
2021 Impact Report



birdsong

We're birdsong, one of the UK's leading fashion social enterprises.

Since 2014 we've been partnering with charities and grassroots communities to create clothing for people who dress in protest.

Women have always found creative ways to make a statement with what they wear.

From the berets of the black panthers in the Sixties to the quiet resolution to only wear clothes made in the UK, fashion is an important ally for change.

We do slogans tees too— our No Borders and Still I Rise designs are some of our best-sellers — but we also make statements that last longer than the time it take to read a t-shirt.

Wearing our collection of original wardrobe staples is a protest in itself— against the fast nature of the fashion industry, against the obsessive pursuit of trends and against the systematic abuse of women in the production line.

We design clothes for remarkable women, but we're also made by them. We work with expert makers who face barriers to employment — from artists and printmakers to seamstresses and painters — and pay them London living wage to bring our designs to life.

It's estimated that 60 million women worldwide — aged 18-35 and working in the garment industry — make less than a minimum wage.

These are the people making the clothes we see on the high street everyday, and are hidden in the fashion supply chain. We know it's near impossible to track where your clothing comes from and who made it — and that's why we're here. Together, we can change the way fashion works.

Our Principles

- **Ethical working:**
Our team are paid London Living Wages for the work that they do.
- **Sustainable by design:**
Every garment is made to order, to minimise waste. We don't make more than we need to, or hold on to excess stock.
- **Local impact:**
We work with communities in London. Our supply chain here is made up of grassroots organisations, charities and fellow social enterprises. Our products are made in fair, equitable conditions by people otherwise facing barriers to work.

80%

Customer Net Promoter Score



Our mission lock

"We exist to provide women facing barriers to employment with living wage work, with a focus on low-income women in London. Where applicable, we also provide income to the women's services supporting them with our split-revenue model.

We promote fairly made, diverse fashion that isn't damaging to women's self-esteem or rights. We were founded to create lasting cultural change in the fashion industry.

The purpose of our company is to empower women: on both the consumer and production sides. We vow not to alter the appearance of anyone we work with, or feature on our site. We declare to only use supply chains we deem clean, ethical and transparent.

Where possible, we cut our environmental impact and use more sustainable and eco-friendly fabrics.

All the women who make our clothes should be paid a living wage. The only exceptional case is when the makers have democratically decided to donate their income to the good of the group or to another cause. This must be confirmed in writing with us.

Birdsong should be majority controlled in the interest of our social mission, and any directors or stakeholders should be made aware of this mission. We are a feminist organisation, and adhere to feminist values. This includes working together to stop the dehumanisation, exploitation and sexualisation of women and all people.

As a social enterprise we vow to:

- Rely on grants for less than 50% of our income.
- Reinvest at least 51% of profits back into our charity partnerships and the people they support.
- Keep our mission lock intact and enshrined in our legal documents. Our mission lock above is written into our company articles, and is legally binding.



Financial transparency

One of our goals for 2021 was to become more financially transparent.

With the pandemic forcing closures of our workshops and warehouse, we relied more on grant funding and sponsorship while we waited for production to be safe again.

How we spent: the good

£21,347.66

The additional amount we spent on procurement on local creatives and small, ethical businesses.

- Of these, 83% were women or women lead businesses.
- 33% were women of colour, with 100% of our multibrand budget being commissioned to talented designers from Black and Australian Aboriginal backgrounds.
- At least 17% of the creatives we funded were LGBTQ+.

This year we've been funded by a 50/50 split of sales income, and grants. Our total income for 2020 was:

£244,776

£122,938 in sales
£4,932 Patreon subscriptions
£96,906 grant funding
£20,000 bounce back loans



How we spent: the good

£33,040.87

In 2020 we provided this much in London Living Wages and revenue for the local charities and community groups in our supply chain.

How we spent: the bad

£23,196.37

We spent this much with big tech companies for software licenses and advertising. This included £13,313.97 on social media advertising.

Though we believe this necessary currently, as it provided us with a return on investment for sales, our 2024 goal is to switch to co-operative, ethical and open sourced tech alternatives

Team

Team costs

£48,490.84

In 2020 we were a team of two. In 2021 we became a team of five. Everyone on the main team is now on the same pay band of around £110 - £160 per day/£30,000 - £32,000 pro rata, with a higher rate for part-time freelance staff to account for sick leave and holiday pay.

Team breakdown

100% women.

60% from minority ethnic backgrounds.

20% LGBTQ+.

Working class, disabled and Black people are under represented in our team. We'll set targets to meet London benchmarks when we expand the team next.



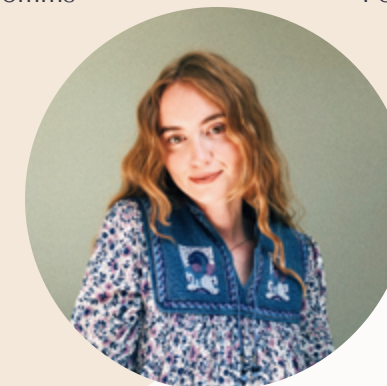
Sophie Slater
Founder/Comms



Susanna Wen
Founder/Design



Zarina Muhammad
Copy + Events



Lottie Hanson-Lowe
Social Media + Customer Support



Aoise Keogan-Nooshabadi
Partnerships + Funding

The fashion industry, as it stands

From colonialism, extraction of resources, and widespread workers' struggles, the fashion industry as it stands is in direct conflict with our planetary and ethical boundaries. Most brands operate in factories with little union representation, overtime, and poor COVID disease control, keeping women in the global south in poor health and poverty. This year in particular has drawn attention to bad industry practices, with many brands cancelling orders that have already been made during the pandemic, leaving millions of garment workers destitute.



"Women are desirable in the garment industry because employers take advantage of cultural stereotypes – to which women are often obliged to adhere – that portrays women as passive and flexible...Gender discrimination runs deep throughout all of the countries in which garments are currently produced. Women are frequently subjected to verbal and physical abuse and sexual harassment."¹

1 in 5

of global cotton products are made with forced labour.²

Exploitation

From child labourers in Uzbekistan, to the Xinjiang region of China, cotton harvesting is often farmed in conditions akin to modern slavery.

Most farming of cotton is now linked to the genocide of Ughur people in China. This cotton is used widely throughout the fashion industry.²

Colonialism

It's no surprise that the fashion industry relies on exploited labour from women of colour in the global south. Many Western brands are deliberately based in ex colonies, as an extension of colonial violence.

These suppliers may have autonomy in principle, but we're still trading along the same European colonial trade routes, for a fraction of the pay that would be expected of workers in the brands' native countries.³

Patriarchy

80%

of garment workers are women. And yet, 80% of the richest people working in fashion are men. Nine of "The Top 10 Billionaires in Fashion" listed for 2020 were men, with 8/10 of them being white.

Poverty wages

Despite an ongoing commitment to "sustainability" from huge fashion corporations, we believe that our planet is not sustainable without providing sustainable livelihoods to the people who need it most.

93%

of brands don't pay a living wage in their supply chain. The average worker in Bangladesh earns the spending power equivalent of just 69p an hour, for 60 hours a week.⁴

What is a Living Wage?

The Living Wage is an hourly rate, calculated according to cost of living in the UK. The London Living Wage is currently £10.85 per hour for 2021 and should be enough for essentials, emergencies, and for workers to provide for their families. This is not to be confused with the 'national living wage' of £8.72 which is the new minimum wage.⁵

Modern slavery here in the UK

In 2015, it discovered estimated that 10,000 garment workers in Leicester, England, were being paid £3 per hour. Fast forward to 2020, and not much has changed, with many brands coming under fire for paying domestic garment workers £3.50 per hour and offering no coronavirus protections.⁶

"At this moment, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the BAME groups and on South Asians in particular is well known. Increased exposure in small factories is particularly dangerous...In Leicester's garment factories however, Labour Behind the Label has received reports that workers have been told to come into work – even when they showed symptoms of COVID-19 – otherwise they would lose their job."

Volume

More clothes are being produced annually than we can ever wear, at poor quality levels so they that deliberately wear out.

Globally, 20 billion garments are made a year. Of these, H&M create 3 billion garments a year, and are sitting on \$4 billion dollars of inventory that they haven't sold.⁷

13 million items of clothing end up in UK landfill every week. The average garment is worn only an estimated ten times before disposal. Half of fast fashion produced is disposed of in under a year.⁸

2.1 billion tonnes

Carbon intensive by design

The fashion industry is responsible for 2.1 billion tonnes of carbon emissions every year. That's 6-10% of total global emissions. This is equivalent to the combined annual GHG emissions of France, Germany and the United Kingdom, or the entirety of shipping and international travel industries.⁹



20 billion garments are manufactured around the world every year. Half of fast fashion produced is disposed of in under a year.

birdsong
exists to
inspire and
implement
change in
the fashion
industry





"How often do you feel happy when doing your work for Birdsong?"

Never

Very occasionally

Sometimes

Often

All the time

"Have you ever experienced harassment or bullying while working for Birdsong?"

Never

Yes

"How often do you feel proud of your work for Birdsong?"

Never

Very occasionally

Sometimes

Often

All the time

"Have you made new friends or stronger friendships/ community when doing your work for Birdsong?"

Yes - definitely

Not sure

Not this year

No

"When you think about the next few months at your work, how do you feel?"

Happy

Excited

Worried

Other

"Do feel safe at work?"

Yes - definitely

Not as much this year

No

"Do you feel understood and respected at work?"

Yes

No

"Do you feel valued at work?"

Yes

No

"Do you trust your colleagues?"

Yes - definitely

No

"Is being part of an environmentally friendly company important to you?"

Yes - definitely

No

"Is being part of an organisation that empowers women important to you?"

Yes - definitely

No

Overview

"I'm happy that over the next few months we have lots of work and I have been supported during this past year which has been difficult."

We send our annual impact survey to our makers and team to answer. All answers are anonymous, and there is an inbox available for grievances or worries should they occur.

3
years
Average time our makers have been working with us

Case Study 1: T-shirts

Our base t-shirts are made by Earth Positive, in a factory based in Tamil Nadu, Southern India.

Fair cotton

No cotton from Uzbekistan or the Uyghur region of China is used - Indian cotton only.

Organic

It can often take 2,700 litres of water to make a single non organic cotton t-shirt, which is often irrigated, leaving water shortages.

The cotton used is farmed in the Indian region of Ahmadabad that receives up to 95% of its water from the monsoon rain.

It's also organic, meaning less harmful chemicals are used, and a much softer, kinder to skin final product. It is closed loop dyed, so no harmful chemicals are leaked out as pollutants in the process.

Fair Labour

Living wage premium payments have been made to all staff since 2016.

Free sanitary products have been provided to all menstruating staff since 2017.

Renewably powered

Our suppliers have reduced the CO₂ emissions from producing their t-shirts by 90%, certified by the Carbon Trust.

This is achieved by low-impact organic farming, efficiency in manufacturing and transportation, and the use of renewable energy instead of the fossil fuel based grid electricity.

The tees are then ship freighted to us, saving carbon emissions compared to sending by air.

Certified by:

- Oeko-Tex 100 Standard, Class I.
- Global Organic Textile Standard (G.O.T.S.)
- Carbon Trust 'Climate Neutral'.
- Fairtrade Labelling Association.
- Fair Wear audited.

"EarthPositive® is produced exclusively from organic cotton wholly sourced from India. The entire production process is controlled and certified in accordance with Global Organic Textile Standard.

Having taken the greenhouse gas emissions to pre-industrial levels, all the EarthPositive® products carry the registered mark 'Climate Neutral'."

**The average
t-shirt
creates
around
10.8kg of
carbon
emissions
from cradle
to grave.**

**Our base
tees create
671g of
carbon.**



Embroidered locally by Mona

Mona is a pillar of the local community in Bow, East London, a talented teacher and seamstress. She machine embroiders all of our best selling slogan t-shirts. She's also now employing local women to help her.

Mona teaches sewing to women and adults with learning disabilities from her community workshop, Bow Sewing Centre on the Gayton Estate in Tower Hamlets. Many are out of work, and survivors of domestic abuse. The sewing centre offers a safe and therapeutic space for her students to learn, come together, and find support.

The work provided by Birdsong accounts for up to 80% of Mona's total revenue. She uses this to reinvest in machinery and employ students, with some going on to start businesses of their own.

COVID-19

During the pandemic, our customers helped us to raise a hardship fund for all of our makers. We donated to Mona after she found herself stuck abroad at the beginning of lockdown.

She was then able to continue embroidering t-shirts for us, done in isolation at her studio. This provided much needed income as she was initially unable to run her sewing classes. These eventually went online, and she's now back teaching small groups.

"Birdsong have a strong impact, they help me grow my business because they know how to sell and can help me market my business in ways I couldn't. There is harmony between our ways of working, we understand each other."

"I am proud to be one of the Birdsong makers (providing embroidery services). I have never felt that I am displaced as a migrant, feeling lost or I can't fit in, but working with them has always made me feel at home, comfortable, accepted, safe, and understood. They support migrants and create job opportunities.

They also support our learning and the running of classes. I admire their commitment and vision of enabling women from different background (my students and myself) to become independent, with no limitations such as who we are or where we come from or where we live, as they provide job opportunities to many of my students. By providing work they give more opportunities to students to gain work experience."

£13,104.13 revenue made in 2020

2021: £25,000 target
2019: £11,313
2018: £4,055
2017: £1,137





Case Study 2: Cut + Sew

Most of the makers we work with are based in Tower Hamlets, an East London borough with a 57% child poverty rate. We selectively work with charities and community groups that offer wrap-around support for our makers, from English classes, employment skills, domestic abuse services, and a friendly, compassionate atmosphere.

Stitches In Time are a charity based in Limehouse, that lead a production team made up of talented women facing multiple disadvantage. Our makers there are previously unemployed, with no prior work experience.

The women who attend learn exemplary sewing skills on the Stitches In Time free training programmes and now work undertaking commissions. We pay 20% above London Living Wage for our made-to-order pieces, and work with the most proficient seamstresses.

All of our cut and sew lines (dresses, blouses, skirts and trousers) are made and finished here, in Limehouse Town Hall.

We only use the finest quality sustainable fabrics that are biodegradable, organic, or reclaimed/recycled.

Last year in March we pivoted to a made-to-order model to cut down on waste. We also switched to creating two collections a year. This has allowed us to expand our size range to UK 6 - UK 30, without creating any excess stock.

COVID-19

With the national lockdown, we had large periods of time in 2020 where our sewing workshop was closed to ensure the safety of our makers. This reduced the number of products we could make.

We commissioned face coverings and scrunchies that our makers could sew from home. We also kept online orders open, so that our makers would have guaranteed wages and work to come back to.

“For many years, I’ve been sewing birdsong’s clothes and at first I found it hard to make, but now, through lots of training and help I feel happy making these and enjoy it.”

“I enjoy working for a company that respects its workers...I really like all the styles and making nice outfits, they’re always enjoyable to make.”

£10,815 revenue made in 2020

2021: £25,000 target
2019: £8,431
2018: £3,041
2017: £2,643

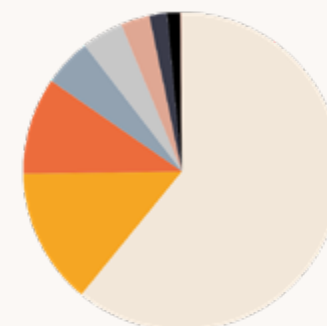


Fabric choices

We try to source the most responsible materials possible. There are pros and cons to any sustainable material, and unless entirely circular (it can be composted, give back to the earth, rather than poisoning it, and somehow offset all the energy, water and carbon used to fabricate it), then no fabric is 100% sustainable.

At Birdsong we mostly either use compostable, naturally derived fabrics (our Tencel Lyocell and Organic Cotton) or reclaimed fibres that would otherwise go to landfill. Due to lockdown, we mostly sold t-shirts in 2020. This means that over 61% of the material we used was organic cotton.

Organic cotton	61%
Responsible Gold	14%
Reclaimed	10%
Tencel	5%
Responsible Silver	4%
Khadi cotton	3%
Offcuts	2%
Bamboo Lyocell	1%
Recycled	0.2%



In 2021 we'd like to aim for 25% reclaimed fabrics and 10% Tencel.

Organic Cotton

We only use GOTS certified, Indian Organic Cotton. Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) ensures factories have met strict social and environmental criteria:

- Only low impact chemicals are used, water and energy is monitored, and wastewater is treated properly before being released.
- Working conditions are safe and workers' rights are protected.
- 80% of organic cotton is rainfed, not irrigated. This means that organic cotton isn't competing with precious local water resources.
- Organic farmers don't use toxic hazardous pesticides and artificial fertilisers, which helps keep waterways safe and clean.

- Organic cotton supports biodiversity and the wider environment by supporting healthy soils, mitigating the effects of climate change and by preventing toxic substances from polluting habitats.

TENCEL™ Lyocell

We source our printed fabrics from a family run factory called Mozartex, based in Wuxi, China.

The factory is an early adopter of greener practicers, with over 25 years of innovation, development and manufacturing expertise and long-term Lenzing Group partners.

Mozartex offer transparent use of TENCEL™ Lyocell fibres derived from renewable and sustainably managed plantations and forests with FSC® and PEFC™ certifications.

The team are committed to energy saving technologies and practices, such as cold pad batch, an air-flow machine for drying and internationally bluesign® certified brands for dyes and processing chemicals. They are SEDEX approved for ethical trade practices.

Our partner organisation prints the fabric in a Lancaster based SEDEX certified printer that is committed to environmental and social responsibility. They use trademarked direct-to-fabric Greentex pigment inks to create an Ecofast™, GOTS 5.0-certified printing process.

All ink systems are OEKO-TEX Standard 100 compliant. By using this process they consume approximately half the water required for typical Reactive Digital Printing and only a fraction of water required in conventional Screen Printing.

49% of conventional clothing is made with virgin plastics.¹⁰

Case Study 3: Shoes

"I enjoy using reclaimed leather to make different styles of shoes.

I enjoy making shoes for Birdsong and look forward to getting new orders every week."

Our shoes are hand made in Bethnal Green, East London, by Ruhela. We use reclaimed leather from local factories which would otherwise have gone to landfill.

Putting leather into landfill can release harmful chemicals that are often used during the tanning process, and glues that often contain volatile organic compounds.

High-street shoes

- 80% of conventional shoes are landfilled, and the remaining 20% incinerated.
- Most shoes are made up of dozens of components, in non biodegradable fabrics like polyester and polyurethane.
- The construction of these upper parts of the shoe contribute to around 60% of the carbon footprint of the final shoe."

2,658
Acerchicime
reperibus



Our shoes

- Made to order, so that stock is never wasted.
- Aside from our recycled vegan options, our shoes are made of four natural components that should break down more easily: Jute | Rubber/TPU soles | Reclaimed leather or vegan upper | Thread
- Using recycled materials significantly reduces this carbon footprint.



Case Study 4: Crochet + Knit

Knitting experts Georgie and Liz have been holding classes on behalf of The Over 50s Forum in Enfield for years in their local community centre. A diverse and welcoming group, Knit and Natter sessions offer a chance to make new friends, and to learn and improve knitting skills.

The women love having new projects to work on, collectively choosing to donate revenue from their knits to a different charity of their choice each month. This has been the local hospital during COVID.

During the pandemic, with many of our knitters shielding, Georgie and Liz have been taking on the bulk of Birdsong's commissions safely from home.

We partnered with Wool and The Gang for our patterns and yarns. Their Tencel® Yarn is made from fibres sustainably harvested from eucalyptus trees, using renewable energy. It's soft, silky and smooth, vegan and uses no harsh chemicals either.

We also used their Cotton Yarn made from leftover pre-consumer denim scraps. Offcuts get scooped up and re-spun into yarn, rather than heading to a landfill. This saves 20,000 litres of water for every kilogram of upcycled denim, and it doesn't use any harmful dye fixers or chemicals in this process.

£1,3098 revenue made in 2020

2021: £5,000 target
2019: £1,555
2017: £1,284
2017: £2643





Case Study 5: Post + Packing

Our postage and packaging is carried out by a charitable warehouse in Kentish Town.

MailOut is a social enterprise that provides training and well-being support for adults with learning disabilities and autism. MailOut support their trainees to pick, pack and post out orders for a variety of ethical brands, while learning general office and warehousing skills.

We pay around £2.50 in labour costs per parcel, and more for storage, which helps to cover fair wages for the trainees, emotional support, NVQ qualifications and training provided by MailOut.

Far from Amazon warehouses, where UK workers are expected to pick and pack around 300 orders per hour,¹² with disciplinary actions for missing targets, MailOut has a much friendlier and more relaxed environment. Our warehouse sent out on average 12 orders per day for us in 2020.

We've used the same ethically sourced and recycled cardboard packaging since 2015. From tissue paper, to our swing tags, packing tape and the printed care guides included with each order, we use recycled paper with natural rubber glue.

£7,464.75 revenue made in 2020

2021: £15,000 target
2019: £6,304.28
2018 £1,400
2017: £2643



“Coming to Mailout is very important to me because it means I’m coming to work. It’s very nice and I really like the people. I like it when there are new customers as I can learn how to pack their orders.”

During the pandemic, the warehouse shut to protect its trainees and staff. With our made-to-order items also being delayed, Birdsong's founders paused the business, and posted face coverings, jewellery and t-shirts out themselves from home, instead.

MailOut staff were incredible at supporting the trainees from their homes, with many shielding due to other health conditions, and struggling with the change in routine. Online support sessions and postal packages were given to all trainees.

Safety was MailOut and Birdsong's number one priority. The warehouse has since reopened, with strict social distancing measures in place, and all staff (including Birdsong) having vaccinations and testing before visiting.

Garment care and life-cycle

Extending the life of clothes by an extra nine months reduces its carbon, water, and waste footprint by around 20-30% each, and cuts the cost in resources used to supply, launder and dispose of clothing by 20%.¹³

With every order, we include a care guide printed on recycled paper. This covers caring for each fibre we work with, when to use Guppy Bags to catch micro-fibres, washing at lower temperatures, alternatives to washing, and where to go to pass your item on or get repairs.

Along with our instagram and blog, it includes educational prompts about waste colonialism and over production. Our online 'Caring for your clothes guide' was featured in Vogue Business.

Returns

It's estimated that between 30-40% of clothing bought online is returned, with the majority of stock then being destroyed. The transport of these returns alone has a huge environmental impact. With keen customer service and our made-to-order model, we have an industry beating returns rate of 4.5%, with all returns going back into inventory or sample sales. For 2021, we're looking in bike courier services for local collections, to cut down on transport emissions.

Rental

We're also collaborating with a leading rental platform, to get the most life out of our samples before they go into our sample sales. As we've pivoted to made-to-order, these pieces are often our only "excess" stock, but are used for fittings, lending out to press and influencers, or snapped up by the team.

Repair

One of our core aims for 2020 was to start a repair service through the women's workshop in Limehouse. This was postponed because of the pandemic, but we'd love to explore this as an option for customers in 2022. Facilitating a repairs service would enable us to create more revenue for less confident seamstresses and create more social impact, whilst keeping loved clothes in circulation for longer.

Resale

For the future, we have also paired with Shwap, a circular platform that tracks how our garments are faring in the world, and enables customers to donate, recycle or resell easily. We earn commission on each sale, encouraging us to design with longevity in mind. In future we hope to offer second-hand Birdsong clothing through Shwap on our own site.

"In sharing these tips with customers, Birdsong is part of a new movement to make the way we care for our clothes more sustainable."

- Vogue Business



Future Plans

Manifesto for a better fashion industry

We've worked hard over 2020 and 2021 to present evidence at several Fashion Roundtable events - an industry lobbying body that campaigns to MPs for a fairer fashion industry.

We've also presented at evidence gathering session for the CMA's Misleading Environmental Claims investigation. From these conversations, we looked at the system as a whole and decided to create 7 point manifesto. Our Ideas for a New Fashion Industry, was an event and report, on practical demands for structural change. This included rent control for community groups, VAT relief for ethical consumers, and tightening up the environmental claims that bigger companies can make.

The conversation about sustainability in fashion often offloads responsibility onto consumers and their individual choices, missing structural change completely. We know brands don't pull their weight, but we wanted to present suggested changes on a policy level.

Over 70 industry experts including Baroness Lola Young, Aja Barber, and Fashion Revolution Week founder Orsola De Castro attended.

“The manifesto was a way of pushing the conversation forward and trying to make it easier to do the right thing rather than focusing on the inevitability of exploitation.

We wanted to create something positive that enabled us to imagine a better future after a long year of health anxieties, job insecurities, mass deaths and grieving.

It was us saying, hey, why is it so hard to pay a Living Wage? If we're so tiny and we manage, why isn't everyone doing it? We took apart the reasons why it's so hard to run an ethical business.”

– Founder Sophie for Riposte Magazine

Birdsong open source

Following on from our manifesto, we want to use 2021/22 as an opportunity to expand more into digital goods and services. This will future proof our revenue streams, cut down on excessive production as the only means to growth, and serve our mission of creating a cultural blueprint for a better fashion industry post pandemic and Brexit.

We are starting by developing campaigning materials for customers on our Patreon site.

With our next funding round, our vision is to democratise and localise the fashion industry as well as empowering people facing barriers to work across the UK into sustainable and rewarding employment.

Our plan is to set up the UK's first open source fashion directory for makers across the UK. We will document the process of setting up Birdsong and our community of makers and create an accessible, "blueprint" guide for others. For a small subscription fee, community groups could access a bank of open sourced designs, prints, fabric manufacturers, packaging supplies and more, in order to scale the Birdsong model up and down the country.



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Appendix + references

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