

Notting Hill Carnival Legal Observing Project

The event and our purpose

Project Empower (“PE”) and North Kensington Law Centre (“NKLC”) teamed together to create an independent legal observer group to attend Notting Hill Carnival. The Notting Hill Carnival is an annual event that has taken place in North Kensington since 1966. The zeitgeist on Caribbean culture attracts around one million people annually. However, the event has been subject to controversy on public order issues. There is an undeniable reality that there a minority of individuals who attend Carnival not to enjoy it but to further their own selfish agendas of criminal activity. These few individuals have led to some members of the authorities declaring that the Carnival may not be safe, and as a result, they apply pressure to either have it moved or stopped entirely.

There have been numerous reports of police officers crossing the boundaries of doing their duty and being needlessly aggressive towards BAME individuals at a Carnival that celebrates and promotes ethnic diversity. However, it is worth noting that Ishmahil Blagrove, author of the book *Carnival: A Photographic and Testimonial History of the Notting Hill Carnival* has stated that the Notting Hill Carnival is not just the second largest carnival in the world – it is one of the safest. The police play a crucial role at Carnival and we do not dispute their necessity. Conversely, our goal during this project was to work alongside the police and the community to build bridges between them – a bond which has been damaged by the Grenfell and Windrush scandals. Our aim during this project was to inform attendees of their rights whilst maintaining the Carnival spirit by making sure that it carries on being the safest of its kind.

Statistics show that crime and violence have decreased from the 2017 Carnival, while paradoxically the arrests have increased. The North Kensington Law Centre has had many clients complain of individual police officers overstepping the mark at Carnival. Therefore, we felt that it is our responsibility as lawyers, legal volunteers and law students in the community to protect the human rights and civil liberties of the local community and those who come to Carnival to enjoy the event.

Before the event

PE and NKLC sent out invitation letters to universities and organisations invited them to take part in this project. Our final group was made up of approximately 30 volunteers, ranging from barristers, solicitors, paralegals, law students, legal volunteers and law academics. This wide range of grouping meant that the project benefitted different people at different levels of their journey, the law students who were just starting out got the opportunity to volunteer alongside PE and NKLC and make a difference to a local community as well as boosting their CV, and those who have been practising for a number of years got the opportunity to step out of the office, court room or class room and be involved with helping people on a personal, intimate and enjoyable level.

PE created flyers on the topics of powers of arrest and stop and search and volunteers would hand these flyers out to Carnival attendees. We found that the majority of people did not realise their own rights, so these flyers were essential to give an informative insight into individuals rights and the power of knowledge allows people, especially young people, to use that knowledge so their rights are not abused.

One week before the Carnival weekend PE and NKLC carried out a training day for all the volunteers held at the YAA Centre. The training day consisted of informing volunteers of what the Carnival weekend is like, especially for those who have not been before, we informed volunteers of how to interact with those attending carnival as well as police officers. We put great emphasis on the fact that we were not going to Carnival to intervene with the police work, we were going there to ensure the boundaries were not being crossed and to inform people of their rights. This was of most importance as Section 60 was authorised for the Monday of the carnival weekend.

Project findings

The use of stop and search was everywhere on the Monday of carnival. The most active area for stop and searches was by the screening arches, mostly negative searches. Individuals were handcuffed in solid handcuffs to the rear of the body, taken to the side of the road and then searched, many searches being quite degrading and intimate as you can see by the image on the right of a young male’s boxers being pulled down, whilst handcuffed and held by 2 police officers. This is classic overpowering and ultimately quite unnecessary.

During some searches, our volunteers spoke with individual police officers, some were clearly empowered by the section 60, one officer stated in a rather hostile and arrogant way, “we have the power today, don’t you know?”. This is obviously a worrying statement for someone who is there to protect the public, not persecute because they have power.

Another issue we found on several occasions was police officers searching individuals and questioning them on their immigration status. These searches consisted of quite interrogating questions on where they came from, what visa the individual is here on and where are they staying right now, whilst their belongings were being searched. It was obvious to our volunteers that those being questioned about this were very confused as were the individual’s friends. The volunteers who witnessed these types of searches were told by the individuals searched and their friends of how grateful they were that our team was there to support them.



We were made aware that Wandsworth police station was full of children at approximately 6pm. We were told that the Met policy was to arrest children in possession of cannabis if they can't get hold of their parents as they were deemed vulnerable. We witnessed many 16 years old who had one or two spliffs in their bag, arrested and taken to custody. At approximately 22:30 our team was informed that a 14-year-old boy, clearly on the autism spectrum was arrested at 16:20 for shouting at officers and was still being held in custody. As part of this project we had business cards made so that those who were arrested could take a card and call or text a mobile phone number dedicated to the North Kensington Law Centre crime team, if they needed any help or advice whilst in custody or if they needed advice or representation afterwards. This begs the question of the proportionality and necessity of section 60 at Notting Hill Carnival.



This young 17-year-old boy was stopped and searched because he was wearing a hood. He spent some time after this talking to the volunteers who saw this situation and he told them that this happens all the time to him. We sent him the video that we had taken of the officer searching him and he took the flyers away with him.

There was a clear difference between the stop and searches being carried out on males compared to females. The majority of females were not handcuffed, they often were not taken to the side of the road, they were simply stopped in their path, quickly searched and allowed to carry on with their day. The searches were significantly quicker, less intimate and less officers attending the search. As you can see from the images below, the difference between the two searches is apparent.



Towards the end of the evening some of our team noticed that police officers were undertaking riot police tactics in regards to crowd dispersal. It appeared to be completely unreasonable and unnecessary to use such force going into the crowd, there was a clear show of authoritative power by

doing this. In the images below, you can see the officers formed a line and proceeded to run into the crowd along the parade route.



The importance of this project

The clear importance of this project was from the interest we received in carnival attendees wanting to take the flyers and know more about their rights. There was an obvious need for our team to be there to inform and help individuals in being aware of their rights and giving them the confidence to speak to police officers when they believe they are being treated unfairly. The authorisation of section 60 made it all more important as many people did not know what section 60 was, that it was in place and what it meant for them.

Throughout the planning and execution of this project PE and NKLC have maintain a close connection with the carnival organisers. The carnival organisers expressed their concerns that the police were crossing the boundaries and therefore giving the carnival a bad reputation. In light of our project, PE and NKLC are putting together a report of our findings that can be used by the carnival organisers for negotiations with the MET police in preparation for carnival next year. This is important for them as the police use their own ‘ambassadors’ who scope the weekend and report on the need for section 60 at carnival, now the carnival organisers have a similar group with us. This means that the negotiations are fairer, more reasonable and balanced.

As well as the public importance of this project and ensuring this vibrant annual event stays safe and fun, PE and NKLC have created a very unique opportunity with this project for law students especially, to gain valuable experience in interacting with the public on matters of human rights and police powers, as well as learning in more detail about the topics of stop and search and powers of arrests that they may not have learnt in a classroom. This project also allows for different people to meet each other, gain confidence in advocacy as well as connecting with like-minded people. As a result of this project, some volunteers have expressed their interest in volunteering with PE and NKLC on other projects or positions within the two organisations.