

INTERVIEW

LUTON CARNIVAL 2023:

LEISURE FOR THE FAMILY

This year, 2023, marked the 47th year of the Luton International Carnival, which welcomed thousands of visitors from all walks of life. Luton's carnival artistic production is organised by the UK Centre for Carnival Arts (UKCCA). This year, it focused on providing an even more family-friendly environment that invites mothers, fathers, boys, and girls to engage in interactive activities. UKCCA's Executive Director, Claudette Whittingham, is keen to maintain a family atmosphere that is cohesive, inclusive, and reflects the community. Luton is ethnically diverse, and is considered one of the most diverse communities outside London.

Attending a carnival as a spectator/participant and absorbing the sights, sounds, and convivial atmosphere is a leisurely activity. It is true that carnival has an enticing atmosphere, but each carnival has its own unique qualities. Aside from this, carnival is also a brilliant way to interact with people from different parts of the world and get a sense of another culture. As highlighted by Devine and Anderson, 'recreation experiences have long been identified as contexts that bring people together through shared interests. Our leisure interests and experiences help us to see how we are more alike than different'¹.

In a time of escalating cost of living, which may put pressure on families to find cost-effective fun activities are increasing. The cost of living crisis might interfere with the enthusiasm and motivation to do things together as a family unit. The Luton carnival may provide a welcome opportunity for leisure time for families. A report published by Luton Borough Council suggests that 'Luton is currently ranked the 70th most deprived out of 317 local authorities'². The report also indicates that, 'Luton has some of the highest rates of child poverty in the country' and the 'highest levels of homelessness'³. Prior to the lockdowns, the economy had grown, and Luton Airport had contributed to it. Unfortunately, the lockdowns severely impacted Luton's economy and 'unemployment rose well above the national rate'⁴. Against this backdrop, Luton Carnival has created a space for family leisure. Festivals and carnivals offer an opportunity to experience family leisure

By Dr R. L. de Matas

Images © Dr Réa de Matas

¹ Devine, Mary Ann, Anderson, Lynn, *Inclusive Leisure: A Strengths-Based Approach*, (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics, 2023), p. 5.

² Holmes, Eddie, *Luton's Demography and Economy* (Luton Borough Council, 2023) <https://www.luton.gov.uk/Community_and_living/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/observatory/jsna-this-is-Luton.pdf> [accessed 5 December 2023] (pp. 2, 24).

³ Holmes, Eddie, *Luton's Demography and Economy* (Luton Borough Council, 2023) <https://www.luton.gov.uk/Community_and_living/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/observatory/jsna-this-is-Luton.pdf> [accessed 5 December 2023] (p. 2).

⁴ Holmes, Eddie, *Luton's Demography and Economy* (Luton Borough Council, 2023) <https://www.luton.gov.uk/Community_and_living/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/observatory/jsna-this-is-Luton.pdf> [accessed 5 December 2023] (p. 3).





for free. In addition, it is not uncommon for some families to bring their own food and snacks to carnivals or festivals. This allows families to have fun while keeping costs at a minimum. According to Jepson and Stadler, 'attending festivals as a family can foster bonding, belonging, happiness, and has the potential to enhance the family's quality-of-life (QOL) over time'⁵. Luton Carnival welcomes all and creates an ideal opportunity for bonding – not just within families, but also with friends or people who originate from the same country and meet at the carnival. At this year's carnival, there were evident fun family moments at different locations along the carnival route. These were well thought out and encouraged families to get involved. Some activities invited families to participate in storytelling or dancing, as well as interacting with masqueraders.

The following is a brief interview with **UKCCA's Executive Director, Claudette Whittingham**. She explains her vision for Luton.

1. Can you tell us a little bit about your role in Luton Carnival?

I am the Executive Director. I work with a team to organise the delivery of Luton Carnival. We are very privileged to have an Executive Producer, Steve Pascal, overseeing the day-to-day delivery of the event. He has extensive experience of working in the carnival industry, which includes being the former CEO of London's Notting Hill Carnival. Pascal, as he is known, is key to ensuring Luton Carnival is delivered efficiently and effectively.

2. In what ways does Luton Carnival appeal to you?

As a mother, I recall the challenge of trying to find a safe space that generates mass happiness for children to enjoy. Luton Carnival appeals because it is that safe space where the creative content is both exceptional and enjoyable, spreading happiness across the masses.

3. Would you mind telling us a little about what makes Luton's carnival unique?

Luton Carnival is a very distinct brand in the UK carnival and creative industry. It is a family-friendly, child-focused event. This means the creative output appeals to all, but particularly children. This means that parents and carers in particular know this is a safe space for all. Luton Carnival is focused on children – their engagement and involvement in the carnival arts. This unique selling point is complemented by the fact Luton Carnival celebrates carnival traditions and heritage world-wide. This comes courtesy of the wide, diverse range of communities that participate in the event. We are privileged to have groups from – just to name a few – India, Hungary, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ghana, Nigeria, Somalia, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, St Kitts, Trinidad, Ireland, Jamaica, Afghanistan, Brazil, and Guyana, as well as Roma participants. However, we're also honoured to have participants who have physical and sensory disabilities and needs joining us: we have elders, nursery groups and primary schools, college and university students who are part of the event. We're even joined by a carnival band made up of

Luton Borough Council's Chief Executive, elected councillors, and other Luton Council staff. We're supported by the Luton Town Football Club, both the main club and their community trust. Their representatives join us on carnival day. In addition to providing financial support, our sponsors come and participate in the event, not as VIPs, but as part of the general community, which makes the event special. We also welcome artists from carnivals across the UK. In 2023, this included steel bands from London (UFO and Steel Pan in Motion), puppets from Manchester (Global Grooves), moko jumbies from the North-East of England (Alan Vaughan), and costume bands from Leeds, Nottingham, Leicester, London Notting Hill Carnival, Milton Keynes, Hull, and the Isle of Wight. We have also had international guests join our event from various countries, including Germany, Trinidad, Brazil, and Ghana. These are just a few aspects of the spirit of inclusion that makes Luton Carnival truly unique, inviting, and welcoming.

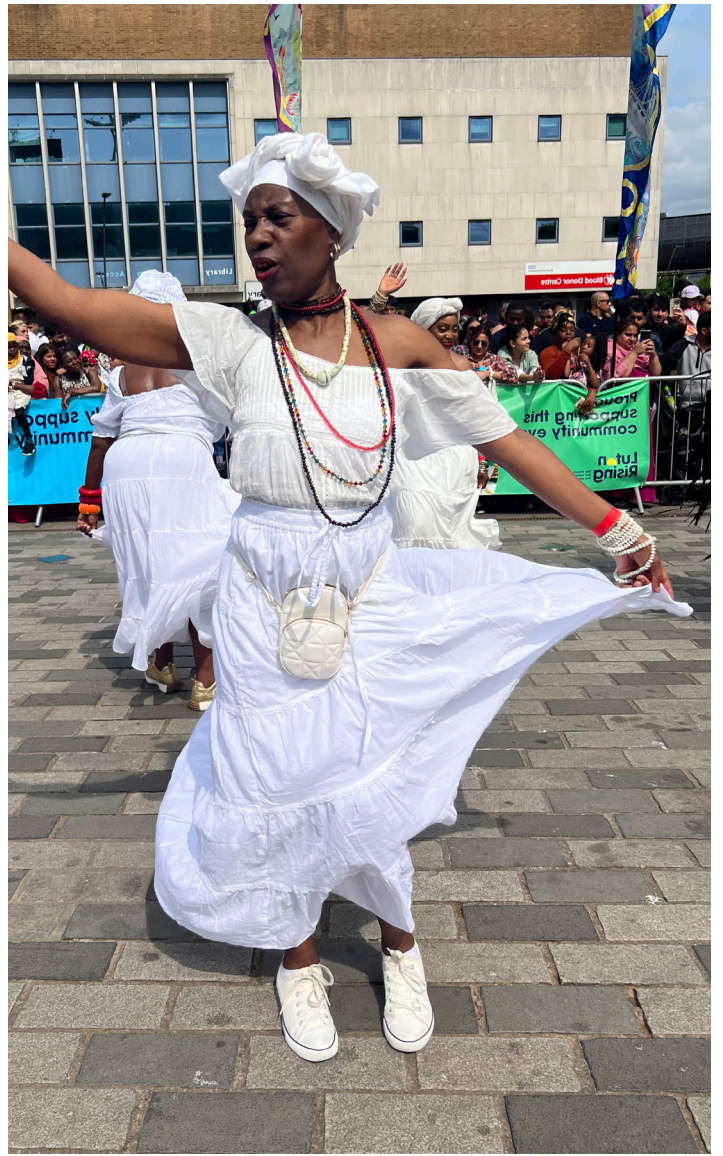
4. What are your plans for the growth and development of the carnival?

We plan to build on our spirit of inclusion, and moving towards green sustainability will be key to our inclusion ethos. We will no longer have diesel- or petrol-fuelled vehicles, generators, and sound systems as part of the event. We will be using green energy sources to animate our carnival parade. We will also revert to the use of biodegradable materials for costume-making, encouraging the reuse and remaking of existing costumes to ensure sustainability. It's important that, as carnival respects heritage, it also respects the home of that heritage – Planet Earth.

We will continue to extend our creative offer outside what could be regarded as the traditional setting – the carnival parade. We have demonstrated we can carnivalise (yes, it is a word) anything! We have set up exhibitions, added carnival to film and event launches, been part of conferences, moved into fashion, and so much more. Our plan is to ensure that, in every sphere of life, we share a touch of carnival that generates opportunities, facilitates social and economic regeneration, and most importantly puts smiles on the faces of all who have the privilege of being connected with our art form.

We will also focus on carnival futurism, which is both about the development of young folk to take forward our heritage, skills, and practices, and also includes making use of new technologies to ensure that carnival remains relevant in a fast-changing world. COVID-19 made us recognise that technology, like streaming, meant folk who were not present in person on the streets could still be included as part of our carnival parade. This same technology could mean folk who, for all sorts of reasons – such as advanced age, illness, or sensory sensitivities – cannot join us in person can still be part of our carnival family via digital engagement. We want to explore the other benefits that technology can provide, and these are probably best harnessed by listening to the voices of the younger generations, learning and often being directed by them. As we pass the carnival traditions forward, it is clear that the young generation has so much to offer, and this means the world's greatest creative genre will continue to thrive.





5. In carnival, especially at Luton Carnival, what is the role of family?

We're very pleased that our interpretation of family is not just about what is often regarded as the modern family model. Luton displays very traditional and welcoming extended family models, so we have many generations of families included in the event. We have communities coming together as 'families': community organisations supporting the engagement of their members, and guests participating in the carnival mas' camps or pan band rehearsals, where they are supported by more experienced folk, who are the equivalent of family elders, to ensure they are ready for the event. During these mas' camp sessions, alongside the support, they are fed and watered – cared for, as they are part of the carnival family. These 'soft care' elements are of increasing significance during the cost of living crisis we currently face – the meal we deliver could be the only meal a child or adult enjoys that day.

We have school 'families', where teachers work with their pupils, volunteers, assistants, and others to get prepared [for] and then participate in the carnival event. We are also joined by members of our wider UK carnival family, coming to join our event and make it spectacular.

We have the #TeamLuton family, where UKCCA works in partnership with a wide range of organisations to ensure the event is delivered for the benefit of residents and guests to Luton. The 2023 #TeamLuton family included the Luton Association of Mas' Bands, Luton Borough Council, the University of Bedfordshire, the Culture Trust, The Mall, Active Luton, the Luton Community Police Team, and the Luton Irish Forum, all organisations that provided services and support to ensure Luton Carnival was delivered well. It was also fantastic that senior representatives of our partners participated in the launch of the carnival parade, with some like Luton Council's Chief Executive chipping the full parade in carnival costume.

We also have a family of funders and sponsors. In 2023, this ensured that, at a time when schools were being challenged financially and might have struggled to be part of the carnival, the sponsors stepped in and provided the required financial and in-kind resources. This family of funders and sponsors were the Luton Rising Luton Town Football Club Community Trust, Luton Town Football Club, Luton BID, TUI, Taylor Wimpey, Valicity Care Services, Tesco, Gentian Events, BT Events, the Arts Council of England, the Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation, Luton Council, and the Royal Opera House Bridge. This could be regarded as an unusual view of what is considered a family; however, all families need financial resources to survive and thrive. Family is core to Luton Carnival's success. It turns the ordinary into the extraordinary, ensuring the event is an inclusive and welcoming safe space.

6. In your opinion, what were the highlights of this year's carnival?

There were so many highlights of this year's event. It was delightful to be joined by six primary schools showing off the costumes the pupils had created. This aligns perfectly with our brand, which focuses on families and young people. We were joined by a large Eastern European group, which included a number of Ukrainian refugees. This Eastern European group put their traditions on show, which included the use of flowers and other natural items and created a beautiful exhibition, much of which was paraded by children. We enjoyed the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Windrush Generation's arrival in the UK. Our lead carnival band, Scandalous Mas' Band, a youth band, created large and small Windrush ship costumes and performed these throughout the carnival parade. We also welcomed green costumes created by artists in Pakistan in partnership with Alif New Beginnings, a Muslim group that celebrated Islamic carnival traditions. The art created was used to create mini floats by dressing mobility scooters, ensuring those with physical disabilities could be part of the parade.

We also enjoyed various traditional customs and garments complemented by carnival costumes, all accompanied by traditional music joining the parade. At the performance area, the crowd was privileged to witness spectacular performances. It is fair to say the entire parade from start to finish was a real enjoyable spectacle, as evidenced by the audience's joyous reactions.

In addition, [and] in partnership with The Culture Trust, we included some new features such as the free storytelling zones, where folk had the opportunity to enjoy some of the tales of Anansi – a character well known in many cultures. We even had an early session for young people with special educational needs, ensuring they could avoid the main crowds of the day, which could have caused them some anxiety. The feedback from these sessions was 100% positive, so it's a feature we will bring back and extend to share the stories, and the understanding, of more communities.

Carnival is all about telling the stories of cultures world-wide. That was done in a fabulous way at Luton Carnival 2023. It was also clear to see that, while the differences of cultures were on show, it was beautiful to see the many things that communities have in common – the things that bring us all together. All those groups came together to create a joyous carnival parade – all of we together as one!

Open Access © 2023 by R. L. de Matas and Claudette Whittingham. A copy of this article may be downloaded for free from the *Journal of Festival Culture Inquiry and Analysis* under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

