

East West

Civic Leadership Forum



EVALUATION



Funded by
UK Government



Charity
Leadership
Scotland

acevo
imagine, inspire, improve

March 2026

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Voluntary and Community sector leaders are operating in a very challenging environment and we have consistently heard that it couldn't be more difficult. Specific challenges include reducing financial support, challenges with recruitment and retention, increasing levels of burnout and an increasing level of need in communities both in volume and complexity. This is resulting in real challenge for leaders to manage balancing immediate challenges and finding new and different solutions.

CO3, ACEVO and Charity Leadership Scotland (The Partnership) recognised a need to develop an opportunity to support leaders to make sense of the many challenges faced whilst having the time and space to think about what might be possible. The Partnership recognised that whilst there were differences in geographic experience there were also similarities in the key challenges that leaders were facing across the UK and as a collaborative the opportunity to widen the connection across the nations.

The Partnership knew from their collective insights from leaders and experience of delivering programmes that creating high quality spaces for learning and reflection can often unlock new thinking and learning. The Partnership are expert in creating the conditions for change and innovation to happen reducing loneliness, increasing connections and generating new thinking.

The East West Forum for Civic Leadership (programme) was created and designed bringing together senior leaders from the voluntary and community sector across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, to foster relationships and advance leadership capabilities through innovative and collaborative methods.



1.2 Programme Aims

The purpose of the programme was to strengthen East West connections by developing long lasting civic relationships drawing on the collective expertise of The Partnership. The programme pioneers a new approach, the first initiative of its kind to convene senior leaders across all four nations. The programme included a blend of online sessions and an immersive residential experience that enabled the sharing of good practice, peer learning and the development of deeper and trusting relationships.

The principles, aims and objectives of the programme were as follows:

Programme core principles

- Cross-boundary Collaboration: Facilitate meaningful engagement and partnerships across the four UK nations.
- Collective Effort: Encourage joint action and co-development of solutions to shared civic challenges.
- Systems Thinking: Promote holistic approaches that consider interconnections within civic ecosystems.
- Shared Purpose: Build a unified vision and mutual objectives amongst participants.

Programme Success Areas

- Strengthening East-West Civic Relationships
- Innovative Programme Design
- Facilitating Positive and Constructive Dialogue
- Building Leadership Capability
- Legacy and Continued Engagement and People to People Links

Programme Delivery

- Induction (Session 1)
- Navigating the CEO/Board Relationship in Complex Times (Session 2)
- 2 Day Residential in Northern Ireland (Session 3)
- Online Follow- Up (Session 4)

All sessions with the exception of session 3 were delivered online.



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Evaluation purpose and scope

A Monitoring and Evaluation Framework was designed to capture the programme progress and outcomes, with a particular focus on cross-boundary collaboration, collective effort, systems thinking, and shared purpose.

The evaluation design utilised both a qualitative and quantitative approach and various data collection methods including surveys, focus groups and video interviews.

The key limitation of the evaluation was assessing any long term impact as this would require further engagement and data collection with participants beyond the life of the programme.

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Findings by Programme Principles

The programme was designed to maximise the core principles stated, both in the approach and the design and delivery. The principles ensured that the optimum conditions for success were created and the programme had the maximum impact.

3.1 Cross-boundary Collaboration

There was a limited timeframe to build the connections and relationships required for open and honest conversations to happen, a critical component to maximise the impact for leaders. The Partnership therefore had to be very intentional utilising collective experience throughout the programme with particular attention given in the induction session.

90% agreed/strongly agreed that the induction created a welcoming and collaborative environment

50% agreed/strongly agreed that there were sufficient opportunities to get to know each other

60% agreed/strongly agreed that they felt more connected to other participants

90% agreed/strongly agreed that the activities helped them to understand better the experiences of other leaders

Participants were asked what could be added or changed to help with rapport building and these were further considered by The Partnership.

Comments included appreciation of the breakout space:

“I appreciated the breakout room cohort as there were lots of good crossovers of discussion points and experiences.”

‘Navigating the CEO/Board Relationship in Complex Times’ included a number of opportunities for group discussion and the post session survey asked participants if they felt psychologically safe to participate in the session, 100% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed demonstrating the required conditions where achieved.



The trust building work enabled rich, frank and impactful conversations to happen at the residential as described by one participant;

“I have been on this residential for the last couple of days and having that overnight stay has really, I guess, helped us to have that time to pause and reflect and get to know each other a little bit better which enables us to build a bit more trust and have open conversations.”

The Partnership continued to ask the participants both formally and informally on the delivery of the sessions and utilise their feedback to make changes. The responsiveness in the approach also built trust between The Partnership and the participants.

“great work embedding feedback into this session. Really nice way to collate the feedback and see the thoughts from a broad group of people. Well done!”

Feedback on areas that could be improved emerged from the residential and included being more intentional about maximising the opportunity for people to engage with as many of the cohort as possible. It was also suggested that creating even more space for group conversations would be beneficial and as one focus group participant highlighted, *“it was the journeying together that made it impactful”*.



3.2 Collective Effort

The programme design enabled participants on an individual and organisational level to think with peers and explore possible leadership shifts that could lead to solutions for different outcomes. ‘Navigating the CEO/Board Relationship in Complex Times’ enabled participants to identify the patterns in relationships and created the opportunity to think and learn from peers identifying what leadership shifts would create change.

Q: The session helped me to think about what actions that I want to take in the future

81% of respondents **agreed/strongly agreed**

The residential programme maximised this opportunity further with a number of dialogical spaces created. This enabled participants to talk through challenges using speaker input and lived experience to consider levers for change and possible solutions. These spaces scored highly on the residential programme particularly on day 2 with weighted average scoring between 4 and 5. (Rating scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree)

The post session survey’s identified this as one of the most valuable aspects:

“Dialogue around tables - sharing experiences and learning”

“A really invaluable opportunity to learn and share with others. The speakers and facilitators were thought provoking and motivating. Everyone entered into the spirit of open discussion and collaboration”

“Felt like a very human-first process - recognising the complexity of the landscape whilst also encouraging us to remain solution focused”

Feedback identified areas that could be strengthened including enhancing structure to some of the sessions and more information and framing on the agenda purpose.

3.3 Systems Thinking

A systems leadership approach was embedded throughout the programme and in the design of each element. ‘Navigating the CEO/Board relationship in Complex Times’, was designed based on systems leadership and created a strong foundation for the session which evaluated highly with participants, 100% agreed/strongly agreed that the session was a valuable use of their time.

The session gave participants a frame to consider how they make changes to improve relationships and what would help them to make the leadership shifts required.

“Putting what is happening within individual organisations within wider systems context”

Systems leadership was a founding principle of the residential programme design and included expert facilitation to support that thinking delivered through 2 agenda sessions.

- Power, responsibility, and leadership in uncertain systems
- The civil society landscape: current pressures and leadership demands

The residential in particular had a bigger picture focus with all of the inputs supporting systems thinking allowing participants to consider the full civic eco system and their influence in it.

3.4 Shared Purpose

The participants had the opportunity throughout the programme to influence its design and delivery and specifically decided on the theme, ‘Navigating the CEO/Board Relationship in Complex Times’. The Partnership was extremely responsive to feedback and was able to pivot and ensure that the programme evolved over the period.

The residential gave participations the opportunity through facilitated discussion to identify the challenges and think together about what that meant for their leadership and the sector as a whole.

Common pressures and shared challenges were identified by the group as:

- Layered, cumulative pressure
- Funding insecurity
- Deep people pressure
- Responsibility drift
- Fragility of trust
- Convergence of pressures
- Unease around identity

The following leadership vision was developed from the output of the discussions.

Residential Thematic Summary

QUESTION: If we look ahead 3-5 years, what must civil society leadership across the UK be braver or clearer about that it is today?

1
Leaders need to speak out with a positive narrative on the society that we want to see, with a focus on the issues and our strength in response. Doing this with others will enable us to be brave...



2
Being brave looks like stepping back/standing our ground on what's important/serving our mission and leaning into new innovations to create more space

3
This space can maximise our impact and ensure our organisation is fit for delivery, enabling us to talk about it effectively (circling back)

Finally, we considered what needed to change in our thinking as a sector if we are to enable the change we seek to be implemented which developed into the following statement.

“We need to hold our value strong in our conversations and presentation with a more confident narrative driving a cultural shift across the sector.”

From the outset The Partnership identified an opportunity to build on its strength and identify further opportunities for future collaboration. This element was incorporated into residential programme and the online follow up session. Suggestions included further work on misinformation and succession planning, supporting the leadership pipeline and communicating our value more strongly. The Partnership will make full consideration of the suggestions and scope future opportunities for collaboration.

4 Findings by programme objectives

In addition to the programme principles there were five key objectives identified. This section will outline progress towards achievement as well as highlighting challenges in achieving the desired impact.

4.1 Strengthening East-West Civic Relationships

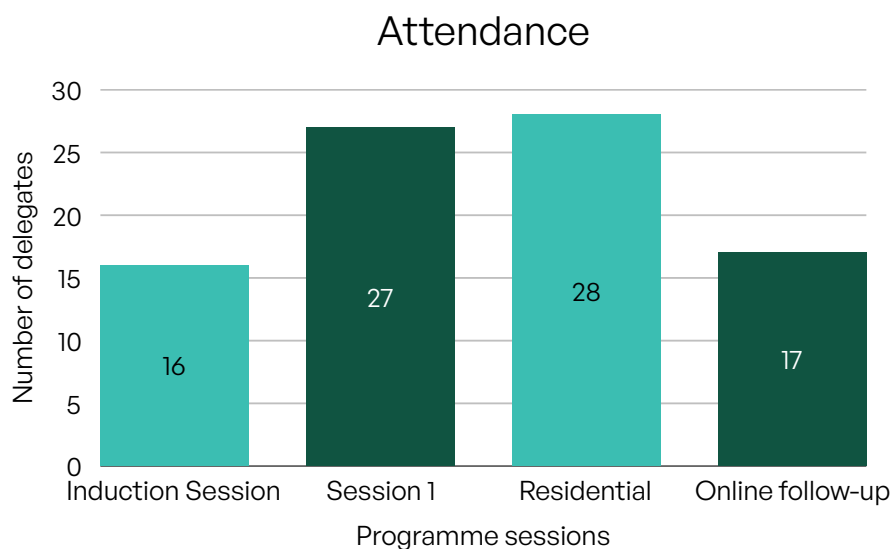
The Partnership aimed to engage 30 CEO's from across the four nations, we secured 32 registrations:

England & Wales – 10

Northern Ireland – 12

Scotland – 10

Engagement over the period was strong, 'Navigating the CEO/Board Relationship in Complex Times' and the residential having the highest attendance in the programme overall.



The Partnership's learning was captured through a focus group which identified that attendance and engagement would have been maximised through a longer lead in time for the Induction. It was also felt that ending after the residential would have given a stronger finish than delivering a further on-line follow up.

As identified in the principles section of the report The Partnership worked to ensure that the conditions were created to build trust strengthening the opportunity for people to build relationships and to get to know each other better. What we are unable to assess at this stage is whether those relationships will be sustained into the future or will create any further collaboration. Focus group attendees suggested potential opportunities for the group to come together in the future which will be considered by The Partnership.

The Partnership focus group identified the value of the three organisations working together, it was a strategic and partnership test and a new way of collaborating. The group was extremely positive on how strong the partnership working was, that everyone brought different capabilities and strengths and that it was a great indicator of how they could all work together.

They agreed that the strong co-ordination and frequent communication from CO3 was critical and their shared commitment to their members meant that they were all very aligned on purpose. Everyone enjoyed the experience and learned a great deal from each other as well as from the delivery of the programme which would enable greater strength in future.

The Partnership has committed to running the programme again for a new cohort and is seeking funding to support this. In addition the suggestions and engagement outcomes from participants will be considered and shape next steps.



4.2 Innovative Programme Design & Facilitating Positive and Constructive Dialogue

Bringing leaders together from across the nations in itself was a new innovation and signaled the first partnership venture between CO3, ACEVO and Charity Leadership Scotland. The Partnership is satisfied that the programme delivered impact for participants and that the partnership approach was executed with support and challenge. This is a great place to build from to strengthen relationships further and consider where they can create further impact.

This programme was the first of it's kind therefore they had to rely on their knowledge and insights of the current landscape and experience in order to design the programme.

The Induction (Session 1)

The purpose of session one was to introduce The Partnership and funders, set expectations for the programme and create initial peer connections across the cohort. Overall the session achieved this however it was identified that further reflection space was required to enable this to happen more deeply.

“Seeing the breadth of organisations involved and the potential that i think will come out of it.”



- The induction allowed me to reflect on what success looks like in this programme
- The structure and timeline of the programme were clearly explained
- I understand the objectives and expected outcomes of the programme
- The induction provided a clear overview of the programme



As identified previously the Induction successfully enabled participants to connect whilst recognising that not everyone could attend.

Navigating the CEO/Board relationship in Complex Times (Session 2)

‘Navigating the CEO/Board Relationship in Complex Times’, a theme identified by participants during the induction session. Careful consideration was applied to the design of the session to ensure strong outcomes taking a systems leadership approach. Pre reflection instruction was issued to participants to maximise the thinking and value of the session.

This agenda was designed to create a thoughtful, supportive space for leaders to reflect on the real dynamics of working with Boards under pressure — not governance mechanics, but the patterns, emotions, expectations, and influence that shape decision-making when things feel stretched.

The session evaluated highly and in addition to the high outcomes achieved created learning for the host organisations and an asset for future sessions in their own nations. Charity Leadership Scotland delivered a similar session in March 2026 to CEO’s in Scotland with positive feedback from participants received.

SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESULTS

Setting the Scene

Q1 - The purpose and objectives of the session were clear to me from the outset

- 100% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed with 75% of respondents strongly agreeing with a weighted average of 4.75 (out of 5)

Q2 - The context setting felt relevant to the session

- 100% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed with a weighted average of 4.63 (out of 5)

Q3 - The presentation about the governance landscape provided valuable context to support the group discussions

- 100% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed with a weighted average of 4.56
- *“Really strong & useful session”*

Group Discussions

Q1 - The group discussions helped surface real and relevant patterns between CEOs and boards

- 94% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed

Q2 - The session helped me to think about what actions that I want to take in the future

- 81% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed

Group Learning

Q1 - The reflection time helped consolidate my learning from the discussions

- 94% agreed/strongly agreed

Q2 - I am clearer about how I might change my own behaviour or approach as a result of this session

- 75% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed

Overall rating of the session

Q1 - Overall, this session was a valuable use of my time

- 100% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed

Q2 - I would recommend a session like this to other charity leaders

- 100% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that they would
- *“Much food for thought. Good to know i am not alone”*
- *“I'll reflect on the learning and experience from the session, it was thought-provoking”*

Key learning from the session included:

- The effectiveness of both a lived experience perspective and a robust context analysis
- The facilitators were able to create a safe environment encouraging openness and honesty which enabled the issues to surface. Whilst it enabled people to think about their own leadership behaviour and what they could do, this was not achieved for some participants in the session.
- The legacy of the work that can be utilised for the host organisations to benefit their membership as well as the wider leadership community.

Residential (Session 3)

The residential took place over 2 days in Northern Ireland with a carefully designed programme taking into account the learning from the first two programme sessions. The residential offered a rare, high-trust space for experienced civil society leaders across the UK to:

- Make sense of the misinformation era and its implications for trust, advocacy and voice.
- Reflect on the complex systems, relationships and governance challenges shaping leadership reality.
- Rehearse plausible futures for civil society and test their leadership responses.
- Co-create a shared leadership agenda for ACEVO, CO3 and Charity Leadership Scotland to champion across borders.

Participant Outcomes

By the end of the residential, participants will have:

- Renewed clarity and energy about purpose and leadership identity.
- Peer-derived strategies for navigating misinformation, governance and systemic complexity.
- Scenario-tested insights into the leadership models needed for the future.
- A shared leadership agenda identifying cross-nation priorities and opportunities.
- Concrete action commitments for implementation by participants, supported by accountability partners.

The programme was delivered using a number of methods including speaker input, lived experience panel, facilitated group discussion and reflection opportunities.

We asked participants how they would rate the overall experience of the residential and it scored a 4.4 weighted average.

“Being with a group of bright passionate and thoughtful leaders who are all of us leading in a time of volatility, uncertainty and division”

“Peer group; not feeling isolated in some of the current challenges. Hearing diverse perspectives but a fundamentally aligned purpose.”

“A really invaluable opportunity to learn and share with others. The speakers and facilitators were thought provoking and motivating. Everyone entered into the spirit of open discussion and collaboration.”

The post session survey assessed content and impact and one of the clear benefits was being with other leaders. This was further explored in the participant and The Partnership focus groups and it was clear that having the opportunity, in person for discussion, experience sharing and sense making was one of the most impactful elements. Specifically reducing loneliness and isolation that leaders can experience and in terms of learning from peers

“That I give myself permission to breathe. And take challenges in turn. It’s a lonely job, but I’m not alone”

- It was valuable to learn alongside other leaders
- The content balanced theory, reflection, and practical application
- How effective were the sessions in helping think through possible future scenarios and how you would respond?
- To what extent has the residential helped you make sense of the misinformation era



The focus group discussions identified that the speaker inputs were interesting and inspiring however more space for discussion with peers would be beneficial. This correlated with the survey results in that time spent learning alongside other leaders was highly valued. It was also suggested that further utilisation of the experience in the room and the opportunity to connect the night before the programme would enhance relationship building even further.

Online Follow - up (Session 4)

The purpose of session 4 was to reconnect leaders with the shared insights from the residential, deepen reflection and identify a small number of cross-nation priorities that would strengthen collective voice, trust, and legitimacy.

The session included presenting an analysis of the dialogical discussions at the residential and the key themes that emerged. Participants had the opportunity to reflect on leadership boundaries, thinking through ways to strengthen them and what would support this to happen.

In addition the group had the opportunity to think together about any cross nation priorities that could be considered by The Partnership for future collaboration. In summary they focused on how the sector elevates it's value and builds on the pioneering work that the East West Civic Leadership Forum has initiated across the four nations.

The Partnership focus group reflected on this session in depth and concluded that whilst there were valuable elements ending the programme after the residential would have created better flow of the overall programme delivery.



4.3 Building Leadership Capacity

There was one consistent theme throughout the East West programme that was valued most by the participants, the opportunity to step back, have time and space to think and do it through honest dialogue with colleagues across the nations. The impact of that cannot be understated and vastly outweighed any other benefit felt by the participants. This was also identified in the post induction survey and during the breakout sessions as one of the key aspects participants were looking for.

Asks from the programme:

“Collaboration and networking away from the day to day and to contribute something long lasting to the sector which we all serve in.”

“energy, inspiration, challenge, newer and more diverse networks drawn from people/orgs with different experience”

“discover and explore experiences across the nations - commonalities and learning from the others , but also to share some of our experiences”

It was clear in feedback both directly and indirectly that the peer learning, connection and opportunity for sense making had the greatest impact on increasing leadership capacity including resilience, skills and confidence. It gave people energy and sparked new thinking and reminded them of the importance of creating these opportunities for themselves and their teams.

The focus group identified that creating space to think about the big things rather than always being focused on the day to day makes more effective leaders and that was where the real impact was realised. They identified that it enabled people to share challenges and fears that they didn't feel they could share with others increasing faith and reducing feelings of isolation. The value of hearing the experience of others at different stages of their leadership journey was hugely valued and was achieved due to the trust that was built and the connections that were made.

This experience identified throughout the evaluation as really invaluable for a number of the participants:

“Time is precious – this was a good use of my time”

“Uplifting and felt recharged, even though it can feel like dark times”

As identified, one of the limits of the evaluation was being able to capture the long term benefits of attending the programme but we did ask people what they hoped to gain from it in the future.

What I hope will be different as a result of the residential:

“There will always be challenges to face, but when I’m facing them, if I can think back to some of the ideas and suggestions generated through this residential, and they support me in addressing these challenges, that will be a success”

“More time to spend fostering / developing new relationships for collaborative partnerships”

“shifting my 26-27 plans into a bolder space”

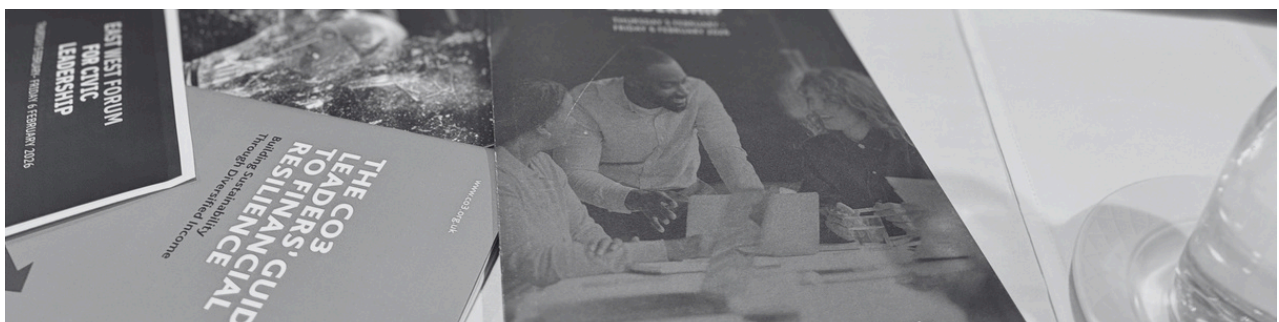
4.4 Legacy and Continued Engagement

The Partnership created a Resource Hub that was identified as adding value by the participants in the focus group. The hub included the resources for each session and a recording of the key elements that the participants could revisit or utilise if they had missed a session. Key reports and documents were also included to support learning throughout the programme.

Programme collateral has already been utilised by Charity Leadership Scotland to deliver a session to their membership and the focus group with The Partnership highlighted that learning and resources would be utilised in their own organisations work.

The Partnership will come together to reflect on the learning and opportunities for further collaboration as well as executing their commitment to run the programme for a second time.

The Partnership is unable to ascertain at this stage if participants will continue building on connection but are clear that it opens up further opportunity for connection across the four nations.



5

Conclusions & Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The evaluation demonstrated high value for participants as described through the various data collection methods and as observed by The Partnership. The key findings identified effectiveness in creating the conditions for trust, open and honest dialogue and utilising speaker engagement to support new thinking and perspectives.

The programme demonstrated alignment and relevance in the challenges of the current context and enabled participants to sense make and think together of potential solutions both in their own situation as well as for the wider sector. In conclusion it was a success, the key conclusions from the process are:

Effective partnership working: The Partnership demonstrated what effective collaboration looks like and was a key success factor to the impact achieved by the programme. The relationships were built on common purpose and values with proactive project oversight and execution of the programme.

The importance of connection especially in times of polarisation:

Leading can be lonely and at times feel isolating especially in the volatility currently being experienced in the sector. Being with others in connection and relationship should not be underestimated, this is where sense making, ways through and energy can be found to keep going enabling forward movement with renewed goals.

More time needed for sense making and solutions: Leading with agency can be challenging with the multiple demands on leaders. Creating space and time that is free from interruption to produce quality thinking on the big picture is difficult. The partnership created this highly valuable opportunity and should continue to create spaces that enable quality thinking and innovation.

Peer learning through lived experience: There is no doubt that the speaker input was highly valuable and a strong addition to the programme however the value of peer learning - particularly in person - should be built on. This was identified as a strong element of the programme including the value added through a cross-nations approach.

Appetite for collective action: It was clear that there were challenges experienced across the nations that were shared and could not be overcome by individual leaders or organisations alone. Leaders expressed a need for problems to be addressed collectively where this would have the greatest impact.

5.2 Recommendations

1. CO3, ACEVO and Charity Leadership Scotland make consideration of participant suggestions on cross nation priorities and further opportunities for collaboration.
2. CO3, ACEVO and Charity Leadership Scotland explore ways to further create space for connection, sense making and solution generation with their individual memberships.
3. CO3, ACEVO and Charity Leadership Scotland secure funding to deliver a new cohort for the East West Forum for Civic Leadership, learning from the feedback and the experience of participants.
4. Key findings from this report are shared more widely to support learning and possible developments for leaders in the community and voluntary sector.



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