



RESEARCH REPORT

Insights into the experiences of commissioning for small VCSE organisations in the Forest of Dean

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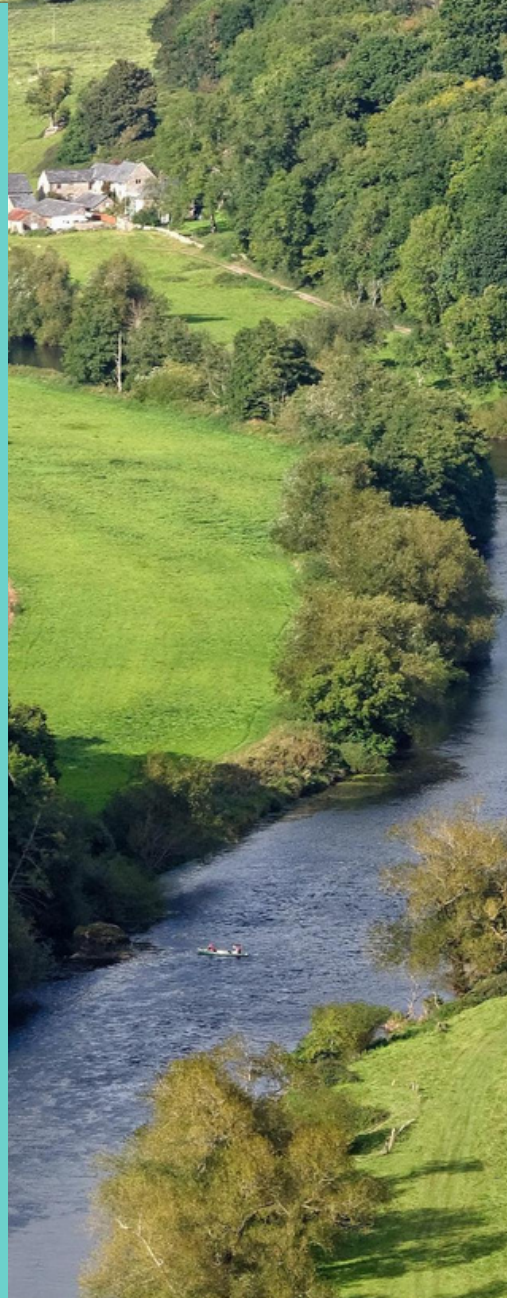


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Summary

This research explores the experiences of health and care commissioning for small/micro VCSEs in the Forest of Dean. The research involved two focus groups involving 13 VCSE organisations (five were small or micro) and two local authorities.

Key Findings

Experiences of commissioning:

- Large VCSEs were generally perceived to have a more positive experience of commissioning and its relevance
- Commissioning needs to better respond to local needs and engage small/micro VCSEs
- Commissioning has varied and multiple implications for VCSE organisations
- There are signs of improvement in commissioning practices and processes

Awareness, learning and understanding of commissioning

- Small/micro VCSEs often found it difficult to find out about commissioning opportunities
- Small/micro VCSE organisations tended to lack understanding of commissioning

Barriers and enablers to engaging in commissioning

- Commissioning was not viewed as inclusive of different voices, including small/micro VCSEs
- There was a perception that commissioning is only for senior managers and directors
- Commissioner behaviour, processes and systems were perceived as a barrier to engaging VCSEs
- Lack of resources and capacity within small/micro VCSEs constrains engagement

Conclusions and implications

For commissioners:

- Support and remunerate small/micro VCSEs to enable them to participate in commissioning
- Promote and participate in spaces bringing commissioners and VCSEs together
- Work with infrastructure organisations to ensure timely information flows to the VCSE sector
- Support collaboration and consortiums of VCSEs

For VCSE sector

- Share knowledge and understanding of commissioning processes across the sector
- Promote collaboration and ways of working together in the sector
- Participate in spaces bringing together commissioners and VCSEs

1. Introduction

This report summarises findings from research exploring the experiences of health and care commissioning amongst small and micro voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire.

It is part of a research study on the third sector and health and care commissioning, being carried out by the Universities of Plymouth and Birmingham and funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR).

This is exploring how VCSEs and commissioning organisations (such as Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), Local Authorities and Integrated Care Boards) work together with the aim of improving practice in commissioning.

A key part of the research has been the involvement of co-researchers based within VCSE organisations across England. Co-researchers focused on different themes or aspects of commissioning with the findings feeding into the wider research study.

In the Forest of Dean, the co-researcher, CEO of Forest Voluntary Action Forum (FVAF), Chris Brown, was particularly interested in the experiences and impact of commissioning practices and processes for small and micro VCSE organisations



2. Background

The vast majority of VCSE organisations in England are small and micro organisations, with 80% of voluntary organisations earning under £100,000 in 2019/20 (NCVO, 2022). Within the Forest of Dean, FVAF estimates that around 97% of the sector can be defined as ‘small’ or ‘micro’.

Wider research highlights the importance and distinctiveness of small VCSE organisations in providing services and activities in communities that are ‘additional to the provision of larger charities and public bodies’ (Dayson, 2018, pii). This includes but is not limited to greater connections and trust with communities, direct access to local solutions and activities that build social capital, and the utilisation and development of other voluntary organisations and community groups.

This was particularly highlighted during Covid-19, with small organisations quickly responding to the crisis, providing a ‘consistent and trusted presence for vulnerable communities for the duration of the pandemic’ (Dayson, 2021, p3).

In their report ‘Respond, Recover, Reset, Two Years On’, the NCVO (2022) received over 6,000 responses from VCSE organisations that were active during the pandemic. 70% of respondents were from organisations with a ‘local’ focus.

Research suggests there are a number of challenges which prevent their full value being realised within communities.

This includes the adverse affects of public sector cuts and approaches to commissioning and procurement “that favour economies of scale over more tailored and responsive approaches” (Dayson et al, 2018, pi). Chris Zacharia (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2018) argues that “as contract values increase, these changes in the third sector are driven as much by cost pressures, ‘transactional efficiency’, and commissioner convenience as they are by an understanding of the real needs of the service users on the frontline.

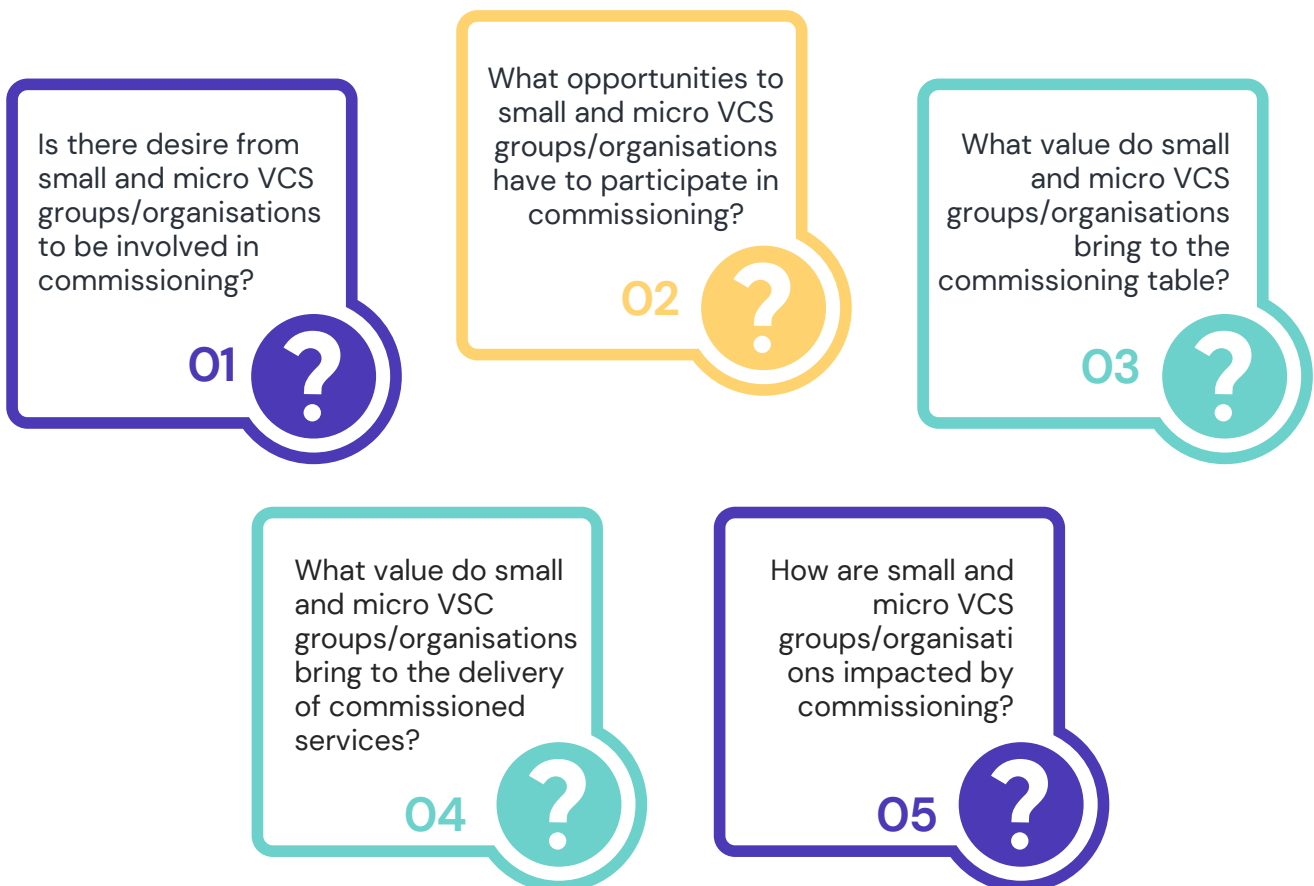
Research is revealing that smaller charities are increasingly finding themselves competing with much larger ones for contracts, or being used by bigger charities as ‘bid candy’ and, if successful, having to accept subcontracting on unfair terms”.

Background

Gloucestershire VCS Alliance (State of the Sector Report, 2023) revealed that despite small and micro charities making up the majority of the sector in Gloucestershire, they receive only 7.55% of VCSE funding. Despite the active role of micro organisations during the pandemic, they saw a 7% decrease in funding in 2020 and a 15% decrease in funding in 2021. By contrast, large charities received an increase in funding of 41% in 2020 and 15% in 2021.

Some argue that larger VCSE organisations are a safer pair of hands when it comes to commissioning as they will likely have stronger governance, processes, and appropriately skilled trustees with a better understanding of risk management (Institute of Risk Management, 2016). Dayson et al. (The Value of Small in a Big Crisis, 2021) however believes that smaller charities not only show greater resilience than their larger counterparts, they also demonstrate the essential ability to change direction quickly, make incremental adjustments and innovations where required.

In light of this research and the extensive involvement of small and micro organisations in the VCSE sector in the Forest of Dean, this research looked to address five key questions:



3. Methods

Two online focus groups, each 1.5 hours in length, were organised by FVAF to capture local views and experiences of health and care commissioning.

Personal invitations were sent to 73 people and 15 participated in the groups who work/volunteer with the following:

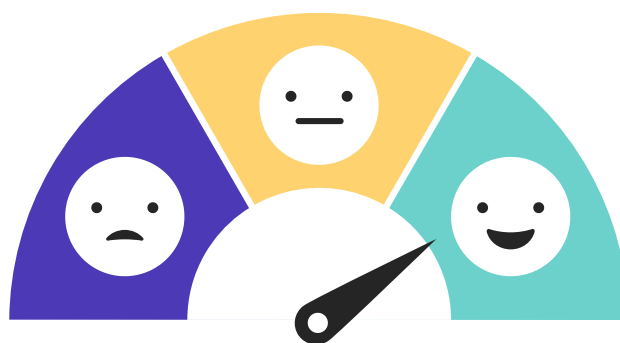
Micro VCSE organisation – 2

Small VCSE organisation – 3

Medium VCSE organisation – 3

Large VCSE organisation – 5

Local Authority – 2



The focus groups were facilitated by the co-researcher and researchers from the wider project team. A topic guide was used to help guide the questions, but a flexible approach was taken to reflect the issues that were most relevant to the experiences of those participating.

All participants were asked to consent to being involved in the research and for anonymous quotations to be used (in line with the wider project's research ethics agreement).

Transcripts of each focus group discussion were produced and key themes coded to draw out findings.

Whilst this report discusses the findings from these two focus groups specifically, the data will also be used to inform findings of the wider study of VCSE and health and care commissioning across England.

This report summarises the findings from the focus group research, structured around the three themes discussed

- 1) experiences of commissioning;
- 2) awareness, learning and understanding about commissioning;
- 3) barriers and enablers to engaging in commissioning.

The final section of the report identifies implications from the findings. It should be kept in mind when reading this report that the findings are based on a relatively small sample of local organisations.

4. Findings

4.1 Experiences of commissioning

The experiences of focus group participants with health and care commissioning varied, from those who had very little involvement to those who engaged extensively and had regular contact with commissioners.

It was felt that larger VCSE organisations generally had a more positive experience of commissioning and its relevance to them.

As the quote opposite suggests, some large VCSEs felt they had relatively strong and open relationships with commissioners:

In contrast, small/micro organisations often felt that commissioning wasn't aimed at them and felt disconnected from commissioning practices and processes:

It means a very distant term really to be honest, when I hear grants that's more connective, that's more lay language

I've always felt commissioning is far above me, lots of bureaucracy and not something that us small charities can get involved in. The commissioning I've seen have always been for much larger amounts and for much larger projects.

Some participants felt that the commissioning of services was weighted towards larger VCSE organisations and those with existing relationships with commissioners, disadvantaging small and micro organisations.

Participants alluded to commissioning as like playing a game, carrying a degree of deception.

Always certain people and there's a lot of schmoozing goes on, so it's sort of funnelled into a certain group quite often in this sector.

So, that's my bug bear about commissioning is we need to start looking at the little guys that are doing just the same job but not getting the commissioning funding.

Findings

4.1 Experiences of commissioning

Participants felt commissioning needed to better respond to local needs and engage small/micro organisations that understand and respond to those needs. Concerns were raised about large contracts that weren't specific to local contexts and the 'parachuting in' of national organisations to deliver services in areas where small local organisations were already delivering local projects and activities:

I think really for a long time that focus the grander contracts has meant that people are dealing with things and messing with situations that they haven't got any idea about because it's happening way over there in a completely different context and it's evolved from different history to the one that they were brought up in.

I feel that what is being commissioned is actually quite out of touch with actually what people want and need.

Commissioning has varied and multiple consequences for VCSE organisations. Focus group participants reflected on the potential outcomes of commissioning, both positive and negative, on VCSE organisations.

On the one hand, being commissioned brought funding into organisations, often over a long period of time, but on the other, some thought it could lead to mission drift or forced organisations to change their ways of working to try to fit commissioning models:

So I think that there is sort of a slight pressure for the commissioned organisation to change its practice in order to be able to fit the targets of the commissioning organisation. That's the downfall...The other side of it is that it does enable some organisations to actually grow and develop their services. My concern is the lack of total independence around that.

Findings

4.1 Experiences of commissioning

There were some signs that commissioning processes were improving. A number of focus group participants suggested that commissioner attitudes, approaches and processes were changing for the better.

They remarked on 'more open conversations' with commissioners, a move 'towards the local', improved engagement with service users in the design of services and increasing focus on engaging and empowering small VCSE organisations within commissioning.

One micro VCSE commented:

"I think there is a will to do things and I'm getting a sense at the moment, post COVID, it feels like there's a will to genuinely do co-production"

Large organisations also highlighted a shift in commissioner behaviour and approaches:

"I guess for me there are some definite positives there, some really open conversations, and they seem to have been more open in the last 12 months than before, but yeah it's a work in progress because let's not rest on our laurels just yet because it's a long old road"

"It seems that the commissioners or the project leads there are very trusting in us and bringing in our real lived experience in what we're trying to deliver and how that's going to be delivered on a county wide and how they're entrusting us."

The medium and large VCSE organisations, in particular, highlighted how there had been a recent shift in levels of trust and honesty between VCSEs and commissioners.

Not all, however reported positive changes, with concerns voiced about the scaling up and 'tightening up' of commissioning processes, seen to disadvantage smaller VCSE organisations who might lack the capacity and economies of scale to engage:

"But actually by tightening the process I guess the organisations that are interested in going through the tender process and being part of the delivery of the service, is perhaps moving more towards regional or county wide organisations...And you run the risk of getting a one size fits all outcome then which doesn't work in a rural community."

Findings

4.2 Awareness, learning and understanding about commissioning

Focus group participants were asked how they know and learn about commissioning.

Small/micro VCSE organisations felt it was difficult to find out about commissioning opportunities. The commissioning landscape was described as 'complex' and challenging and participants highlighted how it was particularly difficult for small/micro organisations to find out about commissioning.

Participants highlighted how it was difficult for smaller organisations to access commissioners – sometimes they did not know who to approach – and the challenge of being in the 'right place at the right time' for learning about commissioning opportunities:

“Sense of how do we even know who to go and talk to, how do you identify the commissioners that you need to talk to, it feels quite a complex world to enter into.”

“It tends to be a case of who you know rather than what you know. If you can knock on the right person then you're well away, but if you don't then that's a bit of an issue””

Small/micro organisations highlighted that a lack of resources and capacity to actively find out about commissioning and seek out or develop relationships with commissioners was a particular challenge. It was difficult for small/micro VCSEs to dedicate the time to this.

“Because my problem as a small charity is I don't have the time to go out and hunt around and find the right commissioners for the services....I don't get anything because I don't know who to go and ask.”

Small/micro VCSE organisations also tended to identify a lack understanding of commissioning as a challenge. Some participants felt that these organisations started from a 'deficit' position within the commissioning landscape because they were more likely to lack the understanding of commissioning processes and practices.

“For small organisations we don't really understand commissioning and we don't really know what it's doing.”

The above quote contrasts with the experiences of one of the larger organisations that can draw on the knowledge and experiences of a former commissioner.

“We've got a guy who, he's an ex-commissioner, he's very well in with the commissioners around Gloucestershire and keeping that relationship going is sort of fundamental to his job.”

Findings

4.3 Barriers and enablers

A number of barriers and enablers to engaging in health and care commissioning were highlighted by participants.

Commissioning was not viewed as inclusive of different voices, in particular small organisations and those with lived experiences. Some participants felt that commissioning practices and processes, including the design of services were not equitable and that the involvement of individuals in these processes often felt 'tokenistic':

:

“

What they've done is they've involved existing people that they commission. But that's not involving the community, that's not involving the voluntary and community sector, that's just involving people they've commissioned already.

People with lived experience can quite often get rolled out as a way to confirm the tender process or what's been designed and why it will be effective.... But I know it was only a small amount of coproduction done in it, so it goes back to that tokenistic approach really, which I thought was quite interesting.

”

Participants highlighted that this was an issue for the VCSE sector as a whole, with limited opportunities for VCSEs to influence and shape services:

“

A lot of time is spent going through a county council process to plan what they're actually looking to commission, and that process is actually quite limited in its opportunity for delivery partners, organisations that are commissioned to deliver the service, to really influence that upfront.

”

“

Let's have a look for those smaller organisations out there that actually are connected, and it doesn't have to be an organisation as well, it can be an individual person....And more importantly as commissioners, let's then go and speak to some of those people to say, 'What was your experience?'

”

As such, some VCSEs felt that commissioners were missing out on intelligence and experience of VCSEs (in particular smaller organisations) and the wider community to inform the design and delivery of services.

Findings

4.3 Barriers and enablers

There was a perception that commissioning is only for senior managers and directors. Concerns were voiced about who engages with commissioners within VCSE organisations and the extent to which those on the frontline within VCSEs are excluded from engaging with commissioners and opportunities to share experiences and learning with them:

“*The only people that are really consulted are the directors and the chief executives. And there’s a missed opportunity in terms of the whole middle staff wrung and managers that are working directly, quite often people with lived experience as well.*

“You would just get a couple of key people with lived experience, a couple of directors, and the vast majority of people working in there really struggled with having any access or any voice really in relation to the commissioners.

Commissioner behaviour, processes and systems were perceived as a barrier to engaging VCSEs in commissioning. Participants highlighted how commissioning processes limited the scope and extent of VCSE engagement, in particular small/micro organisations:

“*I think more and more procurement processes are now going down the very formal government portal type route. But actually when you look at the value of some of the lots that are being offered, we simply don’t have the interest in the community sector for the amount of opportunity that comes with the value of the lot... needs to be a process for dealing with smaller more community roots organisations, stronger community rooted organisations, that will only be delivering a part.*

Findings

4.3 Barriers and enablers

Some felt that commissioner aspirations for co-commissioning with the VCSE sector did not always align with the way commissioners and funders work, limiting the extent to which VCSEs and individuals are able to influence commissioning and the design of services:

“
Co-production is not a process for being able to absolutely start with and determine that project, because that's not co-production. That's why I think co-production, when people talk about it on a commissioning level, is actually a little bit of discussion and then inviting people along to nod along when you've already come up with your plan. Funding is not geared towards the unknown. Unfortunately it really is a leap of faith”
”

A lack of resources and capacity within small/micro VCSEs to engage in commissioning was seen as a key barrier. Alongside, the challenges of not knowing about commissioning opportunities, participants from small/micro VCSEs spoke of the time, skills and knowledge needed to engage in commissioning, specifically to develop proposals and respond to tenders from commissioners. The comparative resources that larger organisations can draw on when developing tenders was perceived to disadvantage or exclude smaller organisations:

“
It's that proportionality....you have larger organisations that are ready to submit every document and therefore will go for as many lots as they can through a tendering process, because actually it's not taking them much time, and it's a win for very little effort. Versus smaller organisations and truly community connected VCS organisations that will spend hours to get those documents together, and may well not get a look in because a larger corporate better established organisation is also coming to the process.

It's the time, the expertise to fill in forms. It's the time that actually there might be only a couple of people running an organisation.
”

Findings

4.3 Barriers and enablers

Collaboration within the voluntary sector is seen as an enabler to engagement of small/micro VCSEs in commissioning. VCSEs felt that there should be more opportunities for collaboration in commissioning but that commissioning approaches and processes can act to stifle VCSEs working together:

Rather than a national organisation being commissioned in that area, why can't there be a collection of smaller VCSs or whoever it may be that can come together that will be able to get that work, and there will be more meaningful data that comes from that I feel as well.

I would hope that because of the way the organisations are thinking now is that we need to be more collaborative, we need to be more cooperative and letting people do the things that they're good at and make collaborative bids. But from my information again from our study and the forum that we had, was that actually no that was a difficult thing to actually apply for joint funding

The value of networks and forums bringing VCSEs together, as well as VCSEs and commissioners, was highlighted including the role of local VCSE infrastructure organisations in facilitating relationships:

I think that a lot of the forums that FVAF do are really helpful in developing the relationships which allow that brokerage to happen. So it's happening on a lower level, but there are pathways that are opening now, and I think that it would be really good to be able to develop more of that process.

5. Implications and Recommendations

The findings from this research point to a number of implications for health and care commissioners and VCSE organisations.

For commissioners

- Community capacity and intelligence must be more highly valued. Where services look to utilise community capacity and intelligence, the groups/organisations/individuals providing this should be supported and remunerated appropriately to facilitate their participation and build more equity into the commissioning process
- Where it is unrealistic to directly involve small/micro organisations in commissioning processes, commissioners must ensure that they are communicating appropriately with infrastructure organisations that can advocate on their behalf
- Commissioners should look to improve the flow of information to VCSEs about commissioning opportunities, in particular small/micro organisations, and how they can engage in commissioning, including through local VCSE infrastructure organisations and networks
- Funders and commissioners need to do their part in supporting a culture within the VCSE sector where collaborations and consortiums can be formed to deliver more localised services
- Commissioners should promote and participate in spaces and networks that bring commissioners and VCSEs together to encourage two-way information and knowledge sharing
- Data that can support funding applications should be more accessible to small organisations
- When designing services, more focus must be given to local needs and provision
- Where possible, meetings should be held in the communities in which the services discussed are being delivered

For VCSEs

- The VCSE sector should look to share knowledge and understanding of commissioning processes across the sector more readily and openly, in particular with small/micro VCSEs
- VCSEs must promote collaboration and ways of working together in the sector, including working collaboratively to engage in commissioning
- VCSEs should look to participate in spaces and networks bringing together commissioners and VCSEs to facilitate knowledge, information and data exchange.



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Acknowledgements

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