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Leaving The Armed Forces  
and Living In North Wales

*An exploratory study of everyday  
decision-making as a civilian*





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# Introduction

## About this study

This study was carried out by Glyndwr University and was funded by the Forces in Mind Trust. We want this study to help improve the transition to civilian life for veterans living in North Wales and elsewhere in the UK. Evidence has shown that veterans prefer to get help and support from organisations and charities run by and for veterans, instead of the public services available to all.

This report is about the difficulties and tensions ex-members of the Armed Forces experience now they are living a civilian life.

We want the findings of this study to better inform policies to support veterans in their transition to civilian life, and to help the wider public better understand some of the challenges they face.

This report will be of interest to:

- Local Authority policy makers
- The NHS
- Public Sector Service educators
- Third Sector Support organisations
- Civilians working in the field of veteran research
- Community workers supporting the delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant

## Why we have carried out this research

Around 17,000 people leave the UK Armed Forces each year. In 2014 the Royal British Legion estimated the size of the UK veteran population at 2.8 million, meaning just over 5% of our population in the UK are veterans.

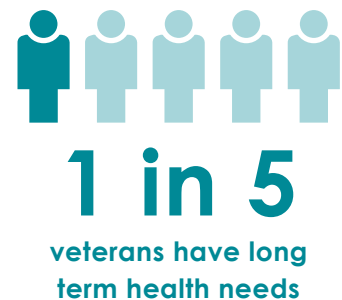
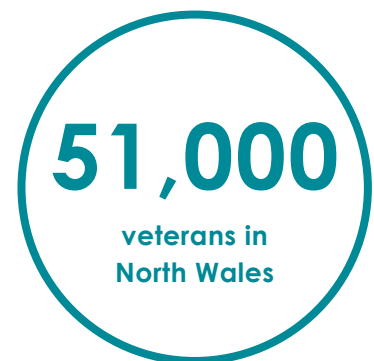
According to a recent needs assessment, the number of veterans in North Wales is about 51,000. That is around 9% of the over 16's population. We also know that 1 in 5 veterans have long term health needs related to military service, including muscular-skeletal problems and mental health issues.

There have been a number of key policies over the last few years that have been influential in the way we provide services to improve health and well-being in Wales.

These are:

- the **Armed Forces Covenant** - this policy exists to redress the disadvantages that the armed forces community may face.
- **Social Services and Wellbeing Act (Wales) 2014** – the legal framework for improving the wellbeing of people who need care and support.
- **Wellbeing of Future Generation (Wales) Act 2015** – this law is about improving economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. It's the first law that requires public bodies to think about the impact they could have on people in the future.

These policies collectively encourage working together, better links between public services and communities, and long term planning for the future. They recognise the importance of involving the people in decision-making and focussing on people's strengths in assessing what support is needed.



We want this report to help inform how best to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant across Wales, to in turn help towards improving the health and well-being of the community as a whole.

## Identity and perspective

Becoming comfortable with who we are, is often an unspoken process that we all go through. We do not usually need to explain our identity to other people, it is something that is taken-for-granted and up to them to work out.

Our identity in a civilian community usually comes from:

- **where we live** – e.g. I am from North Wales
- **what we do** – e.g. I am a nurse
- **what relationships we have** – e.g. I am a wife and mother.

We rely on people being able to draw on similar frames of reference as us, so meaning-making (the process of how people interpret, understand, or make sense of life events, relationships, and themselves), can happen.

It would be exhausting to have to consciously decide on what responses to give to each question, to evaluate options and measure every potential interpretation in ordinary, everyday conversations.

In the first part of this study we are starting with the idea that the way our veteran participants make decisions is influenced by their military identity. The people in this study see themselves as having a military identity. As ex-members of the Armed Forces this military identity and perception of the world has been a key aspect of how they have handled their transition from being seen as a member of the Armed Forces, to being recognised as a member of the civilian community. In the second part of this study we are asking the participants what resources they would find helpful after leaving the Armed Forces.

In this report we will examine how these people explain what it is like to be a veteran in a civilian community. We will examine what capabilities would help veterans make the most of available resources.

## Aims

It is well-documented that the Armed Forces' way of seeing things is to use a structured approach to decision making. This style of decision making is underpinned by military culture. This way of thinking and decision making becomes second nature, and ends up influencing the way people in the military view all situations.

In order to gain a meaningful insight into our veteran's situation, this study had 3 aims.

1

The first aim involved establishing what a military identity is and how aspects of that identity influenced our veteran's perspective. We did this through semi-structured interviews with 30 veterans.

2

The second aim was for the veteran participants to explain the resources they think are important to have for a successful transition. 23 veterans participated in this part of the study which involved an online survey.

3

The third aim was to consider how the findings from this research could be turned into actions that would help veterans transitioning to civilian life.

## What we did: the research

### Interviews

We recruited 30 veterans to take part in the interviews. This was done by raising awareness of the project through posters and social media, the local newspaper and BBC Wales news.

The interviews were semi-structured, and began with an open question - "can you tell me something about your experiences since leaving the Armed Forces?"

We wanted the interviews to:

- reveal something about mundane, everyday decisions.
- give the participants the opportunity to explain their personal experiences of transition in their own way.
- provide an insight into the types of challenges that participants might face in ordinary civilian conversations.

We recorded and transcribed the interviews and studied the responses to identify common expressions the participants used that described a military identity.

We read the transcripts again and again to hear noticeable expressions or phrases that could point to both deliberate and unconscious decision-making methods. We also paid attention to the different aspects of decision making that the participants were explaining, which helped us to identify what aspects were most significant to them.

We identified 3 phrases that were used by participants that described a collective military identity, and 5 phrases that the participants used that described challenging aspects of transition.

## Online survey

We recruited for this stage of the study by asking the participants who had already taken part in stage 1, and recruited some new participants through word of mouth.

In order to establish what resources the veterans thought were important for a successful transition, we used a method called 'group concept mapping'. The participants were asked to list as many external and internal resources as they could. They then ordered the resources into groups and rated them according to:

- how similar they were to each other
- how important they were
- how challenging they were

We added 24 resources that were identified during the interviews as a starting point. At the end of this activity we had 60 responses contributed by 19 participants. The research team went through all the responses and removed any duplicates, clarified some and separated statements that had more than 1 theme. In the end, we had 71 resources to order and rate.

The types of resources and capabilities listed were things like:

- Affordable housing in the area of work with good schools
- Family and friends
- Motivation to belong to the community
- Community trust about military CV
- Occupational therapists
- Ability to cook
- Keeping busy and focused

We used specialist software from Concept Systems Inc. to conduct an in-depth analysis of the responses and how they were sorted. We identified 8 clusters that the resources were grouped into according to similarity, and were able to examine what resources and capabilities the participants identified as most important and most challenging.





## Participants

To take part in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria:

- Had been a part of the British Armed Forces
- Had left within the last 5 years
- Lived in North Wales

After 10 months the criteria was reviewed because we had low numbers. We increased the time frame of leaving the Armed Forces to 10 years.

3 participants had left over 10 years ago, but were included because of their enthusiasm to contribute to the project.

Participants ranged from between 22 and 60 years old. They had been in the Forces for between 2 and 27 years.

Their reasons for leaving the Armed Forces included:

- Wanted to get married
- Loss of potential for promotion
- Wanted a career change
- Pension availability
- Medical reasons

# Findings

## Military Identity

The military perspective is a lasting and influential way a member of the ex-Forces community views situations. Through our interviews with participants we identified 3 basic parts of the military perspective:

- It's drilled into you
- Mission Command
- We have each other's back

### It's drilled into you

New recruits to the armed forces are subject to intense basic training that prepares them for life in the military. Every aspect of daily life is managed until a pattern of behaviour is established and sustained.

Identities are established among the recruits early on during their training and the differences between recruits and civilians are confirmed by the distribution of uniform, learning vocabulary and establishing order to all aspects of daily living.

One participant said:

*“you get told when you've got to get up...when you have breakfast...what time you go to work... when you've got physical training...”*

Regardless of age, basic training is the same for everyone. Learning to follow direction without question is a demonstration of accepting authority. Following orders becomes a social norm that is reinforced in everyday life. Members of the military subscribe to a sense of order, authority and discipline which would be unfamiliar in civilian life.

### Mission command

Mission Command is an analytic approach to decision-making that involves focusing on a problem and assessing the situation and available resources to determine the best course of

action. This style of decision making allows members of the military to do their job efficiently and effectively in high pressure and potentially dangerous situations.

Each individual understands their contribution to the whole when their particular role and part in the mission is recognised as essential. Knowing what is expected of them means that situations can be addressed with composure even when things get difficult. Having a plan and calculated options were common ideas that our participants expressed, that pointed to control, order and outcome as the context for mission command.

One participant said:

*“I know what is expected of me and that’s great, that’s what we want because we know when shit hits the fan, you do this, which allows the commander time to work out the plan and say... this is my best option. So when you go on operations you are nailed to the ground.”*

In a mission command style approach there is the expectation that everyone will do their bit and no one will stray from expectations.

## We have each other's back

Individuals in the military develop a unique bond and sense of belonging. It is reinforced through training, wearing uniform and living in close quarters. This is an intentional and important aspect of military life. It strengthens group's ability to work together when on operations. 'Family' is a word many participants used to describe this closeness that would be widely recognised by other members of the Armed Forces.

One participant said:

*“in the Forces we had each other's back, we knew where we were every-day, we had the structure”.*

## Challenging aspects of transition

Through analysis of the interview responses we were able to identify 5 headings that represented common examples of challenges faced in transition:

- Moving Forward
- Putting down roots
- Changing pace
- Living the moment
- Being a veteran

## Moving Forward

Many participants described leaving the Armed Forces as life-changing and gaining employment was commonly considered amongst the participants to be an early sign of a successful transition. One of the biggest worries for our veterans was financial security.

Many participants found civilian employment within an ex-military community where:

- There were clear expectations of them
- Military perspective is valued
- Specific military skills are respected
- They were around others with a similar perspective

Motivation had a significant influence on decision-making, but this was commonly challenged, with participants finding the civilian employment process and criteria frustrating.

One participant said:

*"I've got a lot of experience but not civilian recognised qualifications... So I'm doing a course that will convert all my experiences into civilian qualifications"*

## Changing pace

All our participants acknowledged the radical difference between the fast paced and closely bonded life in the military and life as a civilian. They commonly claimed that as a civilian there was a lack of structure, limited direction about how time should be managed and sometimes a lack of purpose.

Knowing what to do with freedom of choice was a subject of conversation for many of the participants.

One participant said:

*"...if you don't want to do something [in the Army], chances are someone's making you do it... you don't have any freedom and once you do have freedom you don't know what to do with it."*

Some veterans wanted to keep in touch with their military roots by joining the reserves. Some challenged themselves to learn new skills. Many participants felt an anxiety over not wanting to 'sit still'.

Many participants described social conversations in a civilian environment as difficult because of a language difference that could lead to their 'banter' offending people. Many participants consciously managed their views and opinions and felt unfamiliar to civilian social norms – which were viewed like rules or guidelines that civilians conformed to.

One participant said:

*"It's like walking on egg shells, you never know how far you can go until you start upsetting somebody, we have to conform to 'social norms'. But we had no social norms."*

Discussions around change of pace revealed tensions veterans experienced when managing their free time and the influence of military 'norms' had on having to navigate a slower pace of life. Veterans also experienced challenges when interacting with civilians who do not appear to have similar frames of reference on which to draw on to make sense of the military experience.

## Putting down roots

This was a recurring topic of conversation with our participants. Decision-making here was with the family in mind and was influenced by the motivation to provide stable foundations for a partner and children as a measure of being a good spouse and parent.

One participant said:

*"... in 14 years... we'd had 9 houses... I can put some roots down at long last for the kids, my eldest has just turned 16 and had his results, and the idea was to get out before he hit exam time to give him some continuity."*

Through discussions around putting down roots we were able to identify some of the challenges associated with prioritising a family and home after leaving the Armed Forces. Going away on tour or on exercise is part of the rhythm of life in the Armed Forces, and military duty takes priority above all else. There were some tensions between the military identity and adapting to the role of partner or parent as a civilian. Even though these roles were familiar, some compromise to their military identity was required to make it work.

One participant said:

*"One of the rhythms of life when you know you're going to go away not just on tours on exercises too. I was 18 years married in the Forces, and on operation and going away there was about 9 and a half years of me being away and when you come out you are 24/7 together. So there is not an operation when I think we all do it... I'm stressed I've got lots to do and my wife keeps telling me to do this stuff and you're thinking 'in three weeks-time it's not going to matter.'"*

Going away on tour or exercise is part of the rhythm of life in the Armed Forces, this is not something that can be negotiated and is to be accepted without question. As this participant explains there are many stresses of things that need to be done around the house but these things are not a priority when in the military because responding to duty will always take precedent. Coming to terms with dealing with consequences of putting down roots as a member of the civilian community would reveal a conflict in changing priorities.



## Living the moment

Living the moment was described by one participant as "being in the zone" when in a combat situation and experiencing all the emotions associated with a heightened sense of alertness.

One participant said:

*"it makes you feel good by going on a lifeboat, one minute you're painting the door and the next minute you're thrashing out to sea in a lifeboat you get to be in the waves and it's good you need to have that right in your life it's exciting it's being on it"*

Another aspect of living the moment was the way military personnel discussed and dealt with difficult situations with alcohol and dark humour that would be difficult for a civilian to understand, who may instead have the frame of reference to be judgemental.

On participant said:

*“if you’re in a fire fight you can be actually tingling with adrenaline and you just start crying with laughter because a mate got shot in the foot, in hindsight it’s not normal but that’s how we dealt with it.”*

Living the moment was a way to explain the shared experience between military personnel in combat situations in which their lives were at risk. This is difficult for civilians to understand and, without the understanding of this context, there could be the possibility that the emotional responses being discussed would be seen as abnormal.

## Being a veteran

Veteran is the title given to a person within the civilian community who has served in the Armed Forces. Being a veteran means belonging to a community of people who are neither serving military personnel nor civilians.

One participant said:

*“we feel a dislocation of expectation... suddenly our whole identity is brought in to question...we are called ‘veterans’, which by name implies we are old and washed-up, and suddenly no one has time for us in the same way as military friends did... we have to make our own way and be judged on our own social standing in society.”*

Some participants were not comfortable identifying as a veteran, however at times it is preferable to identify as a veteran when struggling with being a civilian being associated with the mix of people that make up the civilian community, who may not meet the high standards of a military perspective.



# Capabilities and resources

The resources and capabilities that our participants came up with in the 2nd stage of this study were sorted into groups according to how similar they were to each other.

This resulted in us identifying 8 unique clusters:

- Putting down roots
- Making a living as a civilian
- Mental health and specialist support
- Community Welcome
- Veteran links
- Future plans and direction
- Life skills
- Changing pace

## Putting down roots

This cluster included statements concerned with creating a home, for example “affordable housing in the area of work with good schools” and “automatic placements for children in schools when moving in the area”. It is clear the family is considered central to putting down roots; the veterans were motivated to prioritise resources for their spouse and children.

## Making a living as a civilian

This cluster included statements about generating an income and being a valuable member of the community. We need to look at how to communicate to employers the value of skills and experience gained in the military.

## Mental health and specialist support

This cluster included statements like “occupational therapists helping us enhance our basic life skills” and “Support from substance misuse initiatives”. Although these resources are acknowledged as sources of support for veterans, they could also present employment opportunities for those wanting to work with other veterans with specific problems.

## Community welcome

This cluster represents concerns veterans may have about fitting in to a civilian community. It includes statements like “definition of what a contemporary veteran is” and “evidence of local area commitment to meet Military Covenant.” Participants felt that these resources could improve transition, but were not a priority when compared to other resources.

## Veteran links

This cluster included statements that focus on maintaining links with military life through local associations and military organisations. In comparison with other resources, these were seen as low priority.

## Future plans and direction

This cluster included statements like “willingness to learn” and “ability to sketch solutions to problems”. They indicate the importance of having a direction and confidence in one’s own potential. This cluster of resources was seen as very important to participants, but was not viewed as challenging.

## Life skills

The statements grouped under Life Skills refer to the ‘essentials’ of everyday life, like having a driving licence and “ability to give something to the community”.

## Changing pace

This cluster contained the most resources and highlighted the importance and challenge of managing time, priorities and expectations when becoming a civilian. It includes statements like “Keeping busy and focused”, “Knowing what to do with your time” and “...Managing ones expectations”. The statements can be seen as a reflection on how to manage adapting to the civilian community and are recognised as important and challenging.

The clusters viewed as most important were:

- Putting down roots
- Changing pace
- Making a living as a civilian

The clusters considered the most challenging were:

- Making a living as a civilian

- Changing pace
- Putting down roots
- Mental health and specialist support

## Actions

We conducted a further analysis into the clusters that veterans identified as the most important and the most challenging. We wanted to see what specific resources and capabilities are most actionable.

We found that the most actionable resources under putting down roots were:

- Affordable housing in the area of work and good schools
- Automatic placements for children in schools when moving into a new area.

The most actionable resource under making a living as a civilian was:

- Plenty of local businesses that offer job opportunities

The other statements under this cluster identified as actionable were capabilities veterans can have to exploit the resources:

- Full understanding of where to get help previously provided by the 'military bubble' e.g. primary care, dentistry, pastoral care.
- Full understanding of what services there are available to ex servicemen and women.
- Employment opportunities where military skills are transferable and trust in military CV.

The most actionable capabilities within changing pace were identified as:

- Ability to endure frustrations and rejections, having emotional resilience.
- Ability to set achievable goals and "don't beat yourself up if you don't get there."

## Recommendations

### Strategic

It should be a common goal of Local Authorities and other Public Sector organisations to move away from supporting a deficit-based view of veterans and:

- build community partnership collaborations between public sector services and veteran organisations that are centred on the common aims of the Well-being and Future Generations Act, Social Care and Well-being Act and the Armed Forces Covenant.
- invest in sustainable community networks.
- provide consistent advice and information for communities about health and social care provision.

## Skills and Learning

It should be the goal of educators and learners to build relations and improve communications between the Armed Forces and Service Providers by:

- establishing a mutually agreed agenda based on openness and sensitivity from which to initiate conversation about objectives.
- improving methods for translating veterans' experiences into a civilian context.
- ensuring all public facing workers get training about challenges for veterans getting Higher Education providers to encourage veterans to enrol on higher education courses.

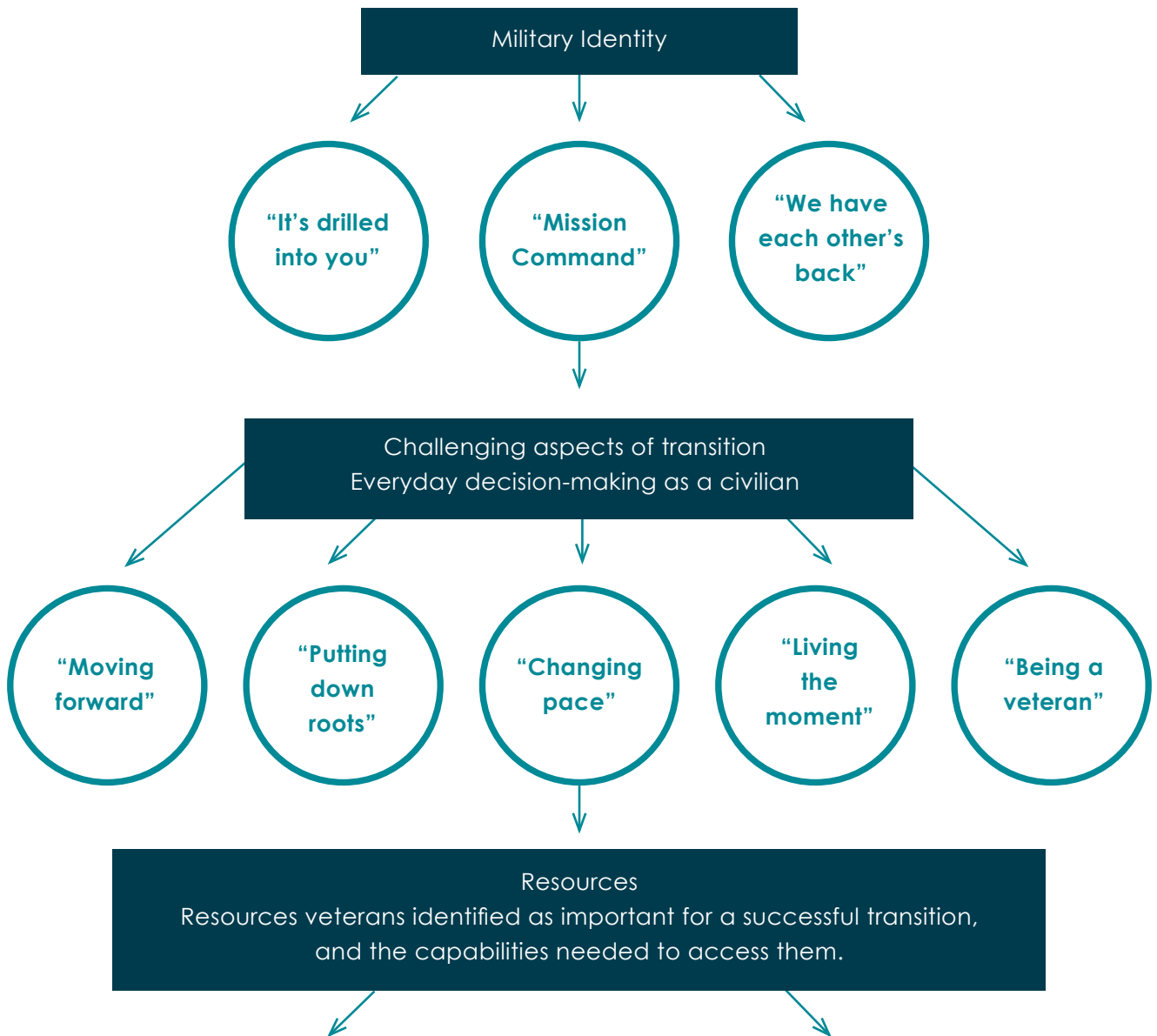
## Public Service Delivery

Improving collaborations between Armed Forces organisations and public sector service delivery could benefit the whole community by:

- developing a simple guide on veterans' decision-making to support civilian engagement, this could also be used to inform planning, marketing and delivery of the public sector services
- informing the development of a statutory training module for NHS and other Public Sector workers on veterans' health and social care issues.
- Improving signposting and availability of resources, with more people able to offer a wide range of advice or referral for guidance in the local area.
- use existing information services better in the local authority and NHS.

## Further Research

- Research into how communities can use and develop methods to help them understand what it's like to be a veteran.
- Explore and evaluate the ways the civilian community engages with veterans.
- Explore 'living the moment' as an important aspect of personal identity and self-respect.
- More longitudinal and comparative studies of different cohorts of veterans.



### Military Identity

Sustaining all aspects of the military identity to help emotional resilience. The sustainability of this identity is more likely when context can be controlled, however, increased variables associated with living in the civilian community can make it challenging to 'keep in shape'.

### Actionable resources

As well as practical resources commonly recognised as valued by all in the civilian community such as affordable housing and good schools, the veterans include reference to being able to manage frustrations and rejections. Addressing these personal capabilities can be significant to enhancing successful transition.





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