

# VASL Community Champions

## 2019-2020

Our impact



“

It just changed my life. I've got a purpose.  
I'm feeling valued.



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## About Community Champions

Community Champions is a five-year project funded by the National Lottery Community Fund working across Harborough District in south Leicestershire, and some villages in north Northamptonshire. It helps isolated or lonely people (over 60) to change their lives for the better, regain their social confidence, and connect with people including:

- Accessing information, groups and support
- Building new friendships
- Enjoying new opportunities
- Developing digital skills
- Support with speaking to other services

**It is delivered by volunteers and a small staff team. Volunteer roles include:**

- Community Champions Volunteers who visit people weekly at home or go out together
- Telephone Volunteers who call on a regular basis, providing companionship, support, and information
- Digital Volunteers who show people how to use and benefit from technology and the internet through home visits or sessions in the library
- Pen Pals who correspond with people through the regular exchange of news-filled letters or emails

## Loneliness and isolation

Loneliness is often described as the subjective feeling of not having the number or closeness of relationships that someone would like, whereas isolation is used in relation to the actual contact that people have (or don't have) with others. Both can lead to poorer health and wellbeing. Clients do not always describe being lonely but talk about having no one to talk to or feeling anxious. It is not only older people who feel lonely, but people are more likely to feel lonely if they are single or widowed, in poor health, or feel that they belong less strongly to their neighbourhood<sup>1</sup>.

Clients frequently mention leaving work, bereavement, moving house, having no family near them, health conditions and disabilities, and being a carer as causes of loneliness,



*It's two and a half years since my wife died, you do get used to it in a certain way, it's never the same, I miss her every day. I do get lonely, you learn to live with it.*



*I think it is harder to make connections with other people as you age, and especially if you move to a new town or area.*

<sup>1</sup> Office for National Statistics, Loneliness - What characteristics and circumstances are associated with feeling lonely?  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10>



The barriers to undertaking activities that clients tell us about include transport and mobility, groups not being welcoming or people not wanting to go alone, not knowing what's available, a lack of suitable activities, cost, feeling that older people are not treated with respect, and health conditions or disabilities. Community Champions aims to overcome these through our own activities and through working in partnership with others in the community.

## About this report

This report has been compiled from information collected and published by Community Champions throughout the year, regular client monitoring, volunteer surveys, and 12 in-depth interviews with clients undertaken by volunteer Community Researchers.

## The difference we made this year

### Changes for clients

**62%** of clients report they are less lonely



**67%** of clients are now seeing people face-to-face more than they were at the start of their involvement

**53%** have more telephone contact



**64%** have more email, written or text contact



### Our activities

#### This year we have:

Supported 226 relationships and support between lonely and isolated older people and volunteers, including:

**43** face-to-face befriending relationships



**78** telephone befriending relationships



**50** people supported to get online or use electronic devices either through sessions in the library or at home

**23** Pen Pals or Email Pals including intergenerational Email Pals



**21** people are "Community Friends" – this means that they developed friendships that are now independent of the project

Held **12** Community Gatherings with accessible transport with around **420** attendees

Run **13** other events with **157** attendees



Involved **79** active volunteers providing an estimated **£109,535** worth of time

The total value of volunteers' time is calculated by multiplying volunteer hours by the Harborough District average wage.

## Since the start of the project

	Year one	Year two	Year three	% increase years 1 to 3
Number of clients	71	89	146	106%
Relationships brokered	95	131	226	138%
Active volunteers	54	72	79	46%
Clients supported to connect digitally	29	30	50	72%

## In clients' words



*I feel a lot better about myself,  
I've come out of my shell a bit.  
They're doing a marvellous job.*



*It's nice to keep in touch with people,  
I'm in touch with a lot more people  
now than I ever used to be.*



*It was probably one of the best  
things I ever did actually.*

<sup>2</sup>Using the UCLA Loneliness Scale as recommended by the Government loneliness strategy, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-connected-society-a-strategy-for-tackling-loneliness>

## Community Champions befriending

Community Champions befrienders make visits to older people in their homes or in the community. For some, this may be the only person they see all week.

Clients tell us that Community Champions provides an opportunity for them to have something to look forward to, to have someone to chat to, to have fun, and to pursue interests.



*We do have a laugh, we talk about anything and everything.*



*I've got something to look forward to.*



*You think, 'I must do something for us to talk about,' so you're taking interest in other things as well. I try different things that I probably wouldn't try.*

Volunteers sometimes take clients out, giving them an opportunity to interact with the community,



*We get on well together, we do go out and have a snack or a meal. I like eating out to save cooking.*

## Breakfast Club volunteering – Dave's story

Sometime after losing his wife Dave realised he needed more company than his golf and bowling provided. He originally approached Community Champions not knowing whether he would be a client or a volunteer, but he was soon started on becoming a Community Champions befriender.

The client he was matched with wanted to go out for breakfast rather than meet at home, so a regular Tuesday morning arrangement was made. After a while Dave said that Community Champions staff wondered whether it would be all right if other people joined them, and Breakfast Club was formed, "We now have a group of five or six turn up regularly on a Tuesday morning; people like myself who are on their own".

It seems to particularly appeal to men, who can sometimes be harder to engage in projects like this. Dave thinks that this might be because, "It's something specific to do, it's 'Going to Breakfast Club' like going to bowling or golf". He also wonders whether it didn't appeal to women because they were initially meeting in a pub, although though it has now moved to a café/bar. Conversation can be about anything, there is no agenda. The regular contact has deepened relationships, "The evidence of success is that during lockdown people have kept in touch and been phoning each other, we're all in the same boat, we are all on our own so we're all starting from the same point".

He encourages other people to volunteer to do something similar, "The potential is that there are seven days of the week when you could have Breakfast Club with other volunteers; there are no rules, it's just letting people know that the session is available and people are very welcome to join". As for Dave, "I like to meet people and enjoy their company. It's as satisfying for me as I hope it is for them".

## Community Friends

Some clients and volunteers have moved onto becoming Community Friends. This is where people have developed a friendship that is strong enough to continue independently outside the project, something that Community Champions encourages so that we can take on more clients and volunteers. Community Friends are welcome to stay within the project community and attend our events and receive newsletters. Clients told us,



*We shall always be in touch and be friends.*



*We talk to each other every day now so we got on very well.*

## Penpals

Community Pen Pals is for people who like sending and receiving letters. This can be a good volunteering opportunity for people who are housebound to be able to connect with someone else, some of our Community Champions clients are Pen Pal volunteers to other clients, enabling them to give as well as receive support,



*When they said they wanted somebody to write I said, 'I'll do it!' It turned out to be somebody that had lived in Harborough about the same time as me, so she said we can say about things years ago, she really enjoys it.*

## Volunteering with pets

Some clients who love pets but no longer have one have asked volunteers to bring their pets, either cats or dogs.



*I love animals and it's fantastic to see both my volunteer and Lily [her dog] together. I like stroking Lily. I look forward to her visits.*

Clients and volunteers have also been on dog walks together.



*Community Champions volunteering with pets*

## Digital Champions

Digital Champions volunteers started out by providing support to clients in their own homes, but since October 2019 they have taken over monthly digital support sessions in Market Harborough library that were previously provided by Age UK. Examples of practical support include enabling clients to book doctors' appointments online, use WhatsApp, Skype and Facebook to maintain contact with family and friends near and far, to share and store photos, download information.

A lot of older people express puzzlement at technology or a reluctance to use it, but the rewards can be worth it.



*It was amazing, but it's quite technical. No way in the world could I have done that. I'd start panicking. Press this button, press that button. You don't know what you're doing.*



*I was given an iPad from the children, and they said, 'You've got to start using this mum'. For two years I just sat with it. Gradually I've come to realise that I've got to learn more how to use it. I just wanted to know how to email my children, it's certainly given me more contact with them.*

The project has supported 50 people over the year, 28 in the library and 22 at home.

### Digital Champions volunteering – Kath's story

Kath is one of Community Champions digital volunteers. Her professional background is in IT, so when she saw the Digital Champions opportunity it "ticked a lot of boxes" for her. She has helped with home visits, the drop-in sessions in the library and with training for new Digital Champions volunteers. Her experience is that, "Often people want to learn the basics, to send and receive emails, talk to their families and friends online, and to take and send photos". Some people are quite nervous not having used technology before, particularly with tablets looking quite different from computers.

Changes for clients go beyond being able to use the technology, "As people get confidence you see it spill out into other areas of their life. One lady borrowed a tablet, and that gave her confidence to go out and talk to salespeople to buy one of her own. People go from not being sure about it to switching it on to, 'I want to do this, how do I do it?' to having a purpose".

Kath has seen greater connections between people as a result of the support and praised the role of VASL in enabling that, "VASL are very good, they create pockets of community, they email the newsletter and encourage people to send photos in. If someone sends an email into the VASL office, they reply. Some clients are emailing each other, and they wouldn't have done that without VASL".

Although she didn't come into the opportunity thinking about what she would get from it, Kath says she has gained "loads". Not growing up in Harborough, it's helped her to build a greater sense of community, and there's the reward of seeing the difference that they make, "Doing things for other people makes you feel good".



Kath leading a digital photo training session



## Community Gatherings

Community Gatherings are a large part of creating a project community and linking clients, volunteers and outside partners together.

Community Champions organises Community Gatherings monthly in different venues around the district, with the idea that once people had visited somewhere once they may want to visit again on their own.

Places we have visited this year include:

- Buttercups Tearoom, Billesdon
- Kibworth Golf Club
- Louisa's Place, Market Harborough
- Market Harborough Golf Club
- Coach and Horses, Lubenham



Community Gathering at Kibworth Golf Club

## What do people like about Community Gatherings?

Something to look forward to,



*It's made such a difference to me. I've got something to look forward to. I've got something where otherwise I'd got nobody.*

Mixing with different people,



*They're friendly, friendly people, we all mix, you never know who you're going to sit next to when you get there, you find a seat and you sit in it, I enjoy it.*

A sense of belonging,



*It helped me enormously, because I felt like I was part of something again.*

A chance to re-connect with people,



*You very often will go to one of these Gatherings and you find yourself looking at somebody and they're looking back at you and it's somebody that you knew from years ago.*

The transport, which can normally be a big problem for many older people,



*Transport's good, when they pick you up, you get on the minibus, you always have a good laugh and meet someone.*

## Intergenerational activities

### Welland Park Academy

A local secondary school was keen to make links with the Community Champions project as it recognised the benefits students gained from conversations with local older people, who in turn enjoyed sharing their experiences including how the local area had changed.

The school hosted a MacMillan coffee morning for our clients and a very successful Community Gathering before Christmas where students chatted and entertained us with music performances. Many clients fed back how much they had enjoyed the session, "That's the best Community Gathering we have been to all year; when are we coming back?" We are maintaining contact through some students emailing older people during the lockdown and keeping the intergenerational dialogue going.



*MacMillan coffee morning at Welland Park Academy*

### Scouts

During December nine Community Champions clients and volunteers went to Scout meetings for a cake, chat and craft session to start a dialogue between generations. Scouts have decorated kindness stones with positive messages and left them around the community for people to discover. Activities will be picked up once we are able to meet again.



*Clients and volunteers visiting Scout meetings*

### "Non-transport" Gatherings

Our main Community Gatherings have more people wanting to come to them than we have places for, so we have trialled "non-transport" Community Gatherings that clients can make their own way to. These are held in cafés in Market Harborough so are accessible on foot or by public transport. It's another opportunity for clients to familiarise themselves with friendly venues that they would feel comfortable going to on their own. Not all clients are able to get to these, but for clients who prefer to socialise with fewer people this is an advantage, one said, "I like these smaller Gatherings; you get to have a proper conversation".

### Inclusion

We enable volunteers and clients with diverse needs to participate in the project. We have visually impaired people who we send enlarged newsletters to and provide escorts for journeys. We have people with hearing loss so use microphones at project events to enable them to hear. Many people have mobility difficulties and we ensure that we have accessible transport to pick them up from home, bring them to project events at suitable venues and safely return them home. We support volunteers and clients with neurological disorders to keep them engaged with the project. We give additional support to clients with increasing memory difficulties, ringing or writing to remind them about appointments, or event pick up times.

Since the start of the pandemic we are also attracting more Black and Minority Ethnic volunteers, working volunteers, and those who have been furloughed.

## Communications

### Newsletters

Community Champions produces monthly newsletters, one for clients and one for volunteers, to keep people in touch with the project. These are welcomed by clients for the information they provide as well as making them feel connected,



*When you get that you know what's going on.*



*It's good to know you've got something to look forward to. That's the big thing, you've got something else to write in the diary.*



Community Champions newsletter



*When it comes, I sit and read it right through and I feel, 'Well, at least I've got somebody. I've got some friends'.*



VASL Charity Manager Maureen O'Malley in the HfM studio with Breakfast Show presenter Dave Irving

### Local media

VASL undertakes a lot of publicity to raise awareness of our services. The VASL Charity Manager is interviewed on the local radio station Harborough FM every fortnight to talk about VASL's varied work, including Community Champions. The Harborough Mail, our local paper also carries a fortnightly VASL blog on a range of issues. These are both aimed at attracting new clients and volunteers, as many older people in the district get their news from these sources.

We are also included in publicity by other organisations including the Scouts and The Torch Trust, in whose building we are based.



## Learning events

These are an opportunity for people to find out about something new and make social connections, and they may appeal to people who prefer smaller group activities,



*That's the part of VASL that I enjoy, the learning part. We did a lot of courses last year, I nearly always come to whatever courses are going because they're all relevant, whatever it is.*

## Reducing the use of plastics workshop

VASL commissioned a “reducing the use of plastics” workshop from Leicestershire Adult Learning Service following the impact of the Blue Planet television programme by David Attenborough. It was attended by local MP Neil O’Brien. This active citizenship session was also offered to other community groups and in total almost 100 people have benefited.



*Reducing the use of plastics workshop commissioned by VASL, with local MP Neil O'Brien centre*

## Other learning events

Other learning events this year have included wheelchair handling and taking digital photos.



*Volunteers and clients join together to learn more and share their knowledge on taking, saving and sending digital photos.*

## Staff and volunteers

As well as our clients, staff and volunteers are what make our project.

### Volunteers

Volunteers have delivered an estimated  
**6,937**  
hours of activity



These include **63** one-to-one or telephone befrienders, **16** who write or email, **12** digital volunteers, two buddies and a dog walker.

There are also an additional  
**21** former volunteers who are now Community Friends.



When clients were asked what the best thing is about Community Champions by Community Researchers, volunteers were the most frequently mentioned answer,



*My volunteer is patient and kind.*



*My fantastic volunteer.*



*My volunteer, we have similar interests and click.*



*My volunteer is fab, we like the same things.*

Volunteers also talk about what they gain from being involved with Community Champions,



*Confidence to meet new people and to mix. The team sessions have given me a new lease of life.*



*Socialising with people from different backgrounds has been fascinating.*



We were re-awarded the Investing in Volunteers award early in 2020 in recognition for the support we provide to volunteers.



VASL volunteers are invited to celebrate Volunteers' Week and served tea and cake by staff as a thank you for their vital contribution.

## Staff

All this work is undertaken by four project staff delivering Community Champions on part time hours:

- Rohini Corfield Community Champions Project Manager 30 hours per week
- Sam Gisborne Community Champions Worker 27.5 hours per week (term time)
- Jenny Young Community Champions Worker 22.5 hours per week
- Denise Heseltine Community Champions Administrator 6 hours per week



Left to right Community Champions project staff: Jenny, Rohini, Denise, Sam

They are supported by Charity Manager Maureen O'Malley and a trustee board consisting of members of the local community, including two Community Champions volunteers.

In our research clients told us they appreciated how helpful, supportive and non-judgemental staff were; how they were reassured because staff were there; and how they felt they were made to feel they belonged

## Comments about staff from clients



*I'd just like to say thank you to them for giving me the opportunity to join, and also for all the help that they give us in the way of information and friendliness.*



*I've not met anybody that's not approachable. They're just lovely, and they really care about us. That's what's special.*

## Comments about staff from volunteers



*The way Community Champions has developed in recent years (I have been with them for six years) is wonderful. Each of the team are so very positive, professional and pro-active.*



*Being part of the team has been a very enriching experience and knowing that if it all gets too much the team are genuinely caring for our welfare.*

## Partnership and influence

Community Champions continues to work in productive partnerships with local organisations.

Leicestershire County Council launched a well-received Loneliness Toolkit consisting of an eight-page booklet and website signposting people who felt lonely to local sources of support. VASL was key in its formation and we were invited to present at the launch events. We are pleased that our clients were consulted about their experiences as part of a co-production approach.



*Launch of the Leicestershire County Council Loneliness Toolkit including Community Champions' Rohini Corfield second from the right.*

Harborough District Council participate in the Community Champions steering group and have run free Dementia Friends training sessions for us.

Neil O'Brien MP VASL maintains a close link with our MP who continues to support our work and promotes VASL projects nationally. This strategic link has brought enormous benefits for VASL, especially as Neil has now become the chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Loneliness. He has supported our events and we share our project progress with him through monthly newsletters and regular dialogue.

**Getting out and about** We attend various events to publicise our work to the local community, clients and volunteers. Many of our clients are referred to us by other people or organisations, as it is crucial that as many people as possible know about us.



*Community Champions workers promoting services at the Lubenham Scarecrow Festival*

## Ideas and suggestions

We have various ways to encourage participation in shaping Community Champions.

### Steering group

Our steering group of clients, volunteers, staff and partners meets every two months and helps us to reflect on our progress and future development.

### Team reflections and feed in from volunteers

Much of our learning comes from the day-to-day conversations we have in trying things to see how they go. We get a lot of suggestions from volunteers in our conversations with them, either informally or in volunteer meetings. We always welcome ideas and are happy to try new things.

### Community Researchers

This year we supported three volunteers to undertake a new role, Community Researcher. Supported by local consultancy, Ideas to Impact, the Community Researchers undertook in-depth interviews with 12 clients, initially face-to-face and then by telephone as Covid-19 affected us. We got a lot of great information from these interviews: we feel that clients opened up more to people already involved with the project as volunteers.

Community Researchers also enjoyed the process,



*I met some great characters, they were fantastic people.*



*Very humbling to be allowed into their lives, I was told a lot that they'd never spoken about before.*

A full report based on the Community Researchers' work will be published separately.

### Comments from partners

Conversations with partners across all sectors help us to develop the project, working alongside them to enhance opportunities for clients and volunteers. A colleague from Leicestershire Libraries commented,



*This newsletter has just put such a smile on my face. Such amazing work and so much good practice. So much for us to learn from, you have some brilliant models of how to do this that I'm definitely going to be looking at more.*

## Learning and reflection

### Routes into the project

Clients interviewed by Community Researchers had generally come into the project through other people, often health, social care or housing staff. This reinforces our focus on partnership work to get out to other workers who can identify people who are most isolated who might never get to our service otherwise.

### Community Gatherings and smaller gatherings

The larger Community Gatherings remain very popular but over-subscribed. Other than making them longer, clients interviewed by Community Researchers didn't have any other suggestions to improve them. The Breakfast Club, run by a volunteer, has been very successful (see page 6). "Non-transport" Community Gatherings where clients are asked to meet in a café in town and make their own way there have not been as popular as we hoped in terms of numbers, but can be positive for clients who prefer smaller groups and this may be a way to promote them. Having smaller groupings may also be a better way for the project to start up again following the pandemic, and it may be that this can be a specific volunteer role in the future.

### Transport

Being able to get to places is one of the biggest topics for our clients, but transport is not just about getting from A to B. In interviews clients also commented on how they enjoy the transport itself, making friends and chatting. Talking informally whilst travelling may be less intimidating for some people with topics of conversation relating to the journey, or less pressure to sit face-to-face and talk. We have piloted some drives with clients and will consider this again in the future when we are able.

### Encouraging clients to attend other activities

Some clients have made new connections as a result of Community Champions, either new friendships or attending new activities. We discuss with clients what changes they would like to make, but some are mainly adapting to circumstances beyond their control; change often happens to them rather than them having control over making changes. We create a friendly project community where people can start to connect so of course they are going to want to remain where they feel welcome perhaps for the first time for a long time or after a traumatic experience. We have found that clients are more likely to attend events if they know the organiser or someone else who is going, and will continue to make these community connections and invite activity organisers to our events.

### Capacity

As the project grows and new interventions and partnerships are developed the capacity of the staff team is stretched, especially as our approach is to fit the project around individual needs rather than vice-versa. One way we are trying to manage this is to develop volunteer lead roles: a volunteer helps with the administration of digital library sessions, another volunteer helps with training new digital volunteers, there's the host of the Breakfast Club and we have several volunteers who help as bus escorts for Community Gatherings. We will consider how we can expand this, which will also create more links into the community.

# The impact of Covid-19

## Community Champions

Covid-19 has had a huge impact on our services and the people we work with. All face-to-face contact was stopped during March, and many clients and volunteers have been in vulnerable or shielding categories, exacerbating isolation.

Volunteers commented on the impact on their clients,



*She is frustrated, lonely, and looking forward to an end to the situation. She does try to remain positive.*



*Obviously making them feel more lonely without the visits. Both my clients say how much they look forward to my telephone calls.*



*They feel trapped, they cannot get to church; they only see their carers for a very short time a day. Carers seem busier than normal and have even less time to chat.*

### Community Champions quickly got into gear to adapt our services:

- Befriending has moved to telephone or video calls as well as through writing and emails. For clients who are particularly isolated we have added in additional befrienders so they are contacted more than once a week. Some clients have learned to use new apps to communicate, and a volunteer described how she supported her client to access WhatsApp, which has meant they have been able to walk around their respective gardens chatting. The volunteer said that this was a "home visit...in reverse" as the client was able to find out more about the volunteer's life.
- We have a closed Facebook group for people to chat safely, people have talked about what they've watched on television, what they've baked, and their gardens. One former volunteer who moved away is participating from New Zealand.
- Zoom has been used for mini-Gatherings and for Digital Champions volunteers to stay in touch. The monthly larger Gatherings have also moved to Zoom, using break out rooms to enable conversations in small groups.
- Staff have been providing a lot of telephone support and help to people, clients have commented that it is reassuring to know that we are there.

As lockdown starts to be relaxed we have started to undertake garden visits, and will continue to adapt what we are able to do in line with Government guidance.

## VASL and Community Hub services

During the lockdown VASL has also worked with the Council's Coronavirus Community Hub taking on referrals from vulnerable people who are shielding and need practical help like shopping, accessing medicines, or walking dogs. VASL has signposted over 100 people who want to volunteer to local community organisations and to Community Champions, although the supply of volunteers has far exceeded client needs, this local trend reflects the national picture.



## What's next?

We are moving into the fourth year of our five year project so we will be looking at how the project can be sustained into the future as well as our usual ongoing changes as the project develops.

With our face-to-face services currently on hold it is not clear when they will start up again, but some of the ideas for future development that we could consider:

- More intergenerational work, through partnerships with schools, children and young people's organisations.
- Support focusing on particular experiences that many of our clients share, for example bereavement or dementia befriending.
- Developing more volunteer roles to run small groups, for example around a specific topic or in different locations, or similarly to Breakfast Club, by setting a regular time for a shared drink, meal or snack.
- Group befriending in older people's housing complexes: a few of our clients have commented how there isn't as much social activity where they live as they would like.
- Continuing links with community projects and other partners to encourage Community Champions participants to link up with activities across the community.
- Continuing online support for clients who are unable to get out or have visits.



*Enjoying a Community Gathering*

Please let us know if you would like to be involved or have any other ideas.

## Acknowledgements

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Community Champions staff: Rohini Corfield, Jenny Young, Sam Gisborne, and Denise Heseltine.

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Maureen O'Malley, VASL Charity Manager.

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Becky Nixon, Ideas to Impact, and designed by Mark Paul, Little Gem Creative.

## About VASL

Community Champions is part of VASL, a local charity providing services and support across Harborough District and Leicestershire.

VASL's mission is to improve and enrich the lives of people in our community by providing services as well as volunteer facilitated activities. Other services include Support for Carers, delivered across Leicestershire; the Car Scheme providing transport for older, disabled or rurally-isolated people; My Mind Matters providing mental health support; and our Young Carers project.



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