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The Network Newsletter: tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries

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The Network's Website is at www.seapn.org.uk and includes information on courses, good practice, specific socially excluded groups, as well as the newsletter archive.

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The Riots, August 2011

Everybody has a view, especially on the causes, varying from poverty to greed, crime to deprivation¹, clothes and style², race – in fact, almost everything to do with modern society³.

¹ See, for example, the reporting by the BBC of the Ministry of Justice's figures, "One in four riot suspects had 10 previous offences", offset by a more questioning analysis by their Home Affairs Correspondent, Dominic Casciani, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14926322>.

² John Bird "Fashion has become a weapon on the streets of London", *The Independent*, 15 August, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/john-bird-fashion-has-become-a-weapon-on-the-streets-of-london-2337838.html>.

This brief article aims to pull together some of the more thoughtful responses, and concludes with a look at how our sector is responding.

Many of the responses have been 'knee-jerk'. As Kevin Harris shrewdly observed:

"The past week's disorders in English cities involved a range of different behaviours – collective protest, rioting, wanton violence, vandalism, arson, intimidation, theft, opportunistic looting, and organised looting. A wide range of people of different ages, backgrounds and ethnicities were involved. So it's *obviously* rash to generalise. But that wouldn't stop the dominant broadcast media and politicians from insisting on doing so. TV presenters have been taking it in turns to ask 'Who's to blame?' As if it were a quiz question. The bland insistence on over-simplifying complex issues is irresponsible and contributes to the problem."⁴

There is an urgent need to get beyond the simplistic responses to look at more complex causes:

"The acts of violence are not one dimensional and there are many questions to be answered about their causes. Simply blaming these events on cuts to public services risks letting violent criminals off the hook and does not help the communities involved. Equally, we must take a strong look at issues around unemployment, poverty and engagement in communities to ensure solutions to these form part of the re-building process."⁵

"Now, is it true that these riots are totally different to the riots of the early to mid nineteen eighties. The fact is, in most of their features, they are astonishingly similar. I witnessed the Liverpool 8 riots. If anyone believes the racism, poverty and unequal prospects faced by many is ancient history they are living in a dream world. We have made strides in restoring some of our inner cities but it has been slow progress and many areas have been barely touched. Worse still, many beneficiaries of this relative improvement are aware that, with the advent of austerity Britain, that progress is beginning to stutter and roll backwards."⁶

Toby Blume argues that, in some ways, we are all to blame:

³ See: <http://www.carmanvalleyleader.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=3290375>. Thanks to Ken Williment for sending this link.

⁴ Kevin Harris "The suspension of civilisation: disturbances in England, August 2011", *Neighbourhoods*, 14 August, <http://neighbourhoods.typepad.com/neighbourhoods/2011/08/temporary-suspension-of-civilisation.html>.

⁵ National Council for Voluntary Youth Services "Statement on involvement of young people in riots 6-9 August 2011", http://www.ncvys.org.uk/blogs.php?act=view_topic&id=234.

⁶ Alan Gibbons "Riots: explaining, not justifying", *Alan Gibbons' Blog*, 11 August, <http://alangibbons.net/?p=12212>.

“The riots are as much a judgment on those of us who look on at what is happening for allowing this situation to have arisen as it is on the perpetrators of the violence. I am not condoning the violence or suggesting that we are as guilty as the rioters. What I mean is the deep disconnection from society that we see today is an indictment on all of us and the society we have created (or stood back and allowed to happen). We must all take responsibility for addressing these problems.”⁷

There is also a growing recognition that the riots were not a great surprise; for example, Sue Marsh⁸ has identified that the following:

- The police
- A senior economist at HSBC
- The Governor of the Bank of England
- The Archbishop of Canterbury
- Nick Clegg
- Youth workers in some of the affected areas

had all predicted that riots were possible, even probable.

The reality of life at “street level” has been highlighted in a much-quoted piece by Camila Batmanghelidjh⁹:

“Working at street level in London, over a number of years, many of us have been concerned about large groups of young adults creating their own parallel antisocial communities with different rules. The individual is responsible for their own survival because the established community is perceived to provide nothing. Acquisition of goods through violence is justified in neighbourhoods where the notion of dog eat dog pervades and the top dog survives the best. The drug economy facilitates a parallel subculture with the drug dealer producing more fiscally efficient solutions than the social care agencies who are too under-resourced to compete.”¹⁰

In addition, there is growing focus on inequality in the UK and the effect this is having. For example, the Equality Trust, in their recent *Research Digest*^{11, 12}, reports that:

⁷ Toby Blume “Riots, responsibility and rebuilding”, <http://tobyblume.posterous.com/riots-responsibility-and-rebuilding>.

⁸ Sue Marsh “Who DIDN’T predict a riot?”, *LabourList*, 16 August, <http://www.labourlist.org/who-didnt-predict-a-riot>. This piece was picked up and developed by Michael Burke for *Socialist Economic Bulletin*, 17 August, <http://socialisteconomicbulletin.blogspot.com/2011/08/social-unrest-and-government-policy.html>. Thanks to *Alan Gibbons’ Blog*, 18 August, for alerting me to this – see: <http://alangibbons.net/?p=12347>.

⁹ Founder of Kids Company, <http://www.kidsco.org.uk/>.

¹⁰ Camila Batmanghelidjh “Caring costs, but so do riots”, *The Independent*, 9 August, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/camila-batmanghelidjh-caring-costs-ndash-but-so-do-riots-2333991.html>.

¹¹ *The Equality Trust Research Digest: Trends & Measures*, no.2, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (310.9 kb) from: <http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/docs/research-digest-trends-measures-final.pdf>.

- “UK income inequality increased by 32% between 1960 and 2005. During the same period, it increased by 23% in the USA, and in Sweden decreased by 12%.
- In the 1960s Sweden and the UK had similar levels of income inequality. By 2005 the gap between the two had increased by 28%.
- Since the 1980s income inequality in the United States and the UK has increased substantially and has returned to levels not seen since the 1920s.” [p1]

The Equality Trust supports this with further evidence¹³, drawn from research developed as a part of and subsequent to the publication of *The spirit level*¹⁴.

JRF has just published a summary¹⁵ of the evidence they have found in their work in some of the UK’s most deprived neighbourhoods; as they say:

“This summary of evidence cannot explain exactly why these riots happened. However, as policy-makers develop responses to the riots, we believe that solid evidence on their social context is crucial. We are taking the opportunity to review this extensive body of research. This is a vital chance to present a picture of life in our poorer neighbourhoods: the problems that exist in these areas; the challenges of living and working there; the misconceptions and stereotypes that must be confronted; questions about representation and participation in society; and the need to give appropriate services to these communities.” [p2]

The key messages from this review of evidence are:

- “Our most excluded neighbourhoods may be characterised by acute tensions and problems, but they are not ‘broken’ or ‘dislocated’. Most residents living there share values and aspirations similar to the rest of us: fairness, hard work and responsibility.
- There is potential in all low-income neighbourhoods for active citizenship, organising and achieving remarkable results.
- However, these communities often experience great difficulty in developing leadership, winning effective political representation and influence with the outside world.
- Consequently there need to be affordable, consistent support and advice services for community organisations in deprived communities. This support needs funding that does not fluctuate in relation to changes in policy.

¹² Noted in *The Network Ebulletin*, 86, 30 August, http://www.seapn.org.uk/content_files/files/networkbulletin_next_no.86.doc.

¹³ See, for example: <http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/why/evidence/child-well-being>; <http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/why/evidence/trust-and-community-life>.

¹⁴ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. *The spirit level: why equality is better for everyone*. Penguin, 2010.

¹⁵ John Low. *The riots: what are the lessons from JRF’s work in communities?* JRF, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (127 kb) from: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/riots-community-lessons-summary.pdf>.

- Plans and projects need to work with the great complexity and diversity in deprived neighbourhoods. Failure to do this risks rejection by sections of the population and so could see such projects becoming unworkable from the start.
- A high priority for residents is to develop effective activities for, and engage with, young people. The efforts of community groups working with very challenging young people need greater recognition and support. Every effort must be made to support youth services ...
- In relationship to partnership working, Government could be more even-handed in recognising the work of *all* sectors, including local authorities. The challenges of stabilising and regenerating our most excluded communities remain immense: the contribution of all sectors must be recognised and supported.” [p7]

New research¹⁶ from the “Ethics and Integrity” project suggests that mistrust of politicians may well also be a cause; they found that:

“... both economic deprivation and personal moral values help to explain attitudes toward illegal behaviour but citizens' mistrust of political leaders and their disengagement from public affairs are also an important factor. The findings suggest that politicians who want to provide moral leadership need to do so through their actions as well as their words.” [p1]¹⁷

In addition, more new research, this time by Nottingham Trent University¹⁸, found that only some 17% of 18-year-olds felt positive about political parties, whilst 81% held a negative view.

Things may become clearer once the Government panel, which has been set up to investigate the causes, reports (early findings in November, final report next March)¹⁹.

Examples of positive responses

- Peace Direct²⁰ have published “London Riots – East End Youth against the Riots”²¹ which focuses on showing a different face of young people.

¹⁶ Sarah Birch and Nicholas Allen. *‘There will be burning and a-looting tonight’: The social and political correlates of law-breaking*. University of Essex/Royal Holloway, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (210 kb) from: <http://www.essex.ac.uk/government/ethicsandintegrity/>.

¹⁷ Source: Andrew Grice “Riots stoked by mistrust of politicians, says report”, *The Independent*, 30 August, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/riots-stoked-by-mistrust-of-politicians-says-report-2345856.html>.

¹⁸ Matt Henn and Nick Foard. *Young people and politics in Britain: how do young people participate in politics and what can be done to strengthen their political connection? Executive summary*. Nottingham Trent University, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (226.29 kb) from: <http://www.citizen.org.uk/admin/uploaded/Young%20People%20and%20Politics%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>.

¹⁹ See: http://www.cypnow.co.uk/go/youth_justice/article/1088715/darra-singh-chair-riots-probe/.

There is also a link to the “Truce 2020” project which “is for young people aged between 16-21 years old who live in the borough of Newham and would like to make a positive change in their community.”^{22, 23}

- National Council for Voluntary Youth Services have set up a Facebook campaign, “Not in my name”²⁴, posting photos of young people emphasising the point that most young people did not riot
- Maggie Atkinson, the Children’s Commissioner for England, has stressed that the majority of people who took part in the riots were adults, and not children as some parts of the media had suggested²⁵
- Members of the Young NCB, the National Children’s Bureau’s young people’s network, feel that young people have been unfairly represented, and have produced a series of brief statements²⁶ and a YouTube video, “Challenging Representations”²⁷
- Just in case you haven’t seen this, the project, “Somewhere to_” is working to “help young people find the space they need to do the things they love within sport, culture and the arts.”²⁸ This might also be an avenue for us to explore in developing positive links with young people.²⁹
- Research in Practice³⁰ have focused on how to improve engagement with young people³¹.

Libraries and museums

- A “Wall of Love” made up of messages posted in Peckham, south London, following recent rioting, is to be preserved at Peckham Library as a permanent display.³²
- *Teen Librarian* is gathering examples of positive library work with young people, which Matthew Imrie will publish (probably as a CD) – if you

²⁰ Peace Direct is an organisation supporting local resolution of conflict – see:

<http://www.peacedirect.org/>.

²¹ See: <http://www.peacedirect.org/london-riots/>.

²² See: <http://www.truce2020.org/about/>.

²³ Source: email from refed, <http://www.refugeeducation.co.uk/mailling.htm>.

²⁴ See:

<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.192570047474496.51394.143181745746660>.

²⁵ See: http://www.cypnow.co.uk/Joint_working/article/1085063/childrens-commissioner-seeks-counter-riot-misconceptions/?DCMP=EMC-CONCYPNow%20Daily.

²⁶ See: http://www.ncb.org.uk/campaigning/media_news/2011/jul-dec/riots_young_ncb_members_speak.aspx.

²⁷ See:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/WatchNCB#p/c/51A30928B013EF55/0/JkYmuDhIOZc>.

²⁸ See: <http://www.somewhereto.com/>.

²⁹ Thanks to Colin Bray (Devon) for alerting me to this.

³⁰ Research in Practice (<http://www.rip.org.uk/>) is a registered charity, established in 1996 – a department within the Social Justice programme of the Dartington Hall Trust and working in a unique collaboration with the Association of Directors of Children’s Services. Their mission is to build the capacity for evidence-informed practice in children’s services.

³¹ *Youth: the whole picture*. Research in Practice, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (785 kb) from: <http://www.rip.org.uk/component/content/article/409>.

³² See: <http://alangibbons.net/?p=12327>.

would like to contribute, or would like further information, contact:
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- The *Museums Journal*³³ has reported a couple of examples where museums have been re-looking at the programming as a result of the riots:
 - Bruce Castle Museum in Tottenham already has an exhibition running, "Broadwater Farm Exhibition – Heroes and Homemakers"³⁴ (which runs until March 2012), and are now planning a project called "Forgotten Gangs", which will focus on giving a voice to those young people who are not in gangs, reflecting a positive image for young people in the area.
 - The Museum of Liverpool is also addressing the recent riots with an interactive exhibit in the People's Republic Gallery that will gather visitor responses to the unrest. The *MJ* article also reports that another Museum of Liverpool project, "The Secret Life of Smithdown Road"³⁵, "has seen a number of comments on its Facebook page comparing and contrasting this week's unrest with riots in the area in the 1980s."
- In a powerful piece of advocacy³⁶ in *The Independent*, Boyd Tonkin argues:

"If it wished to rebuild mutual trust, social capital and motives for hope and change in the riot-wrecked streets of a nation's cities, where might a truly idealistic society begin? ...

I know and have heard all the possible objections to a view of local libraries that puts them at the heart of community renewal. Potential rioters and looters don't care about them anyway. To enter a library in the first place identifies a young person as part of the solution, not the problem. Feral teens who trash the shops will not take an interest in the library until the day dawns when it agrees to stock top-brand sportswear and flat-screen TVs.

Perhaps, just for once, a sharpened sense of desperation might open political and media eyes to something other than plausible cynicism. If the local library system did not already stand, it would take uncountable billions to build. It serves (or did, until the cuts) many of those neighbourhoods bypassed and shunned by other amenities. Libraries are not schools, or courts, or job centres, or social-services outstations. At their best they embody an ideal of voluntary personal development and civic solidarity that few other sites could ever hope to match."

³³ Patrick Steel "Museums respond to riots". *Museums Journal* [online], 12 August, <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/12082011-museums-respond-to-riots>.

³⁴ See: <http://www.broadwaterfarm.info/>.

³⁵ See: <https://www.facebook.com/smithdownroad>.

³⁶ Boyd Tonkin "Not one more library must close", *The Independent*, 12 August, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/boyd-tonkin-not-one-more-library-must-close-2335952.html>.

If you are involved in, or know of, other positive initiatives from within our sector, do let me know, and I can include information about them in the September Newsletter.

Did you see ...?

Clearway

The Urban Forum magazine has just gone online – the first issue published in this way³⁷ includes some very useful items, eg:

- “Open for business”, a critique of the Open Public Services White Paper [pp4-5]
 - A series of articles about commissioning [p6-10].
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Tackling social exclusion – Other Agencies

Work, society and lifelong literacy ...

NIACE have just published the report³⁸ of their year-long inquiry (chaired by Lord Boswell of Aynho) into adult literacy in England, which looked particularly at the impact of the Skills for Life Strategy, introduced in 2001.

The main conclusions include:

“Some challenges relate to **equipping teachers**; others to our inability to **join up policies, practices and partnerships** across departmental and organisational silos. The evidence suggests that those adults with some of the lower levels of achievement, in the most challenging situations and with the biggest barriers to overcome have benefited least in the past. We cannot rely entirely on investment in schools to remove the challenges; the complexity of issues is testimony to that. **Family approaches must be supported, advocated and extended. Older people can find it difficult** to be motivated to engage in learning, because provision does not appear relevant or convincing. Fostering a **positive attitude to lifelong learning**, in order that individuals and organisations can tap into learning at any life stage or life context, is vital.

³⁷ *Clearway*, 74, Summer 2011 [in error, the magazine itself says it is “Summer 2010”]. Available to download as a pdf (1680 kb) from:

http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/files/ufpublic/clearway_74_4_final.pdf.

³⁸ *Work, society and lifelong literacy: report of the inquiry into adult literacy in England*. NIACE, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (938.1 kb) from:

<http://www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/publications/Literacy%20Inquiry%20-%20Full%20report-WEB.pdf>.

Opportunities arise through partnerships and using new technologies. They emerge in different locations and organisations, supported by volunteers acting as buddies or mentors, under the guidance of well qualified and passionate teachers. Challenging schools, employers, trades unions and government agencies as well as voluntary organisations to work together can be exciting, demanding but rewarding.

We conclude that we must **review and change systems and processes as well as stimulate participation**. We must **continue to research** and discover what works best and for whom and to reveal the evidence of the impact literacy learning makes on individuals, families, their workplaces and society. Nudging people who are close to attaining required literacy levels, but also scooping deeper to engage those who might be disillusioned, detached and demoralised are essential.” [p15, emphasises theirs]

They then recommend the following:

1. “The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) must work with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), local authorities, further education colleges and providers, higher education and professional bodies to raise the standards of teaching and learning.
2. The Department for Education (DfE), working with BIS and local authorities, must help to break the cycles of intergenerational difficulties with literacy through family literacy and learning programmes.
3. BIS and DfE, working with employers, trades unions and civil society organisations, should explore environments, opportunities and pedagogies which reach and respond to those who are currently under-represented in provision.
4. BIS should lead on optimising effective organisational processes and structures, which help to join up policies and provision and ensure adequate resourcing.
5. BIS should support the development of a range of measures to identify and record success.
6. BIS must work with the media to raise awareness, demand and motivation to support cross-sector initiatives and build upon research.
7. BIS should work with research and development organisations to carry out more research, in particular about how to reach those most in need.”³⁹

Our sector does get several positive mentions:

“Housing, welfare, employment, health, libraries and financial support agencies have key roles to play in networks of agencies and organisations concerned with adult literacy learning challenges and opportunities. More and better **Information, Advice and Guidance**,

³⁹ Taken from: http://www.niace.org.uk/news/inquiry%E2%80%99s-recommendations-to-improve-adult-literacy?src=fp1st-more&utm_source=http%3a%2f%2flists.niace.org.uk%2f%2f&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=175NIACEbulletin20Sept82011&utm_term=NIACE%20Ebulletin%20Sept2011&utm_content=95162.

would assist such networks, but providers and practitioners need the time to make them work.” [p12, emphasis theirs]

“There are some exemplary organisations [as cooperative partners] including libraries, museums and galleries; some health providers; trades unions and Union Learning Representatives as well as Community Learning Champions.” [p14]

“BIS must work with the media to raise awareness, demand and motivation to:

... build upon research about learning champions, national celebrity champions, Union Learning Representatives, libraries and museums staff and intermediaries to recruit, educate and train local Community Learning Champions and mentors/buddies from business and commerce ...” [p18]

This is a major report in terms of identifying just where England has got to with the Skills for Life Strategy and what gaps there still are⁴⁰; as Carol Taylor, Director of Development and Research at NIACE, is quoted as saying:

“These recommendations, made after months of listening, examining and discussing the evidence from tutors, learners, researchers and policy-makers, must be implemented if we are to achieve the vision of a literate nation for all.”⁴¹

Abbreviations and acronyms

JRF = Joseph Rowntree Foundation

NIACE = National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

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⁴⁰ The National Literacy Trust has particularly welcomed the focus on family learning in the report – see: http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/news/3874_focus_on_family_learning_in_adult_literacy_inquiry.

⁴¹ Taken from: http://www.niace.org.uk/news/inquiry%E2%80%99s-recommendations-to-improve-adult-literacy?src=fp1st-more&utm_source=http%3a%2f%2flists.niace.org.uk%2f%2f&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=175NIACEbulletin20Sept82011&utm_term=NIACE%20Ebulletin%20Sept2011&utm_content=95162.