**Maintaining education opportunities and support:**

**the new challenge once NATT+ closes in October**

By Desmond FitzGerald

As Circus Parents and Education Liaison Officers met for annual Education meeting, hosted by NATT+ on Sunday January 28th at Wolverhampton, Natalie Stables it’s Interim President, who chaired the meeting, announced that NATT+ would cease to exist as a professional organisation on 31 October this year.

Explaining the situation, along with Claire Lockwood, Interim Vice President, NATT+, Natalie highlighted insufficient funds to run a national network; the shortage of members willing to put themselves forward to sit on the executive committee and existing executive members retiring or capacity issues due to pressures of main jobs in school or Local Authority.

While this was a disappointment to the delegates it was understandable given the current national funding crisis and had been signalled over previous years.

That the current meeting took place at all was due to continued and increased contributions from Circus and Fairground groups regionally and nationally, including the Showmen’s Guild; ACP and AIS.

The cross section of Education Liaison Officers included two MBE-holders among the established delegates and some new representatives, namely Valerie Moody, Showmen’s Guild National & Northern Section ELO, MBE (who came with Arthur Robert Moody, Guild Northern Section Treasurer) and Siobhan Spencer MBE, National Federation of Gypsy Liaison groups (NFGLG).

Joining them were Melanie Allen, Guild Midlands Section ELO; Michela Derry, Guild Notts & Derby Section joint ELO; Lawrence Crick, Showmen’s Guild London & Home Counties Section ELO; Helen Hatt, AIS National ELO for Fairs & Circus; Jen Taylor, Magical Youth Circus; Paul Archer, Secretary of the Association of Circus Proprietors (ACP) and Carol Gandey from Gandey Worldwide Productions;

While not able to make the meeting, there was word from Zoe Munn, Circus Parent from No Fit State Circus, who plans to be a stronger member of the Circus Parents Association (CPA). No Fit State’s travelling season has changes making attending this meeting difficult, as well as difficulty in accessing education for children.

Meanwhile Kirk Mulhearn, former ELO Showmen’s Guild Lancs Section, a long-standing delegate at this annual meeting for 25 years, has now moved on to be Section Chairman, with a replacement being selected.

**Overall national update:**

Natalie Stables led the meeting and highlighted issues of current focus:

* the worrying and continuing trend of parents taking children out of school for Home Education as it’s becoming too much trouble accessing and liaising with schools.
* NATT+’s AGM and members meeting in November 2017 highlighted the continuing challenges for Fairground and Circus children (among other travelling communities) accessing education.
* As NATT+ continues to work hard with diminishing funds for all the Travelling Communities, cuts in Education Services are eroding the gains made prior to 2010.
* Fairground and Circus children are vulnerable in having education opportunities denied and the ‘T’ code, registering authorised absence for travelling, is not being honoured.

With all this in mind, Natalie urged, liaison with communities is essential for the future.

**Academy issues continuing:**

There were several continuing issues with Academies reported , relating to the “T” code in the schools’ register; as well as the way schools are measured on progress and attainment and what educational opportunities are available for students post-16 years, with changed legal requirements.

Now English has to be recorded if English is an additional language, including where certain children have arrived from, amid disquiet on the issue from parents.

The conversion of all schools to Academies in a particular Local Educational Area (LEA) if some / a certain percentage opt for it, is becoming controversial. It was reported that there is continuing correspondence with the DfE on this.

**Summary of what NATT+ has been doing overall:**

* A meeting took place at the Friends Meeting House in London, regarding Travelling Communities’ issues including attendance from schools showing good practice. “Friends and Friendship” was the theme of GRT History Month launched in June.
* The committee re-convened in September to discuss NATT + future and membership and funding reduced and regional TESs (Traveller Education Services) diminished and their remit being widened making it hard to cope. NATT+ Posts were not filled in November so all members are in *Interim* posts for now.
* There was further discussion from the report with ambitions for NATT+ and hope for the future. **ACERT for Education**, with its ‘Learning beyond the classroom’ and other Travellers’ groups will be continuing with their support material.
* Natalie explained that NATT+ does not have charity status or Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) status
* **The conference planned for June this year is going ahead** with delegates from the Fairground and circus ELOs encouraged to book to attend. They are pushing for local networking. Natalie will continue to work in the North West and the Localism agenda is still strong.

**Stakeholders’ Meeting with the Dept. for Education:**

Natalie confirmed that there would not be a separate Fair & Circus group meeting with the DfE.

Additionally there was now no chance of attending the meeting the next day as extra members (especially with advance booking due to security clearance issues).

Lynne Powis from NATT+ was to join Natalie at the education meeting in London the following day.

It was discussed that getting the meeting with the Education Dept. was hard-won; the name of the Dept. has changed as had the officers and politicians there to talk to, but it was good that now we have a meeting to go to: the Gypsy Roma Traveller Education Stakeholder meeting - the next day following the Wolverhampton meeting.

Natalie while disappointed that the Showmen would not be represented, having argued to have their own meeting, would do her best to represent their interests.

Then, having attended the Department for Education on the Monday chaired by Baroness Whittaker, Natalie reported that:

* *“In the words of Baroness Whittaker, the aim of the group is to work with and advise the department on GRT policy with the focus on improving attainment, attendance and ascription of children from these communities.*
* It was reported that it is a discreet group with clear terms of reference and the same individuals are expected to attend every meeting.
* As requested,Natalie raised the subject of representatives from the Circus and Fairground attending and was asked to put it in writing, which she has already done, with a response awaited.
* Natalie promised to pass on Baroness Whittaker’s response to the group

**Correspondence with the Dept. for Education:**

Natalie reported back on the correspondence with theDept. for Education (separate from the Stakeholders meeting) following the letter written in September 2016.

It outlined concerns with getting into school using the ‘T’ Code and the effects of ‘Academisation’ of schools on the Community’s children. There was a response from Lord Nash in October 2016; with further correspondence in February and March.

There are further details of this correspondence and potential next steps to be reported further.

**Race Disparity Audit:**

There was a discussion following the release of the Race Disparity Audit in the autumn.

* The audit was undertaken by the government in 2016 by The Prime Minister with a view to shining a light on how people of different ethnicities are treated across public services by publishing data held by the Government.
* Released in October 2017, the aim of the audit was to tackle what she called “burning injustices” that people face in society, bringing together existing information on Health; Education; Housing and more.
* The authorities were shocked at the low attainment and progress of GRT children, who were least likely to stay in education after the age of 16
* While Circus and Fairground children were not represented on this audit, Natalie explained that NATT+ was tasked to report back on what good practice, of which there are countless examples to celebrate.
* It was acknowledged that there was already much research and that now was the time for action, rather than words.

**Heritage of Showmen to assist in accessing bespoke education?**

There was a discussion on the heritage of the Showmen and Circus community being recognised as a cultural community in the EU, using the formula of the “Mandla Criteria” following the case in the House of Lords in 1983 including:

* a long shared history, of which the group is conscious as distinguishing it from other groups;
* a cultural tradition of its own, including family and social customs and manners;
* descent from a small number of common ancestors;
* a common language;
* and / or being a minority or being an oppressed or a dominant group within a larger community.

It was discussed that you only need two out of the criteria.

Working with the ESU (*European Showmen’s Union*) on this was discussed, with examples of success in achieving this in several European countries. It was recalled that this was an area that EFECOT (*European Federation for the Education of the Children of Occupational Travellers*) assisted with in the past. It was hoped that ENTE (*European Network for Traveller Education*) may now be able to help.

Natalie urged to keep pushing for this.

**Needs Assessments** and the ORS Assessments that have been undertaken were discussed with examples and how they are important in putting forward the argument for education access across the country. Some regions reported greater success than others with this.

**National Strategies from the Government:**

The National Strategy of the UK were discussed; The National Strategies were professional programmes aiming for improvements in the quality of learning and teaching in [schools](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schools) in [England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England), delivered on behalf of the [Department for Children, Schools and Families](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Department_for_Children,_Schools_and_Families).

**Regional / ELO round-up of the year’s experiences:**

Time was set aside for feedback and reports from the delegates’ regions and areas of Fairground and Circus with examples of issues to report, problems to share and achievements to celebrate. Examples from England and Wales were compared with those from other countries where appropriate.

Scottish experiences from delegates were included and while the Scottish ELOs are working separately on the current issues, the feedback will be shared with them.

Issues to resolve included:

* allocating places in schools;
* providing agreed support for children with specific needs;
* children being taken off roll unreasonably;
* the ‘T’ Code not being understood nor honoured;
* class sizes used to deny places in school;
* short-stay places diminishing;
* difficulty in engaging with Academy schools;
* Distance-Learning system misunderstood by some schools;
* reduction of Special Schools & ‘Mainstreaming’ ;
* Arbitrary exclusions of pupils;

Issues to celebrate included:

* graduate and other educational achievement;
* Fair-Schools continuing success & funding at Newcastle and Hull;
* good feedback from teachers;
* presentations and exhibitions in museums and elsewhere;

**Guidance for families approaching schools in a new area:**

the guidance was re-distributed for families approaching schools in a new area – with a draft letter, which included the duties and responsibilities of Local Authorities in England and the rights of the child. There were also ‘Top-Tips’ on how to get children into a school at short notice.

This was seen positively as “more ammunition” by the delegates.

**Guidelines from on child safety online were also discussed:**

Following a discussion at the meeting, a document on this was sent out by Natalie within three days to delegates highlighting the issues and pointing to resources providing further support from parent groups; government and police authorities and the NSPCC.

**Apprenticeships:**

Ahead ofthe 11th National Apprenticeship Week from March 5 to 9, details of Apprenticeships were distributed from the Department for Education (of their December 2017 document) as well as ‘A Parent’s guide to apprenticeships’ from the National Apprenticeships Service.

Natalie explained that the government are pushing this now (they have done variously in previous years also).

The possibilities this scheme presents were discussed with both positive and cautionary recollections by the delegates’ experiences of previous apprenticeships.

Natalie explained that it was the Government’s drive to be top of economic and cultural development to compete internationally in the future (especially post-Brexit).

**Current and future educational focus:**

Natalie advised on the current and future educational focus including:

* That the Academy programme to be still being pushed including primary schools.
* Grammar schools are being extended and the government are keen on independent schools to support local children, with their charity status.
* There is concern that the Year One curriculum is too onerous with higher expectations than before
* There will be STATS tests at the end of year 2
* There will be exams at the end of the year as there used to be
* Safeguarding in schools and online is seen as very important , especially neglect; child-‘sexploitation’ & grooming; self-harm
* Dealing with the Radicalisation agenda is high in schools

**Education support after NATT+ closes in Oct.**

NATT+ started over 30 years ago and has been a source of great support and strength for many teachers and professionals working with Gypsy Roma and Traveller children and communities.

A statement on the NATT+ website reads:

*“Times have changed but the needs of these children haven’t and we hope that all existing and former NATT+ members continue to speak out and network at least at a local and regional level to spread best practice, share ideas and develop a local voice.”*

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**Alternative voices to turn to:**

* Alternative voices to turn to for the Fairground and Circus parents and families were discussed (with some already referred to) including:
  + ACERT(*The Advisory Council for the*Education of Romany and other Travellers) that is based in the south and
  + *The Community Law Partnership* for legal advice based in Birmingham.
  + ENTE (*European Network for Traveller Education*) of which some delegates are already members
  + ESU (*European Showmen’s Union*) of which the Showmen’s Guild is a national member; it has pan-European focus and influence on Cultural Heritage but less influence on pure national education policy in the UK
* There was also discussion on the possible maintenance of the *NATT+ website* ([www.natt.org.uk](http://www.natt.org.uk)) with its many resources, advice, useful links and more. Hosting the website will be the issue to finalise.
* The wider issue of loss of service **c**ould also be on the agenda for the *Westminster Parliament’s Fairs and Showgrounds All Party Group;* with a meeting currently in preparation.

At the end of the final annual meeting of NATT+ with the fairground ELOs and Circus parents, Claire Lockwood said “*Thank you for coming today, this has uplifted me.”*

In closing, Natalie said: “*This is not the end but the start of something new*” drawing applause from all the delegates.

**ENDS**

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***Issues in more detail and Regional contributions to follow…***