



Annual Report 2020

A note on timescales: This report is intended to encompass the Financial year ending March 2020, however to report on only the year prior to March 31st 2020 would be missing a significant amount of learning, changes and challenges we've overcome, so certain other details and themes will be included to provide a rounded picture of the state of the organisation.

Trustee's statement on AGM 24th February 2021

Having been involved with Oblong both as a volunteer and as a Trustee for several years, it is my great pleasure to welcome you all to our AGM.

Normally we would be meeting in person, face to face, in the Woodhouse Community Centre, the hub of the community resource from which Oblong operates. But these are not normal times, of course, so it's doubly appreciated that you have been able to join us remotely for our somewhat delayed AGM.

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.

You hardly need telling that this has been a difficult year for Oblong, as for so many - of necessity, activities have been curtailed, access to the Centre has been restricted, and income has been hard hit.

Nevertheless, Oblong has endured: resources have been found, activities have been adapted, and we have continued to pursue the aims and objectives of Oblong, namely: **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.**

It has been particularly sad to see our Community Centre, usually so full of life, bustling with activity, and a place in which so wide a range of users have found a welcome, so under-utilized. This has been unavoidable, of course, and we must be very careful how we open things up again as lockdown is gradually lifted. The Centre remains prominent on Woodhouse Street, a real presence in the neighbourhood, and we can be sure that, after the year we've had, that there will never be a greater need for such a resource. We have already been looking forward to opening up, attracting users back



again, focussing on coordinating the Centre's use whilst ensuring safeguarding.

As a Trustee, I would like to express my gratitude and admiration to our staff (Jess, Amber, Alex, Fawzia and Jay - and Tabitha, who left us during the course of the year), who have been so adaptable, determined and ready to serve. We have also lost several Trustees after years of valuable service, and look forward to an injection of new blood onto the Board.

I hope we can all take encouragement from the way Oblong has been able to weather the difficulties and limitations of the last year, been able to maintain and develop many of its community services, and that we can look forward with renewed optimism to building back with increasing capacity over the next year.

Mark Richards
Trustee Board member

Volunteering



Community Cooks

From Aug 2019 - Nov 2020 we ran a Community Cooks project which aimed to support members of the community to increase their cooking skills, experience and business knowledge. Some amazing cooks took on organising community meals and events such as a cinema and food night. We worked with a total of 7 local people, and hosted 5 cafes during the project. 4 of those local people also took part in business support, coming to our internal events, group planning, and attending outside events such as an evening on "setting up your own business" at Leeds Library. Fran, a community cook, went on to host a cinema and food evening with a friend and created a calendar for 2021 filled with tasty recipes from the community cooks to mark the end of the project.

"I am extremely grateful to have taken part in the Community Cooks project. It has been an amazing experience for me. I have always felt welcome and valued by staff and volunteers alike. Being part of this project has empowered me to pursue what I enjoy doing and it has developed a very strong sense of belonging to the community. Thank you! :)"



 Leeds
Community
Foundation



Volunteering

Time to Shine - Pass It On

The Pass it On volunteer project which was funded by the Big Lottery, Time to Shine and Leeds Community Foundation, ran from Oct 2019 - Oct 2020. The aim of this project was to combat isolation and improve self esteem in local people over 50 through skill sharing workshops. Some fantastic volunteers met regularly to plan and run this project. They delivered English classes, Express Yourself (an art group for learning to paint), Simple Spanish lessons and a creative writing workshop. The volunteers took on the promotion of these sessions to other volunteers and local people and even had a painting exhibition at Woodhouse Community Centre.



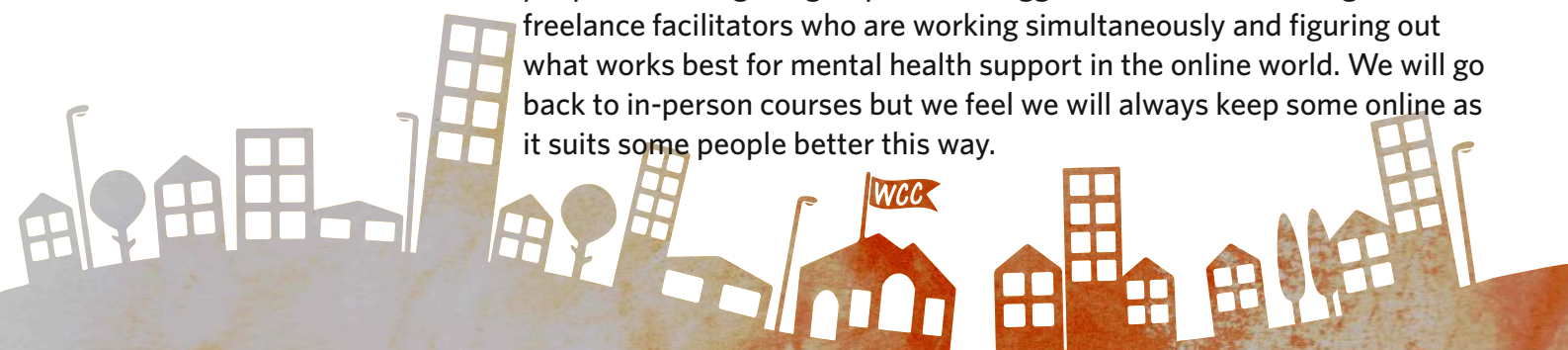
**NATIONAL
LOTTERY FUNDED**

Headspace - Live Well Leeds

Our mental health and wellbeing work with Live Well Leeds got off to a flying start with over 70 people supported through groups in the first year. We worked with local Mental Health Hubs, Women's Groups with Health 4 All in Middleton, Carers Leeds in the city centre and in our very own Woodhouse Community centre to deliver our 7 week mental health, peer-support group, Headspace.

When the pandemic started we had to focus on the changing needs of our communities and for a few months people's needs changed from emotional, peer-led support, to more basic survival needs like food and stable shelter. But by summer 2020 we were developing the Headspace course to reflect the changed world we now lived in and the new needs of the communities. We have been running Headspace Online for Covid-19 now for several months.

Everything is on Zoom and we have a digital inclusion project to support people accessing the groups who struggle. We are now working with freelance facilitators who are working simultaneously and figuring out what works best for mental health support in the online world. We will go back to in-person courses but we feel we will always keep some online as it suits some people better this way.



Headspace - Live Well Leads

So far we have supported approx. 40 people through the online groups. We are planning for some ex-participants to become facilitators with peer-mentoring and co-facilitation roles being built into the delivery. A special thanks to Kerri, Aaron and Aicha who have worked with us to deliver these groups in the most accessible and appropriate way we can right now.



The feedback for the Headspace online groups have been lovely, here are some quotes.

"A lot has changed and have been talking to more people. The Headspace course gave me some tools to manage my mental health. I have improved a lot. My upbringing maybe made me quite sceptical about the course but week by week it was good and really opened up to it. When im stressed i now have tools and i can be more open about it. I can be more open about my feelings has helped me. I will continue to go to the groups and counselling and therapy. Mental Health is something to keep up with even if im feeling better. Its good to stop for an hour or so every week and to focus. After the guided meditation i felt lighter every single time, especially the Loving Kindness meditation. I wanted more Breakout rooms though so we could share and listen more. That was where i connected and learned a lot. "

"I learned that its ok not to be ok. That i am not alone in the way i feel. I got to listen to others in how they feel and i got to speak about my feelings without being judged. It was being understood. The lovely comments from others about myself were great. I am so grateful for the course. Its about talking to people who are in the same boat, like minded people. Who 'get' where you are coming from. I know im not alone."



**OBLONG
MENTAL WELLBEING**



Headspace - Live Well Leeds

We ran several mental health and wellbeing groups between June 2019 and March 2020 including at St Luke's Cares, The Vale Circles and at a centre in Yeadon. The aims of the NHS and Leeds Community Foundation funded project were tackling loneliness; supporting carers to help people they care for remain independent; reducing health inequalities; reducing the use of Primary Care and A&E by supporting more well communities.



The groups focused on issues of self-esteem through the use of positive diaries, creative writing, affirmations, self-compassion and looking after ourselves, we worked on this and many group members reported an increase in self-confidence. Sessions on self-esteem, motivation, sleep problems, relaxation, music, assertiveness, anxiety, mindfulness, and the discussions that accompanied them, all led to useful exchanges of information and strategies that people found helpful. Sharing ways to manage these health issues and strategies for improving mental wellbeing were crucial to the groups. Reduction in anxiety around common health concerns - such as having a cold over Winter - reduced the impact on Primary Care. There are also many studies that say reducing isolation and loneliness can make us healthier.



Community Care Volunteering

Community Care Volunteers

Victoria is one of the weekly Community Care Volunteers.

"I'm originally from Argentina and have been living in Leeds for the past few years.

One of the things this pandemic breaking out made me realise was how far from my family I was, and that there wasn't much I could do for them from here. This reminded me of all the people that, like my grandma back in Argentina, could also be in need of someone's help because of the limitations the actual situation is putting on all of us.

So that's how I got to meet you and become a part of the amazing effort everyone at Oblong and the Rainbow Junction are doing to support our community.

It has been the most rewarding experience. The look on people's faces when you arrive and their kind words have made every effort worthwhile."

Thank you Victoria! None of this would work without all the amazing volunteer <3

This was a project we were initially approached about just at the end of the financial year 2019-20, as the scale and severity of the pandemic was just emerging. At the time we were still in the building 5 days a week, but immediately started to make partnerships and develop processes to meet this new and unforeseen need.

What has resulted is something I think we can be incredibly proud of as a community organisation.

The core of this project has been working with volunteers - primarily ones recruited and inducted via LCC and Voluntary Action Leeds, and initially inducted by VAL in basic procedures and safeguarding.

We could say a lot about this project, and it has shaped us hugely, however a lot of the impacts, challenges and learning happened beyond the scope of this report.



Community Care Volunteering

As a result of this work, our strategic relationships with local partners, statutory organisations, local councillors and the local community have improved immensely.

Our skills and innovation have also been recognised and applauded and this work puts us in a very strong position in the coming year to investigate further the needs of our communities and gain evidence of what is required of us as neighbourhoods are able to return to normal.



Ejiro is a Community Care Volunteer

"I wanted to help! I have previously volunteered helping people and students in Nigeria and recognise the need to help those in need. My mother is a nurse in Nigeria so as a family I have always been motivated to help people,,



Sarah is a Community Care Volunteer

"I sense many of the residents that I have encountered needed a helping hand before the pandemic, and will continue to need it long after. If this has brought to light situations where continual care can be offered and sustained then that can only be good. Perhaps funding allocations and priorities will be re-addressed. I hope that our shared memories continue to bring us closer as a community, and that human acts of kindness prevail"



Woodhouse Community Centre

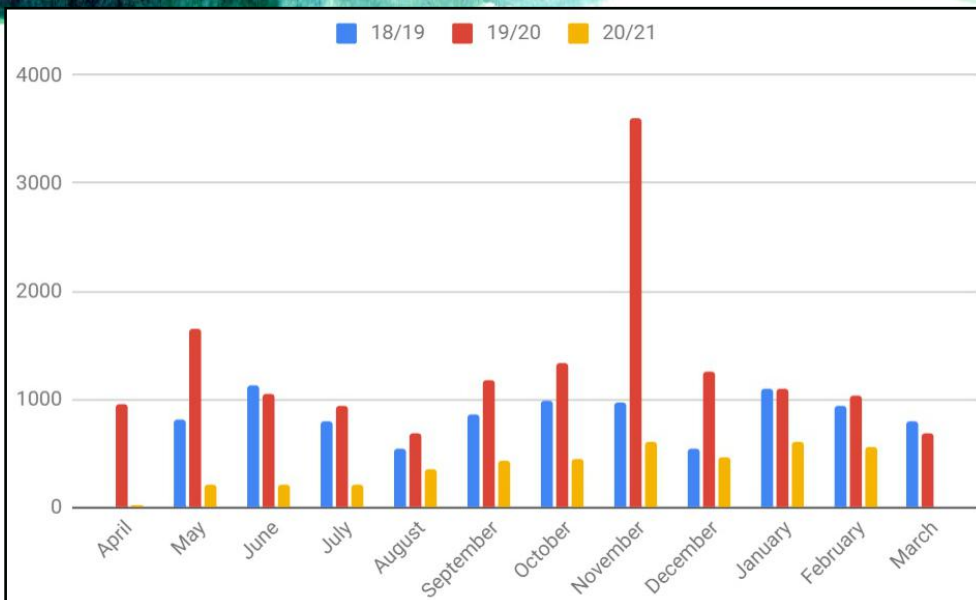


For the vast majority of the year 2019-20 we were able to retain working arrangements with most of our regular bookers, Leeds Community Clothing Exchange, Christ Church Central Leeds, QTT professional training, W Childcare Leeds, ESOI from PATH Yorkshire and our own projects, WEA Yoga and Homeopathy, the Youth Point team as well as a wide variety of ad-hoc bookings such as meals, kids parties and meetings.

We continue to have strong working relationships with our tenants Caring Together, Abigail Housing & Leeds Zen Group. We also enjoyed having In Touch Massage and Holistic Therapies in one of our smaller rooms until December 2019.

The significant spike in footfall (below) in May & November are polling station bookings (UK and Romanian respectively) it should also be noted that we made the building available as a polling station in December but the corresponding "spike" actually hid the fact the December is usually much quieter in terms of building usage. These events all involved a huge number of people through the door, but only for a short time each.

These, along with other logistically demanding events have further honed our skills in catering to more demanding organisations and improved our reputation as a capable and professional organisation.



The graph on the left shows increased footfall for 2019-20 (red columns) for most months over 2018-19 (blue columns)

It shows a predictable drop from April 2020 (yellow columns), with some increases from November 2020 onwards as lockdown changes allowed some regular bookers back in once safeguards were in place.



Development

To state that this last year has been challenging, would be an understatement! However, despite these challenges, and despite over half the staff team being on furlough for at least three months of last year, we surprisingly managed to sustain a steady income stream through successfully securing approximately £100K worth of grants this year.

These grants have been mainly to support our covid emergency response to local residents, and some have been to replace lost income we suffered as a result of the pandemic. This has been a very welcome and much needed lifeline, particularly as it allows us to cover core costs and overheads which would normally be covered through room hire and tenant income.

Much of the strategic work has been put on hold this year, but will be picked up as soon as it becomes feasible to do so. These are the development of our business plan for the next five years, and the large scale community consultation exercise we had planned for 2020. Both of these will feed into developing Oblong's 'Theory of Change' and enable us to map our direction of travel.

Our work, going forward, will obviously be affected by how the pandemic and its impact pans out, however, we are working on the basis of expecting things to improve in the next few months, enabling us to continue nearly normal business. On this basis, we are currently working on funding applications to secure grants for community support and empowerment projects. We are very aware that people are in great need of activities that bring them together as a community, to combat isolation, and to help improve their mental wellbeing, and it is these issues in particular we hope to focus on.

We are also very keen to reinstate our community consultation exercise as this will give us a good insight into the needs of our local communities, and help shape relevant future activities.



Finance Review

The financial statements for the year ended 31st March 2020 show:

- £182k Total income, £15k more than prior year.
- £4.5k added to unrestricted reserves, taking this up to £88k.
- £13k paid off from the debt owing on our building, taking the balance outstanding on the loan down to £194k.

In this financial year the organisation incurred a deficit of £678 which is a result of the completion of restricted funded projects on which income had been received and recognised in the previous financial year.

Unrestricted income grew this year, supported by grants that could be used for core spending and a slight increase in rental income, resulting in a profit of £4,598. 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.

At the end of the financial year the overall reserves of the organisation amounted to £195,359 of which £88,108 is unrestricted and can be used on any aspect of the charitable objectives of Oblong Ltd. We continue to work through our plan to build on our strengths, maximise the use of our Community Centre asset and grow our way towards a sustainable position.

