs workshops to climbing sessions, IT sessions to music activities, the club aims to expose young people to a wide variety of new experiences.

Project DOST

Dost (friend) provides social and emotional well-being support for separated children and young people aged 11-25, helping them develop positive minds, rebuild their lives and become active participants in their communities. It advocates for the child’s best interests, shares knowledge and experience with other professionals in the field, and engages the wider community in the issues affecting separated children and young people. Direct services provided include advice, advocacy, therapeutic support, education and play amounting to holistic support tailored to the needs of each child in both the long and short term. The project also offers accredited activities, such as Duke of Edinburgh and V-Inspired, and delivers a play and youth programme through a combination of regular youth clubs, sports coached, creative projects and residential trips.

Samuel Lithgow

The Samuel Lithgow Centre is located at the heart of the Regents’ Park Ward and serves the whole of the West Euston area. The centre’s main services target disadvantaged young people aged 4 – 19 through two different youth projects and an after school club, but it also offers supporting activities to lone parents and under 5’s, the unemployed, BME groups, women, and senior citizens. Recently refurbished premises now offer young people and the wider community a dynamic ICT Centre, an enlarged Community Gym, a Sports Hall, a Community Café with a commercial kitchen, a Juice Bar, and Music Room. Youth services are delivered in partnership with a number of statutory and voluntary organisations.

Participating clubs

Samuel Montagu

Samuel Montagu Youth Centre is a community youth club that provides a variety of services for young people aged 9 to 18 years. The centre offers sport, fitness, training courses, an Internet Café and Tuck Shop, plus a variety of activities and special events all in a safe and supportive environment. The club also holds 'Friday Friends', a youth club for young people with disabilities.

WAC

WAC Performing Arts & Media College provides affordable training in the arts for children and young people up to the age of twenty-five, as well as a range of career and personal development projects for the eighteen-plus age group. The college works with more than 1,100 children and young people from Camden and the surrounding area, within projects that range from under-fives drop-in sessions and weekend classes to professional arts training and career development consultancy. WAC also organises alternative education provision and professional level Diploma training. As a registered charity, the college is supported by various funders and through partnerships with other organisations, enabling it to deliver the most innovative, pioneering and inclusive programmes to students.

Westminster House

Westminster House serves the young people of Nunhead, Peckham, and the surrounding areas. It provides a safe, educational building-based project with an in-house programme of activities designed to empower young people and give them the opportunity to engage in activities beyond the realms of their usual inner city experiences. The youth club meets four times a week, in addition to an after-school club and weekly Girls' Nights, and is funded by the generosity of a variety of Trusts, Foundations, organisations and individuals.

Youth Action and Diversity Trust

The Youth Action and Diversity Trust runs two community centres in Bexley on behalf of Bexley Council, and offers a wide range of services for young people aged 8-16. These range from sport and games through to Drama workshops and team building activities. The club delivers accredited courses for young people in a range of subjects such as Drama, Drug Education, Life skills and Office and Business skills as well as delivering the Sport Leader Awards and the Adventure Service Challenge. YADT also support School Work Experience programs, and works with the Youth Offending Teams to divert young people away from crime or anti-social behaviour.

About the author

London Youth is a vibrant network of 400 community organisations serving young people and their families in every London borough. Somewhere near you, there's one of our members, at work every day and most nights. (Find out more at www.londonyouth.org).

We grew from the Ragged Schools movement in the 1880s, spending the 20th Century as the Union of Youth Clubs and Federation of Boys' Clubs. Throughout, our mission has been to help young people be the best they can be. Today, we try and achieve this in three ways:

Development

We help our member organisations increase their effectiveness by training youth workers, providing information and supporting organisations to achieve the London Youth Quality Mark.

Voice

And we advocate on behalf of young people and youth workers – ensuring the daily experience of on-the-ground practitioners informs the thinking of powerful policy makers and funders.

Opportunity

We work directly with young people, innovating and delivering projects in partnership with youth clubs to create opportunities that a single community-based organisation working alone could not. We do this in London through programmes focused on sport, youth leadership, youth crime, employability and volunteering – and out of town at our two residential leadership and outdoor education centres, Hindleap Warren and Woodrow High House, where we also run a specialist disability programme, Activeventure.

Thanks

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