

A large-scale community event: the Notting Hill Carnival, London, England

Factbox

Notting Hill Carnival, London.

Annual celebration with parades and music.

Comprising five disciplines: Mas' (Masquerade), Calypso, Pan (steel bands), static sound systems and Soca (a blend of soul and calypso).

Attracts some 1.3 million people; the August event is at the heart of six weeks of related events.

Background

In 1958, a series of racist attacks in Nottingham is thought to have triggered other incidents around Britain and to have prompted the Notting Hill riots in London. The following year, Claudia Jones (the Trinidad-born editor of the West Indian Gazette) is credited with organizing a Caribbean carnival at St Pancras Town Hall, as a response to the riots and the BBC broadcast the event on its 'Six Five Special' television programme. In the mid-1960s Rhuane Laslett, apparently unaware of the annual Caribbean carnival – now held in Seymour Hall and the Lyceum – organized an outdoor carnival procession as part of the Notting Hill Summer Festival. This small procession, starting from Acklam Road (with costumes borrowed from Madam Tussauds) attracted about 1000 people and is generally seen as the start of the modern Notting Hill Carnival.

The event has gradually expanded and is now seen as one of Europe's largest open-air carnivals, although attendance has varied from 1.4 million in 2002 to 600,000 in 2003, when the number of people attending was less than the 900,000 who attended the Zurich Love Parade (www.streetparade.ch). It is such a firm fixture on the calendar that it took a central role in Queen Elizabeth's Golden Jubilee parade during 2002. Still focused around Portobello Green, it features live music and bands drawn from cultures all over the world; the August public holiday parades are the main focus of a series of events stretching over six weeks.

Progress

The carnival takes place over the last Sunday and Monday in August, and parades, processions and music attract a throng of visitors and celebrants. It is no surprise that during its existence the celebrations have been the cause both of community cohesion and community disharmony. The sheer volume of visitors can place great strain on the fabric and infrastructure of the very community that they have come to be part of. Attempts to fund-raise to cover some operating costs have frequently been through sponsorship, which came to provide over half of the income of the Carnival Trust (NHCT), so much so that this prompted a backlash, and a curb on large-scale advertising by sponsors was announced.

The carnival has developed from a relatively small, community-based event to a major feature of London's summer calendar. During its existence, it has been the focus of community will, community cohesion, community celebration and, occasionally, community issues and community anger. Now much respected, the carnival has had its ups and downs. Large numbers of people interacting together are largely peaceful, but occasionally there have been violent incidents, sometimes not helped, in the past, by incompetent policing. In 1976, a riot at the Notting Hill Festival is said to have left some 400 constables injured. Images of the police defending themselves with dustbin lids and milk crates prompted an increased police presence and changed tactics at future carnivals. By 2001, policing the almost entirely peaceful Notting Hill Carnival involved about 10,000 officers deployed over the two days, alongside 600 carnival stewards. Nowadays, the carnival attracts more than a million people, many of whom are tourists coming to experience the spectacle. This puts some strain on the local infra-structure, such as public transport, toilets and emergency services, but the local authorities have become more practised in the event, and public services are better geared for it than in its early days.

A turbulent period for the management and governance of the Carnival Trust ended in 2002, when Chris Mullard became chairman. The Carnival Funders Group (CFG) comprising the Arts Council of England, Association of London Government, Greater London Authority, London Arts and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea kept a close view on these organizational changes. Mr Mullard argued that the priorities were:

1. That the carnival should transcend groups and individuals
2. To demonstrate the carnival was good for London and that London was good for the carnival
3. To provide a vision of a multicultural and diverse London.

Some view changes such as regulating the sound systems, which close down at 7pm, and the secondment of a police sergeant to the Trust, as evidence of increasing professionalism; others see them as further evidence of the event moving away from the community and becoming just another 'corporate event'.

Questions based on this case:

Examine a community-based event in your local area.

1. What benefits does the event bring, in social and economic terms?
2. What evidence is there of community cohesion or community disharmony about the event?
3. How effective is the balance between community involvement and the input of professional agencies?

Websites:

Related websites for those interested in the Notting Hill Carnival:

www.nottinghillcarnival.biz

www.rbkc.gov.uk/nottinghill

For more pictures of the Notting Hill Carnival see:

www.flickr.com

Case Notes

Social benefits include goodwill, public happiness, social inclusion etc. Economic benefits events may make a profit which can be used to keep a club or society going, to donate to charity, or to use for a philanthropic purpose. It partly depends on the type of event – you can use different events to compare the various effects.

“Economic Impact” is a term which we often associate with large-scale events, but may also have some small-scale implications. Remember that local events are often small-scale, they are put on for simple enjoyment – they may have and actually do not even need to have, the slightest economic impact or economic benefit. Also bear in mind that economic benefit might simply mean raising enough money to buy a tree to plant or a bench to put in the town square. On the other hand, it might be about proving employment on a small scale - for example to raise enough money to pay a part time cleaner for the village hall. In terms of negative effects these vary. Small events tend to have few or no negative effects (otherwise there would be no point doing them) except the need to tidy up. However, bigger events may have issues such as the need for grounds restoration (gardening or re-seeding), also litter (recycling collection requirements), they may use energy, they may generate short term noise (such as clapping or music), they may generate traffic, and the need for police or stewards in large numbers. Remember you are never going to eliminate negative effects completely, any more than you can avoid washing up and tidying up after a dinner party.

Communities often have strong social ties which events help to sustain - you attend an event, meet friends and people you know, and events offer a forum for informal discussions and creativity. However, events alone would not be enough to sustain the economic and social life of a community, because events are only one aspect of community life, there have to be other, perhaps more routine things which help sustain a community. For example, social, hobby, or leisure clubs, activities and sports and a whole range of ordinary things which sustain communities, including going to the shop or having a drink with friends – it is not just about events. The balance of community involvement versus professional input may not be an issue at all – some events are entirely community organised, some entirely professionally organised. Where both are operating together, it is important to be clear who is the lead group - relations between volunteers and paid staff may be delicate.