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# Social entrepreneurs' response to the UK riots

SocialFuture Roundtable, 13th September 2011

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The week of 7 August 2011 saw riots and disorder on our streets in cities across the UK. It also saw an exceptional response by social entrepreneurs and citizens, coming together to sort out the mess and offer ways to help solve the underlying problems. UnLtd, the Foundation for Social Entrepreneurs, has worked with many of the people – often from the communities and age groups most involved – who have a deep and personal understanding of the situation and possible solutions. We surveyed our social entrepreneurs who work in communities and discovered many had already started doing something proactive to help their communities recover.

We held a private roundtable with some of these proactive individuals, alongside other key policy makers and supporters. They heard first hand how people leading social and community ventures in the most disadvantaged areas of the country, believe they can contribute to building stronger, more cohesive communities. This led to the roundtable discussing potential solutions with those working at the grassroots.

What follows is a reflection of the many issues raised by participants in that discussion.

**We would like to give special thanks to the Institute of Directors for hosting the event, and all those who gave their valuable time and invaluable thoughts to create a deep and healthy debate.**

**For a copy of the survey results please go to:**

[http://www.unltd.org.uk/download/SE\\_Riot\\_Response\\_Aug11.pdf](http://www.unltd.org.uk/download/SE_Riot_Response_Aug11.pdf)

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# Cause and Effect

## Immediate action on the nights of the riots

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Two examples of immediate action on the nights of the riots were discussed. First, we heard about **preventative action** in Bolton. A social entrepreneur worked with community members to react quickly, going out on to the streets to listen to and talk with those who might otherwise have joined the rioting. These community members were proud of the reaction they encountered: “this is our time to prove we’ve changed”. There were no riots in Bolton that night or any other.

This was an example of a fast and powerful response, but **the secret to that speed and efficacy was the strong groundwork of trust** that had been built over a period of three years. This trust was built up through hard and often challenging work with gang members over the years, resulting in strong self created community groups, reduced unemployment and anti-social behaviour, as well as increased engagement in education and new community projects.

A different example of an immediate response was described by a young social entrepreneur working with other young people through music. Having lived in Tottenham all of her life, she was **out there on the day the riots took place**, recording an album with local young people. One recording artist suggested that they record a track there and then that offered a creative, non violent, expression of the feelings on the street.

## First hand analysis

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The social entrepreneurs in the room work at grass roots level and can provide insight into what happened. There was a feeling that the riots were an **expression of the anger** that young people have towards the police, and for the social issues they live with. This was something some participants felt had been undermined by the media portrayal and subsequent social comment.

Many felt that the riots were sustained by a feeling that if the Government can get away with corruption such as bank bail-outs, MPs’ expenses, then so could the people. Others agreed that there is a distinct difference between rioting and looting. **Initial violence was directed toward the police** in response to the protest to what happened to Mark Duggan. However, the initial violence also reflected a deep resentment towards the police for their perceived attitude towards young people, for example selective stop and searches.

One person identified an instance that was not reported by the media – an act of aggression towards a particular bank in Tottenham, which they felt was targeted due to anger towards the injustice of recent events in the banking sector.

The violence and the looting that followed fed on the energy of initial rioting. It was a reflection of both generalised anger and opportunist looting. There was anger because those involved **didn’t feel like they’d been listened to**, and the looting was **based on a perceived culture of taking what you want**.

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Through this conversation it became clear how social entrepreneurs working in their communities play a very important role, not just in direct action, but in highlighting **both initial and deeper causes** of the disorder. They have the authentic understanding of their communities plus a powerful motivation to bring communities together to create positive change.

## Why did some riot, whilst others didn't?

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We know people have individual agency - there is the capacity to decide not to riot. What are the factors which allow some to choose not to riot, even in the face of strong peer pressure?

We heard examples of work being done in riot hit communities by young social entrepreneurs who work with young people on building **self awareness and resilience**. One was working in schools, colleges and universities to raise the aspirations of BME youth. Another was using drama workshops to address issues experienced by young girls in gangs, creating a positive change in their thoughts and life decisions.

In many of cases around the table, **the people the social entrepreneurs worked most closely with had chosen not to take part** in the riots. This was a result of long term face to face engagement. Without this relationship there was no way of knowing who had got involved and no real possibility of preventing escalation if they had.

**“There are no short term solutions without a long term underpin.”**

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# So What Next?

## Building our future together

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What was striking to roundtable participants was the **depth of anger throughout society** in response to the riots. The current socio-economic climate means that a lot of people are suffering. This anger has rippled throughout society and resonates deeply. It is crucial to harness this emotion in a positive way to unite communities and build greater cohesion.

Social entrepreneurs noted that mainstream media gravitates to the negative rather than the positive. During the riots young people were portrayed as thugs, with those who were doing good seen as the exception. However, **thugs are not the norm**, the reality is the opposite.

One of the social entrepreneurs present told us how he is attempting to **provide an alternative media platform for youth to speak out positively**. However, it is a struggle to achieve the size and impact of mainstream media. After the riots the media wanted to hear from the young. Why is the voice of youth not heard on an ongoing basis? If young leaders were supported to scale up their ventures large platforms could be possible, thus redressing the balance.

It was feared that the kneejerk reaction to the riots from politicians and the criminal justice system may have forced a further wedge between generations, as well as between ethnic communities. **How do we get younger people to engage** with the politics which affect them? Do we need new structures and innovations, or should we work on existing infrastructure? How do we bring these groups back together?

### **“Riots polarise, work needs to be done to bring society together”**

In response to these questions, it was discussed how important it is to have **open and honest reconciliation** between young people and authority. A practical first step would be increased and **more supported mediation with authorities like the police**, alongside communication of expectations. These discussions would need to be held and mediated in schools, in charities or on people's own turf. We heard an example of this happening in Sandwell, where a social entrepreneur organised a successful Question Time style discussion bringing the police, local authority and government advisors together with young people, community workers and youth workers.

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## We all need to be parents

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Time will reveal who and why people took part, but what made them feel they had no stake in their communities? Why did people feel so uninhibited? The discussion identified that children inherit low levels of aspiration and insecurity from their parents; **parents lacked opportunities as children, and this tends to repeat itself**. For example, when barristers were dealing with the first wave of arrests, they found the parents of those convicted were not motivated to come to court with their children.

Contrast this with the humility and courage of the Birmingham father who lost his son. In this and other communities, there were examples of strong family interventions. Some young people feared their families far more than a police deterrent, and wouldn't dream of rioting. Where was this key inhibitor in the young people who did riot? Why was it missing in these young people? During the session we saw a film and heard a poignant point made by a young woman who identified how children are influenced by their surroundings. **"we as people need to be parents**.so when they see people living the fast life they understand the value of working hard "

**Click the URL to view- London Riots 2011: Young People's Perspective**  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojDpCBblo3w>

The same film showed another young man, an urban lawyer, describe the rioters as fruits of a tree - to make a sustainable difference you need to tackle the roots of the tree, not just take the short term measure of cutting off the fruit.

**"It is easier to destroy than to build, we need to teach them how to build and feel ownership as well as responsibility for their communities and their futures."**

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## Engagement – the fundamental pillar of intervention

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There is a **disconnect** between authorities and communities. Families who only survive on benefits have seen welfare cuts and rhetoric turn against them. They feel there is no respect for them.

Work is therefore needed to **build trust and respect between authorities and the whole community they serve**. In Glasgow there has been a lot of ambitious work to tackle negative gang culture with a dual approach of engagement and enforcement - starting a dialogue with gang members, engaging them to build positive communities, whilst still robustly enforcing the law. Could this be replicated elsewhere?

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## Local solutions based on local strengths

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How do we leverage power in communities? There is a lot to be learnt from observing the copycat nature of riots and indeed the copycat anti-riots. **How do we become as agile in creating the solutions as those who created the riots?**

One way would be to **recognise and support social entrepreneurs, people who lead**

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**through action.** We should empower people to scale up their impact and also create links between these leaders. A **network of these active social leaders could provide coherence and agility of response** to events like the riots.

So, what should be done differently by Government tomorrow? Roundtable participants suggested that they listen to people at grass roots level; look for existing strengths in the community and build from them; engage people over the long term; and support existing social leaders.

Currently there is a general and inevitable move away from large-scale structures. Within Government there is an increasing stress on localism: local diagnosis and interventions. The coming months will see Government concentrating on social policy, and within that the focus will be on responsibility: personal, social, collective – and this has backing from across the political spectrum.

**Here is the opportunity for social entrepreneurs.**

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# Summary:

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- \* Long term work is needed within damaged communities to build trust as well as confidence, capacity and opportunity for positive change
- \* Successful long term projects need to be connected to legitimate authorities who have power and resources to make a large scale difference
- \* Leaders, even gang leaders, are leaders for a reason. Engaging them in driving positive change is a key, powerful catalyst
- \* We need to recognise the anger felt on all sides – the poor and disadvantaged, the ordinary citizens who were scared by the violence and the shopkeepers and residents who were harmed
- \* Strong emotions can be channelled and there is a great opportunity to bring people together in a common cause to build and improve
- \* We need to recognise, in a society full of family breakdown, that there is a need for everyone to be a parent
- \* Media is changing – authentic and responsive news sources have proved to be both viral and local in nature
- \* Social entrepreneurs and social leaders are agile and can act as quickly as the rioters and looters

**Solutions lie within communities, with the people stepping forward to create channels and opportunities for reconciliation.**

**Authorities can harness this positive power by legitimising and supporting action at community level, creating an environment for community driven positive change.**

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## List of Attendees

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<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Alex Mitchell	Institute of Directors
Cliff Prior	UnLtd
Colin Bloom	Conservative Christian Fellowship
Dharmendra Kanani	Big Lottery Fund
Jesse Peters	Youth Prospects
Judith McNeill	Comic Relief
Katharine Danton	UnLtd
Liz Douglas	Personal and Community Development CIC
Nick Carey	ACEVO
Nick Starkey	Office of Civil Society
Paul Matthews	S.A.Y. (Serious About Youth)
Pearl Amoateng	Let's be Positive
Rachel Shand	Change of Thoughts
Richard Kuti	Young, Black & Successful
Sebastian Thiel	Its Upshot
Simon Marcus	Boxing Academy
Steve Moore	Big Society Network
Stuart Hoggan	Department for Communities and Local Government
Yasmin Waljee	Hogan Lovells

This report is on a roundtable conversation. Although these notes follow the thread of the conversation some points have been moved around to allow the reader to get a better sense of the themes discussed.

**Author: Katharine Danton**

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# Appendix

## Social Entrepreneurs

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### **Liz Douglas - “The Roots Project” Personal and Community Development CIC**

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Liz is a successful and highly motivated business woman who herself has come from a deprived community in Bolton, an area of which she is very proud.

Personal and Community Development is a Community Interest Company providing comprehensive personal, social, emotional and academic programmes to individuals and groups within the community as part of a social regeneration model. Her project was piloted on an estate in Bolton that was known for its high levels of anti-social behaviour, isolation, drugs, burglary, knife and gun crime. She set out a 2 year community development programme which aimed at breaking down pecking orders within gangs and working with young people. Liz invited community and gang members to be part of the project from day one and took direction from them about what was needed and what would work. Over this 2 year period, anti-social behaviour dropped by 50%, unemployment by 5%, over 100 residents returned to education and 5 new community projects were established.

Liz was very proactive when the riots broke out in London, rallying project members and getting community leaders to join her out in their communities to speak with people to make it clear why they should not get involved. They responded by seeing it as an opportunity to prove they have changed. Bolton did not experience the public disorder seen in other parts of the country. Liz strongly believes the success of the approach taken at this time was only possible due to the long term work undertaken in that community for the previous 2 years.

[www.developingpeople.org.uk](http://www.developingpeople.org.uk)

### **Pearl Amoateng - Let's Be Positive**

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Pearl is 22 years old and has lived in Tottenham, North London, all her life. She has always been keen to make a positive and long lasting difference in her local area. She was elected a member of the local youth committee when she was 14, and went on to be the chair a few years later. She has also been involved in international projects, meeting politicians and young people in countries such as Sweden and China to discuss best practice and devise working solutions to recurring problems. Pearl helped establish Let's Be Positive in 2003 and is currently running a music and animation project called AniMuzik.

The AniMuzik project focuses on creating music and poems based on positivity. It helps young people to have more positive mentalities, steering them away from anti social activity and gang culture and giving them an opportunity to be a positive figure within the community.

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Issues such as sexual health, leading a positive life as a young person and unifying young people from all parts of London, whatever their postcode, are also tackled. The proceeds from albums created through the project are reinvested back into the project.

Pearl and her team were recording an album in the centre of Tottenham when the riots took place. One of the tracks on the album reflects this as one of the artists suggested they should respond to the riots through the project. They are currently working on a video to accompany the track.

### **Rachel Shand - Change of Thoughts**

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Rachel's own personal experience has been an important part in developing Change of Thoughts. Her life to date has included teenage pregnancy, dating older boys, being in a gang, peer pressure, being bullied and other life challenging experiences. Based in Lewisham, Rachel has used these experiences to help others in similar situations through her programme.

Change of Thoughts is a series of 10 drama based workshops, delivered in schools, which explore some key issues which young teenagers are exposed to. The programme is designed for young adults aged 11-19 and uses open discussion and drama based practices to explore these areas and develop skills to deal with the pressures teens face. As Rachel says, "young people don't naturally have negative attitudes, a minority do, this spreads – they live in chaotic worlds. Change of Thoughts helps them realise that positivity breeds positivity. We steer them away from gangs, criminality, helping them choose the right path."

Rachel was in London during the recent riots and understands the people involved in them. She sees mediation between communities and police, and opportunities for a positive future for those involved in rioting, as crucial to finding long term solutions.

### **Paul Matthews - SAY (Serious About Youth)**

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Paul lives in Croydon and set up Serious About Youth (SAY) in 2008 with his childhood friend Rommell Wallace. Having always wanted to be an engineer, Paul graduated in 2003 with a Masters in Aeronautical Engineering and now works as a design consultant in an architectural firm. His portfolio includes several award winning buildings as well as the stadiums that helped Qatar win their World Cup bid in 2022. Paul is regularly invited to talk at high schools as a BME role model and is passionate about motivating, supporting and guiding young people to a positive future.

SAY is a youth-focused organisation based in London that strives to make a real difference to the lives of young people. They specialise in developing and delivering creative, fun and interactive life skills workshops that challenge, engage and empower. The workshops cover topics such as effective communication, conflict resolution, attitude, interpersonal skills and creative thinking. They encourage participants to make positive life choices, utilising relevant, effective resources such as contemporary poetry, popular youth music, role models and multimedia.

Paul believes the riots, and consequent actions by the authorities, have forced a wedge between different generations and different communities. SAY workshops support Aim 2 of the National Curriculum, and reflect the increased focus on developing social and emotional skills. Consequently, they help schools to fulfil the Ofsted criteria to promote

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community cohesion and assist with the implementation of the PLTS framework.

[www.say-youth.org](http://www.say-youth.org)

### **Jesse Peters - Youth Prospects**

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Jesse Peters established Haringey Warriors Youth Organisation in Tottenham in November 2001. He was awarded the Whitbread Young Achievers Award 2005 for his work founding and developing the organisation, now known as Youth Prospects.

In ten years the organisation has grown to have over 2500 registered members and is delivering over 20 hours a week of provision for young people (aged 8-30), across 7 North London Boroughs (Haringey, Hackney, Waltham Forest, Enfield, Islington, Camden, Barnet). The organisation delivers services for disadvantaged young people in a variety of settings and works to improve life, social and economic skills, job opportunities, equality of opportunity, access to sport and dance and combating knife and gun crime and gangs. The organisation has received prominent recognition for its achievements and the continued growth it experiences is testament to its ability to attract, keep and motivate young people.

Jesse believes community entrepreneurs make significant impact on a local level and that effective support is the key to ensure sustainability. However, to achieve positive long term change, good infrastructure is essential, with clear routes out of deprivation to self sustainability.

[www.youthprospects.co.uk](http://www.youthprospects.co.uk)

### **Sebastian Thiel – Its Upshot**

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20 years old, Zambian born and London-raised Sebastian Thiel set up Its Upshot, a fashion and entertainment business, after his dreams of becoming a basketball star were dashed due to scholarship funding problems. He was awarded The Mini Mogul title in 2008 for his entrepreneurial flair, and featured as a 'Mover and Shaker of 2011' on the front cover of The Voice early this year. He was also one of 6 Virgin Pioneers chosen to meet Richard Branson in June 2011.

ItsUpshot was created from a clothing line of popular slogan t-shirts, dubbed "conversation starters" because of their provocative messages. Sebastian now also has an online television channel and community projects which seek to challenge negativity within youth culture. ItsUpshot is about aiming high and standing tall despite hurdles and obstacles placed in front of you. The target symbol within the logo is illustrative of this notion; aiming for a positive outcome.

Sebastian feels young people need an alternative, attractive and effective media platform to speak out. When the riots happened, the media wanted to know what young people wanted to say. Sebastian believes this should have been asked before, and on an ongoing basis.

[www.itsupshot.com](http://www.itsupshot.com)

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## **Richard Kuti, YBS (Young Black & Successful)**

Richard lives in Bromley. He was President of London South Bank University Students Union until June this year and now is a Black Student Campaign Committee member for the NUS. He also is part of the Black Leadership Engagement Network for the Olympics in 2012. He founded YBS in 2009.

Young, Black and Successful CIC (YBS) is a social enterprise run by young people with the purpose of empowering BME youth, and making a positive impact on the BME community in the UK. They create innovative media, events and programming that seek to challenge the representation of BME young people in the media whilst also creating training programmes and opportunities that tackle real issues that BME youth face. These programs include seminars, showcases, short documentaries, an interactive website, online TV programmes on subjects such as knife crime, media, communication, employment, policy & politics and enterprise. They have over 40 volunteers aged 16 - 25 who help to deliver in universities, colleges and communities across the UK. Their latest initiative is the Great Debate Tour that will use a panel and audience 'question time' format with BME students in universities throughout the UK to debate key issues, including the recent riots.

**[www.ybsgroup.co.uk](http://www.ybsgroup.co.uk)**