



# Annual Report 2021

**A note on timescales:** This report is intended to encompass the Financial year ending March 2021, however this report will include notes and references to the organisation's challenges and successes after April 2021.

## Trustee Chair's statement - 30th Nov 2021

It is my great pleasure as chair of Oblong Trustees to welcome you all to our AGM, particularly as we are able to meet in person, at last, after having held our AGM remotely last year (in February 2021, delayed due to Covid complications). We are here to renew that commitment to serving the needs of our neighbourhood communities; to take stock of the year gone; and to look forward to the year to come.

This has been another difficult year, in which we have had to curtail activities and limit access to the Community Centre. But thanks again to prudent work by our staff, in accessing funds and managing our finances, adapting work practices (including the use of furlough), and being flexible, and the support of our bank and our volunteers, we have weathered the storm and are looking forward to the gradual process of revival. We were able to continue some services throughout, renting out office space, delivering Headspace sessions remotely, and managing volunteers to deliver food parcels and other essentials, for example, and are now beginning to see a revival in room bookings and community services. We have also recruited additional staff, to develop and promote these activities and to manage the Centre. In all of this we have been mindful of the needs to safeguard staff, volunteers and service users, and have developed and followed guidelines in ensuring this.

It has been gratifying to see the Centre become busier, and we look forward to developing the building and our website to improve appeal, both to regular users and enquirers. The face we present to the public is critical, and thanks are due to both the staff and our volunteers for their commitment to this work.

We are also aware of the need to continually monitor the needs of the community, and will soon be starting the project to research local needs using surveys, and then to develop our services in response. This important project was another victim of the Covid crisis, originally scheduled for last year, but which is now being primed. The aims and objectives of Oblong remain (as stated below), but we must be mindful of the need to adapt and respond to changing needs of the community.

**To develop the capacity and skills of people living in socially and economically disadvantaged areas in such a way that they are better able to identify, and help meet, their needs and to create active, flourishing communities;**

**And to run a community centre, primarily for the benefit of the Woodhouse, Little London, and Hyde Park areas.**

As a Trustee, I would like to express my gratitude and admiration to our staff (Jess, Amber, Alex, Fawzia and Jay), who have been so adaptable, determined and ready to serve, and to welcome Lily and Fran to the team. And as Chair of Trustees I would like to thank my fellow Trustees who have so dutifully served the efforts of Oblong, to which we are all committed.

**Mark Richards**  
**Trustee Board Chair**

## **Mental Health & Wellbeing at Oblong**

Due to the pandemic and needs of the community we deployed our mental health staff time and budget to running mental health support in the form of wellbeing phone calls, local interventions and advocacy, emergency Covid-related responses and training volunteers to respond to the mental health needs of people they were supporting. With the support of Live Well Leeds, and the Clinical Commissioning Group overseeing its funding, we did this for 6 months but from Sept 2020 we began to think that there was an increasing need for mental health groups and peer support.

We focused on redeveloping all our Headspace (our 7 week mental health and wellbeing, peer support course) materials to work on Zoom peer support groups and to be postable to participants. Instead of meeting people for mental health assessments we did this all online and on video call and in the meantime we launched our Headspace for Covid-19 course. We used our knowledge of community needs from the Covid-support we were doing to tailor sessions and add topics like; Relationships, Connection & Isolation, My Mental Health and Covid-19 and Resilience.

We worked with freelancers to be able to run remote groups to people all over Leeds. A big thanks to Kerri, Aicha, Aaron and Miranda for their work this last year.



# Mental Health & Wellbeing at Oblong

We also started our peer support co-facilitation project where people who have done the Headspace course and who want to become peer support group facilitators themselves have worked closely with us and freelancers to get this experience.



**"I enjoyed meeting everyone in the group, sharing experiences. I learnt that other people, who can have completely different circumstances and worries than yourself, can have the same thought patterns and ways to cope, which helps you to realise that you are not alone. It was helpful that those people could understand the way you think and react."**

Big shout out to Colin and Tabz who have come through this project in the last year and are both facilitating their own groups in paid and voluntary work. We are now running groups back face to face but keeping the online Zoom groups too because we know, through feedback, that there is an ongoing need for both.



**"I've got trust in humans again. It showed me skills and it was good not to be shut down. I was being listened to."**

Next steps for 21-22 is to work on getting a funding bid to start a new peer support group **Peaceful Minds** (co-ordinated by Aicha Django-Balde) run-by and run-for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities in Leeds. Feedback from participants and from the wider mental health community of people who run and use services shows a need for more tailored and specific focus peer support groups.



**"Really loving the mental health course just want to say thank you it's only 2nd week but feel like I'm already understanding myself better"**

If you or somebody you know would benefit from the work Oblong is doing, or you want more information on current courses, please email [wellbeing@oblong.org.uk](mailto:wellbeing@oblong.org.uk)



# Community Care Volunteering

Since March 2020 Oblong has been working with Leeds City Council and Voluntary Action Leeds to provide Covid-related Community Support to people in Woodhouse & Little London.



This support came in the form of food parcels and deliveries, pharmacy and prescription collections, dog walking, wellbeing and befriending calls, baby items, clothes deliveries, welfare checks, signposting and much much more. Hundreds of passionate volunteers who had free time on their hands came forward to support their local community.

We have built new systems from scratch to coordinate the hundreds of support requests that have come in through the council's helpline and our local area. We could not have done this without working in partnership with Rainbow Junction, Hyde Park Source, Leeds Grand Mosque (Love In a Box), The Hamara Centre, Bahar Women's Association, Leeds African communities, Sylvia at Little London Community Centre, our local councillors Abigail Marshall, Kayleigh Brooks and Javid Aktar as well as councillors from the Hyde Park and Headingley areas.

We had a cohort of volunteers who came on board to do weekly wellbeing phone calls and coordinate, pack and deliver 100s of food parcels. Thank you especially to our volunteers Marie, Colin, Kim and Rosie for coordinating so much behind the scenes!

The Hamara Centre and Give a Gift advocated for communities in Leeds whose food needs were not being catered for by the councils initial food parcels. These organisations used their knowledge of communities they work with to buy in 'culturally appropriate' foods so that people had access to familiar ingredients in their food parcels. At one point this year over 800 parcels were being collected and delivered across the city from Hamara. We want to say a big thank you to the Hamara Centre and Give a Gift for their vital work. They ensured the diverse communities in Woodhouse, Little London and beyond, had access to the food they needed to be able to cook familiar and comforting meals in these uncertain times.



## Community Care Volunteering (continued)

**We could also not have done this without the hundreds of community care volunteers who gave so much of their time to supporting their neighbours.**



This project is set to continue running into the next year (2022), and we are looking forward to working with so many incredible Community Care Volunteers and local partners to continue to meet the needs of our community.

**If you know somebody in your community who needs help, they can get in touch with Leeds City Council's Welfare Service on 0113 378 1877, who will be able to refer them to their local hub.**

There are some self-referral options also available at [oblong.org.uk/support](https://oblong.org.uk/support)

## Woodhouse Community Centre



Throughout the most part of 2020-2021 the Community Centre building itself has been in a dormant state as it was closed to the public throughout the height of the pandemic. Although of course, there was plenty of work going on behind the scenes and in recent months it is magic to see the centre coming back to life! It is it's usual bustling and busy self again.

Work at the centre during the pandemic has mostly revolved around keeping the facilities ticking over, and working out ways for our tenants and essential groups to safely return to the building. While the building was closed to the public, most of the centre Co-ordinator roles were put on the back burner. This was so staff attention could be focused on the Community Care Volunteers project.

# Woodhouse Community Centre (continued)

We are delighted to have new tenants in the centre, Acorn! They are a community union working in Leeds and across the UK. Our other tenants are Abigail Housing, W Childcare Learning Centre and Leeds Zen Buddhists. Our friends at Caring Together have moved to a site with a shop front in Charing Cross just down the road, and they still hold regular groups at the centre and we continue to have a strong working relationship.

While the building was closed to the public, and while staff responsibilities were stretched, essential repair work to a leaking roof was not completed in time. This caused damage to multiple rooms in the centre and the consequences of this have been costly in time money and stress!

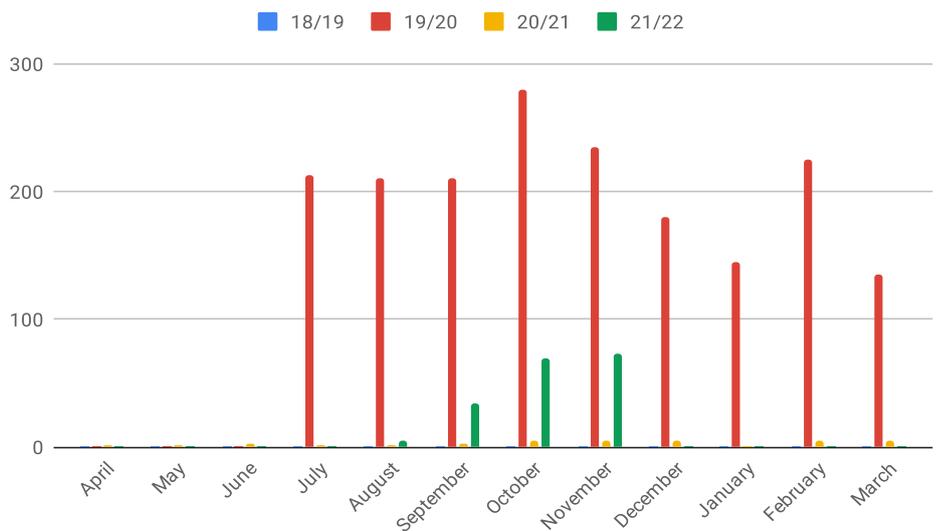
As a result, as restrictions were removed, we continued to be cautious as we are still - taking more precautions than we are legally required to do. This has certainly had a financial impact although we remain adamant that it is the right decision.

To say the least this was a very strange and demanding year for WCC as a building and as a community anchor, and towards the end of the year we were considering carefully the demands of CCV workload, regular users, required repair/improvements to the building & those interested in overdue birthday parties!

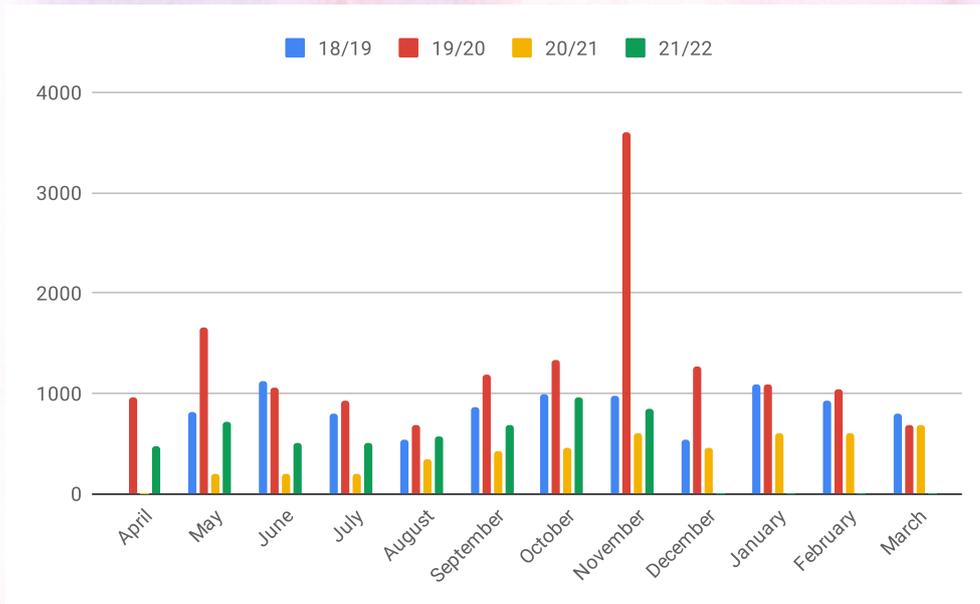
We are especially grateful to Jay and Dom for sticking with us and keeping the building and garden looking good rain or shine!

The graph on the right shows IT suite usage for 2020-21 (yellow) to be virtually zero, as you would expect, and recovering usage (beginning Sept 2021 - green) - with some restrictions and somewhat less capacity is still significantly below that of 2019-20 (red) when we first started collecting data.

### Woodhouse Community Centre - IT suite usage



## Woodhouse Community Centre - footfall



The graph on the left shows depressed but steadily increasing footfall for 2020-21 (yellow columns) with some notable recovery. It shows a predictable drop from April 2020 (yellow columns), with some increases from October & November 2020 onwards as lockdown changes allowed some regular bookers back in once safeguards were in place.

April 2021 onwards show continuing green shoots of gradual increase in usage.

## Development & Future Plans

The last financial year has brought both challenges and opportunities to Oblong's sustainability and development plans.

The pandemic meant we were unable to continue business as usual, and required us to reconsider how we developed our income generation strategy, in a covid-safe way, and whilst meeting the needs of our communities.

We suffered our greatest loss of income from being unable to offer room hire during enforced and then voluntary closure of the building, for both ongoing external events and one-off bookings. Our locality suffered some of the highest covid rates in the city.

Fortunately, we were able to mitigate against this loss somewhat, through securing covid support grant funding, the government's business support funds, and insurance payouts to cover lost earnings.

We also had to rethink how we secured grant funding, as projects needed to be delivered in a covid safe way, and remotely, whilst still meeting the needs of our communities. This meant directing our projects to meeting short to mid-term emergency covid-related needs, such as food, emergency supplies, mental health support and IT support.



## Development & Future Plans (continued)

Whilst delivering these projects, we kept a close eye on user feedback to identify ongoing and emerging needs, in order to formulate our funding strategy going forward. What became clear was that we needed to develop ongoing support to individuals who had engaged with our covid support projects, through either receiving personal support, or through delivering support in their communities as volunteers. The main issues to emerge highlighted a need to provide opportunities for improved mental wellbeing and to tackle isolation,

This resulted in a submitting a bid to the Lottery's Community Fund, and successfully securing 3 years of funding for the Thriving Together project. This project will primarily focus on engaging local people as volunteer, to initiate and cascade group activities within the community. It will focus on bringing local people together and empowering them to work collectively and for the benefit of their neighbourhood.

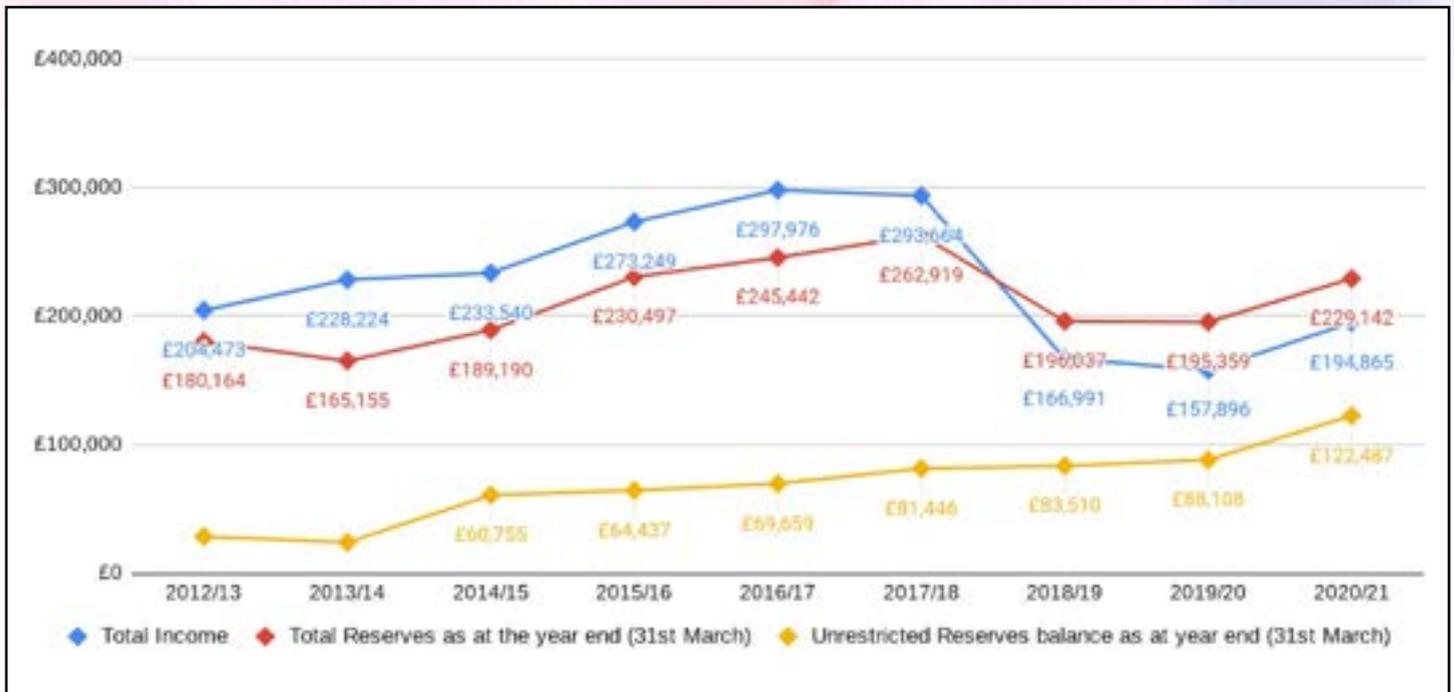
We had secured funding to deliver a large scale community consultation project in 2020-21, however, delivery was postponed due to the pandemic. This is now due to start in November 2021 and will be conducted by a group of independent researchers and bi-lingual community researchers. The aim of this consultation, is to hear from a wide range of stakeholders, particularly residents in our locality, and to find out how we can better meet their needs. This will help shape Oblong's direction of travel over the next few years, and ensure our services remain relevant to our communities.

# Finance Review

Oblong's financial statements for the year ended 31st March 2021 show:

- £195k total income, £37k more than prior year.
- £34k added to unrestricted reserves, taking this to £122k.
- £1.8k paid off from the debt owing on our building, taking the balance outstanding on the loan down to £192k. This is less than previous years as Futurebuilders England Ltd (Social Investment Business) offered us a loan repayment break during the first six months of the covid19 pandemic. As a result of the loan repayment break we continued to incur interest and when repayments began in October 2021 they were initially used to repay off the outstanding interest before making loan balance payments.

In this financial year the Oblong made a surplus of £33,783, compared to a deficit of £678 in the previous financial year. This was due to Oblong's quick reaction to the pandemic and the financial support that we received. Oblong was able to furlough up to four members of staff under the government's Job Retention Scheme, reducing our largest cost staff salaries. We also experience a reduction in running costs due to the closure of the Woodhouse Community Centre which was mandated by the government. Oblong also received business grants from Leeds City Council and other unrestricted resilience grants to support costs, as our main source of income room hire was not available during the closure of the Woodhouse Community Centre.



At the end of the financial year the overall reserves of the organisation were £229,142 of which £122,487 is unrestricted and can be used on any aspect of the charitable objectives of Oblong Ltd. We anticipate that these reserves will be required to support costs for the following financial year (21/22) as we plan for the reopening of the Woodhouse Community Centre to be slow so we can protect our local community and centre users from the spread of covid19 which will result in lower income from room hire.

Unrestricted rental income decreased by £48,781 this year, which was the result of the closure of the Woodhouse Community Centre to adhere with government guidelines for public health and safety. Oblong maintained its tenants in the community centre but was not able to take the same number of bookings for public events. Unrestricted income is any income that is not specifically associated with a grant for example, rental income received from room hire at the Woodhouse Community Centre.

Oblong's unrestricted grant income for the year was £61,075, this was an increase of £44,261 from the previous year and was primarily due to the resilience grants that we successfully applied for during the year and the grants we received from Leeds City Council for business support.

Oblong's restricted grant income for the year was £98,058, this was an increase of £28,305 from the previous year and was driven by the funding we received to supply food parcels, medicine and support for other local community needs driven by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of the increase in grant funding we saw an increase in charitable activities spending.

