Development of Scotland's Volunteering Action Plan

Evaluation Report

September 2022

Contents

Thank you

Volunteer Scotland and the Scottish Government's Third Sector Unit would like to thank the 40 respondents from the Governance Group and the five Working Groups who took the time to complete the survey and provide such valuable feedback.

Survey highlights

Working Group perspective - Positive aspects

- 76% of respondents rated Management Team support 'excellent' or 'good'.
- 87% rated Management Team support for their Group as excellent or good.
- 83% of respondents thought their Group had been well chaired.
- 73% thought there had been a co-produced approach.
- 80% rated communication from the Scottish Government and Volunteer Scotland as 'excellent' or 'good'.
- 87% rated communication from their chair as 'excellent' or 'good'.
- 94% rated communication within their group as 'excellent' or 'good'.
- 70% thought their Working Group had helped to progress the VAP process.
- 90% thought that their contribution to the Group was valued 'most/all the time'

Working Group perspective - Areas for improvement

The following VAP tools all had a significant number of 'average' responses: lunch and learn sessions, evidence sessions, prioritisation tools, Participants' handbook. Also:
- Only 57% thought VAP's overall objectives were clear and easy to understand
- Only 47% thought the right people were involved in their group
- Only 33% thought Human Learning Systems was 'excellent' or 'good'.

Governance Group perspective (only 6 respondents)

In general, the feedback was less positive from the Governance Group. The key positives were that 5 respondents thought the Governance Group had been well chaired; and 5 thought the right people were involved in their Group and 5 thought communication from the Scottish Government was good. Areas for improvement included:
- Only 3 respondents thought their group was partly fulfilling its objectives
- Only 3 respondents thought they had partly helped to fulfil the VAP process.
- Only 2 respondents thought that Human Learning Systems was good.

Future engagement by Working Group (WG) and Governance Group (GG)

- Enjoyed being involved – 73% of WG respondents; 50% of GG respondents
- Believe in VAP process - 87% of WG respondents; 100% of GG respondents
- Would definitely/possibly like to remain in VAP process – 93% WG; 100% GG

1. Introduction

1.1 Focus of the study

This report evaluates the effectiveness of the action planning process underpinning the development and publication of Scotland's first Volunteering Action Plan (VAP). This was a major co-production process which commenced with an initial engagement of over 100 people in early spring 2021, right through to the final drafting of the Action Plan in spring 2022.

It is primarily a process evaluation to learn lessons from what worked and what didn't work in the management, administration and development processes involved in the production of the Action Plan. Therefore, its main objective is to use the evidence to help inform the future rollout and implementation of the Action Plan.

However, an important secondary objective is to share the evidence with all those who 'volunteered' to help the action planning process; those who gave their time as chairs or members of the Governance Group, one of the five Working Groups, or the Management Team – see Figure 1. The achievements of all those concerned is a testament to what can be achieved through a genuine spirit of co-production and partnership working.

Lastly, the evaluation study provides an important insight into the learning which Action Plan members benefited from during their year-long involvement in the process. Hence, there is an element of impact evaluation as the evidence reveals how members have enhanced their knowledge of volunteering; learned from the experience and skills of group members; have a greater understanding of co-production; have been exposed to new systems' thinking; and have learned more about policy development and the workings of Government 'from the inside'.

1.2 Methodology

The main research method was an online survey that was issued to everyone who expressed an initial interest in the VAP process and participated in the engagement events in April and May 2021 The sample sizes and response rates were as follows:

- 6 responses from 18 Governance Group members = 33% response rate
- 34 responses from 95 Working Group members = 36% response rate.

Figure 1 - VAP Delivery Structure
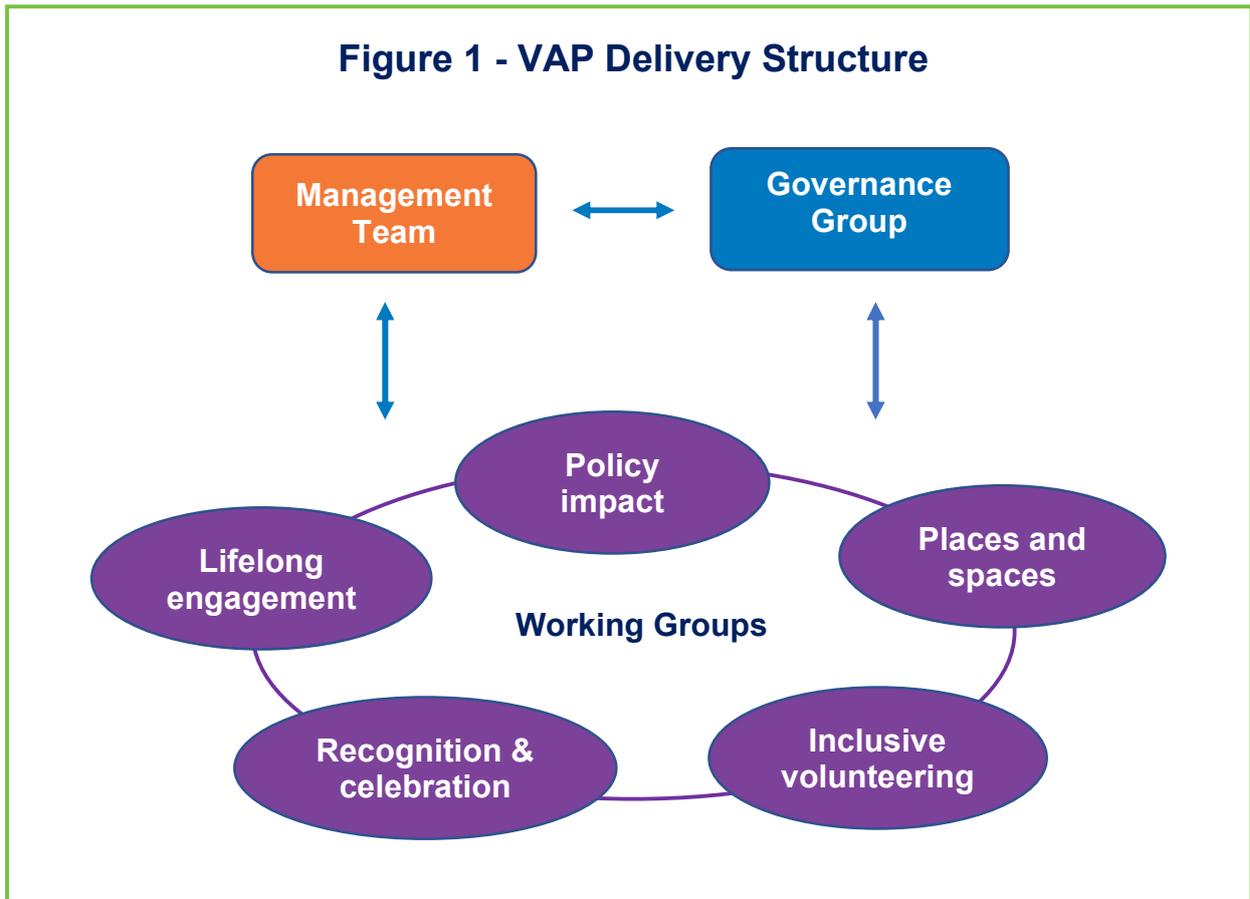
Care must be taken in the interpretation of the survey feedback as the respondents are not necessarily representative of the population of participants. Factors to consider include:

- Small sample size - there were only six respondents from the Governance Group
- Self-selection bias – respondents' engagement in the VAP process was high – 90% of Working Group respondents participated in their Group 'all' or 'most of the time'. The equivalent figure for the Governance Group respondents was 83%. This may reflect self-selection bias with those more actively engaged being more likely to respond to the evaluation survey.
- However, there was balanced representation from the 'active members' of the five Working Groups, with 5-7 respondents per group.

The excellent range of qualitative evidence was analysed thematically to help in the interpretation of the quantitative data.

The study also included evidence from:

- The quarterly monitoring reports provided by the five chairs of the Working Groups
- Feedback from Volunteer Scotland's 2022 stakeholder survey which contained a question on 'the overall impact of the VAP partnership initiative'.

VAP Engagement

2.1 Understanding the variations in engagement

Engaging people in the VAP process, and keeping them engaged, has been an ongoing challenge, specifically for the Working Groups. There were two engagement phases:

- **The initial 'mobilisation' phase** of the VAP process, which was successful in attracting a very positive response, with around c.120 interested parties attending the introductory sessions that were offered at the beginning of the process to provide information on the proposed way forward. Trying to reflect personal interests, the 120 were assigned to the Governance Group and the five Working Groups. This resulted in c. 20 members per Group.

- **The delivery phase** when the Groups were tasked with the development of the Volunteering Action Plan and this lasted for approximately a year from April 2021 to March 2022.

The engagement problem with the Working Groups reflected these two phases. The mobilisation phase attracted a significant proportion of individuals who did not fully appreciate the nature and scale of the task in hand, and that the term 'working groups' actually meant what it said – 'work'. The result was that the initial numbers 'signed-up' did not translate into active team members. As a consequence, some chairs of the Working Groups actually classified their members into two groups: 'active members' and 'networked members', with the former participating in regular group meetings and supporting specific tasks between meetings.

The delivery phase over the year of the VAP process resulted in a second level of attrition, whereby the engagement of some Working Group members waned for a range of reasons. These included the time commitment involved in supporting their Working Group; the level of the workload in their 'day job'; and the fact that the 'ask' was not fully understood at the beginning and that it was more onerous than expected.

> **Factors impacting commitment of working group members**
>
> "I was overwhelmed by the amount of communications and meetings due to my existing workload and couldn't continue with the group as I quickly lost my place." (Working Group member)

> "The formation and development of the Working Group initially took some time to form. We had more active members initially however some had to drop out due to work commitments and the realisation of the 'ask' of the Working Group (for example continued participation over a prolonged period of time)." (Working Group member)

However, the engagement issue did not apply equally across the Working Groups which was quickly identified through the Working Group Process Evaluation Reports. For example, some groups managed to retain a strong cohort of c. 10 members that met regularly every two weeks.

Strong Working Group Engagement

"There is very good engagement during meetings and people volunteer to undertake tasks and complete them outside meetings too. The meetings feel lively and interesting." (Working Group Quarterly Process Evaluation)

"There is a good amount of representation in the [Working Group] and members seem to enjoy hearing from each other and connecting with one another's ideas." (Working Group Quarterly Process Evaluation)

However, for other Working Groups, engagement was more problematic, with reports of poor attendance at meetings, members not engaging in the process outside of meetings and Chairs' feeling that communication was one-sided.

Weak Working Group Engagement

"Our chair took on a huge amount of work herself." (Working Group member)

"We are losing people a bit now and need to be mindful of that." (Working Group Quarterly Process Evaluation)

"…in spite of Doodle polls and moving dates and days of meetings to maximise attendance, commitment to the process is still low." (Working Group Quarterly Process Evaluation)

"The chair made a great effort to involve all members of the group and was hampered by some members' limited attendance, participation and contribution." (Working Group member)

However, the survey feedback on engagement of Working Group members was a lot more positive when they were asked to assess their own level of engagement:

- 80% of Working Group survey respondents stated that they regularly attended meetings;
- 90% had actively participated in their group all or most of the time; and
- 90% felt that their contribution was valued all or most of the time.

This suggests that the sample of respondents suffered from self-selection bias, whereby the 'engaged' were more likely to respond to the survey than the 'less engaged'.

With regards to the Governance Group, the six survey respondents had all regularly attended meetings, with five out of the six actively participating in the group all or most of the time. However, only four out of six felt that their contribution was valued all or most of the time: "I feel my contribution is valued by the group members, but I'm not always sure it's then acted upon." (Governance Group member)

Although the survey results presented an overall encouraging picture of engagement in the VAP process, respondents did highlight several issues that provided an insight as to why there was sometimes a lack of engagement and withdrawal from the process.

2.2 Key factors affecting engagement

Lack of time was the primary reason for engagement problems cited above. The commitment (both time and effort) that was expected of Working Group members and how "meetings have been far more frequent than envisaged" was the main obstacle to involvement in the VAP process, even for those who were committed to the ethos and development of the VAP. It was therefore suggested that for any future initiatives it is important to have the 'ask' and level of participation clearly defined at the beginning of the process.

Understanding the 'time poor' factor

"As the work on the VAP is usually additional to our full time work I noted that all of us […] sometimes struggled to keep up with the different stages/developments. This is more due to our busy work schedule than any shortcoming on the hosts/key protagonists of the Working Group." (Working Group respondent)

"Time is a huge barrier. I feel like I am not contributing as effectively as I could as so much time is taken up with meetings. As a Chair I am spending at least 8 hours a month on meetings alone so struggle to find the time to do all the admin stuff

and pulling everything together. Sub-Groups have not worked for our group as we are now down to a small pool of core members." (Working Group member)

"I have found the process to be confusing and onerous despite having a very committed group convenor. The number of meetings has increased significantly and it is difficult for members from small organisations to commit to many meetings. This appears to be evident from the fall off of people attending group meetings and then being able to take on additional tasks." (Working Group member)

"I think it was difficult in the start, we had an overwhelming support from lots of different organisations which I think was amazing but did slow the process down…I did think that some people wanted to be involved but struggled with the commitment. Our group size has contracted but I feel that we can move at speed. I think what could be done better is possibly clearer direction of who needs to be involved and the commitment that is involved." (Working Group member)

2.3 Mitigation measures

However, it is important to remember that the VAP process was a new concept, operating in uncharted territory and moving at a fast pace. It was challenging for the Management Team and Working Group Chairs to address and mitigate the time pressures that were emerging from the process and the apparent impact that this was having on levels of engagement. Attempts to alleviate some of the issues concerning engagement included:

- Creating informal opportunities for members to get to know one another, and to share their motivations for being involved in the process, particularly as COVID-19 restrictions had curtailed face-to-face engagement and impeded the 'normal' relationship building process. These informal sessions were *"worth their weight in gold"* according to one Working Group Chair in terms of helping the group to bond.

- Reviewing the Working Groups' membership and asking members to reconfirm their engagement. This saw some members move into a more networked or critical friend role rather than being an active member of the group. This provided Working Groups with a clearer idea of who their core membership was. However, feedback on this approach did identify the need to keep networked members regularly informed and updated on progress which had not always happened.

- Encouraging Working Groups to create sub-groups or buddy pairs to help build connections and relationships.

- The Scottish Government communicating with members to acknowledge their time, effort and commitment, in a bid to re-energize their efforts – *"…..the resource cost and commitment of individuals and organisations supporting the VAP process needs to be recognised. This was a real tribute as to how bought into the process people became"*.

Some members did appreciate that it was difficult to know beforehand what the required commitment to the process was going to be; and some even reflected that if this had been known at the beginning of the process, then it may actually have turned people away.

> **Examples of successful engagement – Working Group members perspective**
>
> One Working Group member commented that "it was the evolving process over the last 6-9 months that supported the group to bond" and that it is "certainly testament to the Working Group's development and dynamics that the VAP work was prioritised [despite] the volume of work increasing exponentially over the time period of the VAP development".
>
> "The time taken at the start to form [the Working Group] has delivered a bonus as the active group members have committed time, energy and worked superbly in buddy pairs. We started as colleagues and will continue as friends." (Working Group member)
>
> "The Working Group I am part of has produced superb work. Only challenge has been the time pressure as everyone is so busy. However, people's dedication to volunteering and the importance/significance of the Volunteering Action Plan has ensured that people have given priority to this and fulfilled the objectives, feeding in great experiences, ideas and knowledge." (Working Group member)

2.4 Implications for VAP implementation

One can draw the following observations from analysis of the engagement evidence to help inform the future rollout and implementation of VAP:

- **Targeting Working Group 'active' members**. The VAP planning and development process was effective in engaging a cadre of c. 30 - 40 individuals who were prepared to invest a significant amount of their time and skills to the Working Groups. There would be merit in the Chairs

investigating the interest of their members in the rollout process. It was encouraging to see that 50% of survey respondents confirmed that they '…would like to remain in the VAP process beyond publication of the Action Plan' – see Section 7 – 'VAP impact on participating members'.

- **Sharing evidence on what participants got out of the action planning process**: specifically, the benefits – building relationships, making friends, feeling part of an important national initiative, etc.

- **Learning from 'what worked' in the Action Plan engagement process:**
  o Being honest about the nature of support required and likely time commitments.
  o Providing the offer of active versus networked 'membership' for Group Members.
  o Providing time for informal discussion and bonding to allow people to get to know each other and help create a team spirit.
  o Fostering a learning community where people trust each other and feel confident to speak out and share views non-judgementally – both within groups and between groups.
  o Sharing tasks across all Working Group members so everyone has to participate in the thinking and development process – to foster a sense of ownership.
  o Utilising successful engagement tools such as working in 'buddy pairs' for task driven activities.
  o Providing strong facilitation support for Working Groups.
  o Providing recognition of the contribution of Working Group members and the team overall.

3. VAP Objectives

3.1 Understanding of objectives

Working Group perspective. Just over half of the Working Group survey respondents (57%) felt that the overall objectives of the VAP process were clear and easy to understand. However, this increases to 70% when reflecting on the objectives of their own working group, with 63% of respondents clear as to how their Working Group feeds into the overall VAP process.

> **Feedback on VAP Objectives – Working Group members' perspective**
>
> "Very transparent process, with all members of the group fully aware of what we are trying to achieve and what we are working towards." (Working Group member)
>
> "The overall objectives were relatively clear to grasp. What the end product was going to look like and how we were going to get there remained very unclear until the final stages." (Working Group member)
>
> "Understanding of the overall objectives and the shift in timelines, etc. has been challenging to keep up with. I relied on the excellent summaries that our Chair provided to keep me on track." (Working Group member).
>
> "The objectives and process have been/are excellent and are ensuring that the aspirations of the Volunteering For All – Our National Framework for Volunteering in Scotland are translated into key actions for the Volunteering Action Plan that is already making a positive difference, real impact and is an exciting prospect for volunteering in our communities across Scotland." (Working Group member)

Governance Group perspective. Only two out of the six Governance Group respondents (33%) felt that the overall objectives of the VAP process were clear and easy to understand; and only one member felt it was clear how the Governance Group fed into the overall VAP process. Half of respondents (50%) felt that the Governance Group objectives were clear and easy to understand.

> "It was a bit shaky to begin with through lack of clarity about our role, but has definitely improved in recent months." (Governance Group member)

"Not very clear where the ownership of the Action Plan sits. Does it sit with the Governance Group or the Management Group? Not clear on the governance aspect of the Group as decisions appear to be made and then presented to the Governance Group for comment. With all the volunteering expertise on the Governance Group I think involving the group in a more operational as well as strategic role to support the process would have been beneficial." (Governance Group member)

3.2 Implications for VAP implementation

A key advantage of the rollout process is that there is an actual 'Plan' which provides the foundation for taking this work forward. It provides much greater detail than the Volunteering for All National Outcomes Framework. Not only is there a list of 47 actions, but it also describes the characteristics of a 'Living Plan', 'Societal Impact', 'Policy context', 'Funding for Success', Creating an enabling environment', and 'Living the Plan'.

However, as always, 'the devil is in the detail'. For example, the 'Living the Plan' section describes the formation of 10 separate groups to support the management and implementation of the Action Plan. So, at one level, the read-across to the action planning process in 2021/22 is very similar, with similar challenges:

- A new delivery mechanism has to be created
- The objectives of these 10 groups need to be made clear
- Members need to be 'recruited' for the groups
- They need to be engaged effectively and supported.
- They need to track the rollout of their work and assess its contribution to the goals of the Volunteering Action Plan
- While the wider societal, economic, and environmental context is more complex than ever, with new challenges taking up the time of organisations.

Hence, the importance of learning lessons from the action planning process to optimise the effectiveness of these new structures, while recognising that people are no less busy and will possibly be even more stretched over the next decade.

4. VAP Process and Structure

4.1 Support provided by the Management Team

The support provided by the Scottish Government and Volunteer Scotland was generally well received, especially from the Working Groups:

- Over three-quarters of the Working Group survey respondents (77%) thought that the Scottish Government and Volunteer Scotland had provided excellent or good support to the VAP process.
- This increased to 87% in terms of their support to the Working Groups: *"*Excellent support and participation by Scottish Government and Volunteer Scotland. A rep[resentative] from both organisations usually always attends our group.*"* (Working Group member)

However, there was some qualitative feedback that the Scottish Government's support could have been enhanced if it had been able to support all five Working Groups consistently in the same way that Volunteer Scotland did.

In comparison, the feedback on support for the Governance Group was not so positive. Four out of the six Governance Group respondents (67%) thought that the Scottish Government and Volunteer Scotland had provided good support to the VAP process. However, only a third of respondents (33%) thought they had provided good support to the Governance Group.

> "I think better understanding from the beginning about what the Governance Group were best placed to support on, and how best to use the skills and knowledge of the group [was needed]." (Governance Group member)

4.2 Operational effectiveness of the Groups

A range of operational questions were put to both the Working Group and Governance Group members, with response options of 'yes', 'partly' and 'no'. Only the 'yes' responses have been analysed: see Table 1. For the first question 'Has your group been well chaired', 87% of respondents from both Working Groups and the Governance Group responded 'yes', which is a tribute to the skills and commitment of the VAP chairs.

However, the evidence also highlights some marked differences in operational effectiveness and performance between the Working Groups and the Governance Group:

- **Co-production** – 73% of Working Group respondents thought that a co-produced approach had been adopted, whereas for the Governance Group the figure was only 17% (1 respondent out of 6).
- **Group membership** – just under half of Working Group respondents (47%) thought that the right people were involved in their group, compared to 83% of Governance Group respondents.
- **Group objectives** – 73% of Working Group respondents thought that their group was fulfilling its objectives, whereas for the Governance Group it was 0% (however, 3 out of 6 responded 'partly').
- **Helping the VAP process** – 70% of Working Group respondents thought that their group had been fulfilling its objectives, whereas for the Governance Group it was 0% (however, 3 out of the 6 responded 'partly'.)

Table 1: Percentage of respondents who answered 'yes' to the following questions about their Working /Governance Group:

VAP Process	Working Group (n=30)	Governance Group (n=6)
	% of respondents saying 'yes'	
Has it been well chaired?	83%	83%
Do you feel there is a co-produced approach?	73%	17%
Are the right people involved?	47%	83%
Does the meeting schedule suit the needs of the group?	63%	50%
Has the group been fulfilling its objectives?	73%	0%
Has the group helped to progress the VAP process?	70%	0%

In summary, this evidence suggests that the Working Groups were actively engaged in delivering the VAP process through co-production, good chairing and focusing on their VAP objectives, but with significant gaps in terms of having 'the right people involved'. In contrast, the Governance Group felt they had the right people, but were not involved in the co-production process which undermined their ability to fulfil their objectives and make a meaningful contribution to the VAP process.

4.3 Working Groups' perspective on improving the VAP process

The main suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the Working Groups were:

- **Engaging other 'voices'** – the need to enhance the range of 'voices' in the VAP process, including:
  - The volunteer voice must be heard directly, not indirectly: *"Effective co-production necessitates the direct involvement of those with lived experience from the initial stages…"* (Working Group member)
  - Specific demographic groups such as ethnic minorities and young people
  - Increasing the practitioner voice and reducing the academic/ professional voice
  - Filling gaps in specific areas such as local authority representation.

- **Not 'going over old ground'** – using research evidence to save unnecessary working group investigations and so help 'move the agenda along'.

    "I feel that we are going over the same ground repeatedly and that the excellent research undertaken [by Volunteer Scotland]…..has answered many of the questions we are subsequently addressing and reframing." (Working Group member)

- **Less theory and complexity** – reduce the focus on theory and process: "[I wish] we had not got bogged down in theory and process at the beginning. This would have freed up time to focus on content." (Working Group member)

4.4 Governance Group perspective on improving the VAP process

Governance Group respondents commented on how they had not had the opportunity to fulfil their governance role, and how they had sometimes felt excluded from the VAP process through a lack of engagement between the Governance Group and the Working Groups. Ironically, the Governance Group had the skills and experience relevant to the themes of the five Working Groups, but were constrained in their ability to deliver this support.

"More involvement [by the Governance Group] in the Working Groups and Management Group. Even making the decisions on the actions, I haven't seen any actions and it is meant to be launched in June. This makes me nervous, as this is essentially what the next 10 years for volunteering looks like. The Governance Group should have been involved in the decision making of what actions were taken forward for the Action Plan given the expertise in the group. I understand that the Working Groups are presenting this to us shortly, however, it makes it very difficult for Governance Group members to offer suggestions and be a critical friend, as they have essentially not had much to do with this group and would rightly feel who were we to come in at the last stages and be critical." (Governance Group member)

This disconnect between the Governance Group and the Working Groups was also discussed in the Working Group Quarterly Process Evaluation reports and mentioned by Working Group survey respondents who felt "….that the Working Groups should have had a formal link to the Governance Group".

4.5 Implications for VAP implementation

Given the significant issues around the remit and deployment of the Governance Group during the action planning process, there are no proposals to repeat a similar structure in the rollout of the Action Plan. In summary, we had the right people but in the wrong roles. With the benefit of hindsight, the VAP structure would have been simplified and strengthened by removing the Governance Group and allocating members' expertise to the Management Team and Working Groups.

Building upon this learning the following should be considered in the development and rollout of the new Action Plan structure:

- Deploying the considerable skills and expertise of those Governance Group and Working Group members who want to continue supporting the Action Plan – specifically in those areas where they can generate the greatest influence and impact.

- Learning the lessons from the operation of the Working Groups and Governance Group during 2021-22 in the following areas:

  o **Strong rationale** - ensuring there is a strong rationale for the establishment of any new group, and that each group has clearly defined objectives which are complementary to, and supportive of, other groups.

- **Right membership** - paying careful consideration to membership of each group, particularly with regard to ensuring:
    - The required representation of volunteers and other 'voices'.
    - That members understand their obligations and are prepared to be 'active members'.

- **Strong chairs** - The importance of appointing strong chairs for the new groups, as the action planning process has demonstrated how critical their role is in providing the required leadership and direction.

- **Keep it simple** – the simpler the structure the better. In particular, consideration should be given to the timing of new group formation. There may be considerable merit in phasing the rollout of groups to reduce workload, improve focus and enhance performance. (Note: there are 10 new VAP groups proposed as part of the 'Enabling Environment')

- **Overall management** – reviewing the appropriate membership for an overarching management group. Limiting this to the Scottish Government and Volunteer Scotland is too narrow. However, a word of caution – ensure that group size is restricted to a manageable number, which will help facilitate effective executive control.

5. VAP communication

5.1 Effectiveness of VAP communication

Working Group respondents were very positive about the levels of communication within their Groups (94%) and with their Chair (87%), and also with the Management Team members (80%): see Table 2. The one exception was communication from the Governance Group rated by only 50% of respondents as 'good' or 'excellent'.

Table 2 – Percentage of respondents rating communication as either 'good' or 'excellent'

Type of communications	Working Group (n= 22-30)	Governance Group (n=2-6)
	% of respondents rating as	'good' or 'excellent'
Within their Group	94%	50%
With their Chair	87%	50%
With the Scottish Government	80%	83%
With Volunteer Scotland	80%	67%
Between Governance Group and Working Group	50%	50%

Interestingly, 50% of the Governance Group respondents also rated the communication from Working Groups as 'good' or 'excellent', the exact reciprocal of the results of the Working Groups' views on communication from the Governance Group.

It is also concerning to see that only 50% of Governance Group respondents rated communication within their own Group and with their Chair as 'good' or 'excellent'. However, these results only represent 6 out of the 18 Governance Group members, so the findings are not necessarily representative of the wider Governance Group.

5.2 Working Groups' perspective on improving VAP communication

The following suggestions were put forward by Working Group respondents:

- **Direction of travel** – greater clarity on 'the overall direction of travel' and what 'the final product would look like'.

- **Forward planning** – improved forward planning, not just planned outputs and dates but what specifically was expected of the Working Groups by these dates.

- **Clarity of 'the ask'** - being crystal clear on what you ask for. For example, determining the specificity of VAP 'actions'. "Are they to be really clear and specific actions to be taken by a single organisation, or are they vaguer and more general actions that could be undertaken by a range of organisations." (Working Group member)

- **Cross-group communication** - the need for better cross-group communication. Some members felt that the Working Groups were operating independently of each other and that there was a *'mystique'* surrounding what the other groups were doing in terms of their approach and outputs, including how they were progressing and whether there was any read-across between the different Working Groups.
  > "Despite the stated commitment to taking a systems approach, the process has felt quite siloed at times with little insight into what the other Working Groups are doing, ability to feedback on each Working Groups ideas, or opportunity to consider how their ideas and actions impact on the actions of your own Working Group." (Working Group member)

- **Improving public awareness** – working group members recognised that there were significant challenges in raising awareness, especially as "….those that ought to be invested in volunteering aren't always, and there' a job to do in embedding the plan". (Working Group member). Ideas included having a section on the VAP website that anyone can communicate through – along the lines of a SLACK channel; this could help support effective knowledge exchange; and being bold and innovative in the launch and implementation of the plan.

6. VAP Tools

6.1 Effectiveness of VAP tools

To assist with the VAP process, a range of tools were made available to the Working Group and Governance Group members. Members were not obliged to make use of these tools and therefore not all respondents were in a position to comment on every tool that was provided.[1]

Table 3: Percentage of respondents who rated the tools made available to support the VAP process as either 'good' or 'excellent'

VAP Tools	Working Group (n= 22-30)	Governance Group (n=2-6)
	% of respondents	
Participants' Handbook	50%	67%
Evidence sessions	70%	50%
Online tools (e.g. Miro, Jamboard)	73%	33%
Lunch and Learn sessions	61%	33%
Human Learning Systems	38%	33%
Prioritisation tools	59%	N/A

The online tools and evidence sessions were the highest rated resource amongst the Working Group respondents at 73% and 70% respectively, followed by the 'lunch and learn' sessions (61%) and prioritisation tools (59%). In comparison, the Governance Group tended to rate all of the VAP tools less highly than the Working Groups, with the exception of the participant's handbook at 67% (four out of the six respondents).

The different tools were, in general, perceived to be of good quality and relevant, but their uptake and impact were undermined by:

- **Low usage of the tools** – for example, the evidence sessions were well received, but their reach and impact could have been much better: "The

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[1] Due to lack of knowledge about the tools by a significant minority of respondents the 'don't know' responses have been discounted from the data analysed in Table 3.

research presented …..has been excellent and perhaps this could have been used to greater effect*."*

- **Trying to do too many things at once** – for example, learning about Human Learning Systems while trying to deliver the objectives of the Working Group. There was also a cumulative effect from the range of different tools, new IT platforms (for some), and new approaches/systems which was overwhelming, on top of very busy personal workloads.

- **The fast pace and intensity** of the action planning process meant that there was limited time to engage with the tools.

6.2 Human Learning Systems

The Human Learning Systems (HLS) approach not only received the lowest ratings of all the VAP tools in Table 3, but it also generated the greatest amount of feedback from the open questions. Importantly, not all of the feedback was negative:

Positive feedback on Human Learning Systems

"[I] learned a lot about Human Learning Systems as a process." (Governance Group member)

"[I've gained] a greater appreciation of the HLS and its practical application." (Working Group member)

"Working though the design thinking model is really beneficial in simplifying how we tackle whole system change. This fits really well with the HLS and I hope that this is something the group members find it useful and will be able to use the methodology in other projects they lead in future." (Working Group Quarterly Process Evaluation)

For others, the Human Learning System approach had made the work more complicated and was at risk of disengaging people who "….were clearly stretched for time and having to learn the HLS approach on top of work in relation to the [Action] Plan".

The overarching lesson from VAP is the need to understand what is required to make the methodology work before committing to its use. Respondents highlighted the following key factors:

- Understanding the HLS approach in advance of commencing the action planning process. Trying to do both in parallel does not work.
- There needs to be training to ensure that everyone involved in the VAP process understands HLS and how it should be applied.
- In particular, those leading the VAP process must have high level knowledge of, and experience in, the application of HLS.

It's easy to be wise in hindsight, but given the challenges in preparing an Action Plan, the addition of the HLS methodology was too ambitious for the number of people involved and the added pressure to deliver VAP outputs against a tight time-table. There was also the opportunity cost to the time committed to HLS:

"I feel the HLS was unhelpful - it complicated the process and consumed significant time that would have been better spent on the plan itself. Thus, the system was over complicated, making the interconnections overly complicated and burdensome. I respect the hard work of many in helping to overcome this as best they can, especially the Governance Group chair and the Working Group chairs." (Governance Group member)

7. VAP Impact on Participating Members

7.1 Enjoyment

Seventy three percent of Working Group respondents replied 'yes', they had enjoyed being a part of the VAP process, with 23% 'partly' enjoying it. The corresponding figures for the Governance Group members were 50% and 50%. Not a single respondent stated 'no' they had not enjoyed the VAP process. The positive impacts from involvement included:

- **Collaboration** - the opportunity to work with others collaboratively as a co-production process: "I thoroughly enjoyed the process and [I'm] keen to see the collaboration continue…." (Governance Group member)
- **Building relationships** – meeting new people, working with them and building relationships: "Learned from other members of the group from their experience and different perspectives on volunteering and built new relationships. (Working Group member)
- **Being on 'the inside'** of a major national initiative: "…it was a great privilege to be involved in this important work. Well done to all." (Working Group member)

The other key theme underpinning the positive feedback on members' enjoyment and what they derived from the process relates to learning, and this is now examined in detail.

7.2 Personal learning – Working Group members

When asked to consider what they had personally learned and gained from the VAP process, Working Group members responded very positively. Feedback can be grouped into the factors that contributed to the learning; and what the members actually 'learned'.

Facilitators of learning: a range of positive factors were identified by VAP members including:

- **Skills mix** – providing members with the opportunity to meet and work with '*friendly and intelligent people*'; also reference to fellow volunteering 'experts'; and a varied skills mix across the groups.

"Experience of working on a volunteering-focused task in a multi-agency group. This is the first time that I have been part of such a group and I learned a lot from the perspectives of the other members." (Working Group member)

- **Rich discussions** - the varied skills, expertise and perspectives amongst the Working Group members has enabled rich discussions to take place and has created the opportunity for members to share their knowledge and experience of volunteering practice. One respondent mentioned that it was important to share this learning more widely and build in time for this through a 'learning network'. Another stated:

    "Has encompassed tremendous learning […] and has re-affirmed the importance of volunteering and the great potential of the Volunteering Action Plan to further build this." (Working Group member)

- **Safe space** – the Working Groups were widely considered to be a safe space where members felt they were 'treated as an equal and with respect'. The lack of power dynamics in the groups meant that 'good, open and honest' conversations could take place.

    "It has been interesting to hear different perspectives and there has been a good willingness to get into rigorous discussion and debate within the working group which can sometimes be missing from government-led processes." (Working Group member)

Understanding volunteering – in response to the question "Has your VAP experience changed your understanding of volunteering and if so in what way?", six respondents out of 29 stated 'no'. However, the other 23 gave examples of the impact the VAP process had had on their learning. Interestingly, three 'no' respondents then went on to evidence specific aspects of learning they benefited from! The most common responses were:

- **Learning about volunteering** – developing a wider understanding of the range, scope and complexity of volunteering. Learning about the volunteering issues faced by other members and how they managed them was particularly helpful in enhancing members' understanding of the volunteering landscape in Scotland. Lessons included:
    - The nature of the contribution of volunteers and volunteering to Scotland.
    - The contribution of volunteering at both the national and local levels.
    - The different levels of knowledge and awareness about volunteering.
    - The volunteering contribution from different demographic groups.
    - Having one's assumptions challenged – 'a steep learning curve'.
    - The recruitment of volunteers – understanding internal policies and procedures (especially for disabled volunteers – relevant to 'inclusive volunteering below).

- How appreciated volunteering is…..but also the counterpoint….how volunteering is not fully understood.
- The contribution of informal volunteering.
- Understanding volunteering from the point of view of policy makers.
- How to support volunteering as an ouput of the VAP process.
- Being aware of the obstacles that volunteering groups face.

- **Inclusive volunteering** - Members improved their understanding of inclusive volunteering. This included good practice which was shared by organisations such as disabled people's organisations.

Other learning – there was also other learning which transcended volunteering-specific learning. The most frequently cited themes were:

- Greater appreciation of the HLS and its practical application. For example, how to listen using HLS theory.
- Improved understanding of Scottish Government processes and being part of a wide-ranging project focused on policy development. Learning how different government departments are working in isolation more than they expected.
- Learning from the VAP co-production process – the management of a large project in collaboration with others. This included collaboration involving those in a remote setting through the application of digital platforms such as Miro.

7.3 Personal learning – Governance Group members

Whilst each Governance Group respondent had a different learning experience, the benefits of sharing knowledge amongst volunteering experts and developing an appreciation of the challenges of co-design were cited by more than one member.

"How challenging it can be to implement a proper co-design process...as people want to default to traditional ways of working." (Governance Group member)

"I have enjoyed the experience and collaboration with people from a wide range of organisations. Opportunity to hone my skills in strategic engagement and being a critical friend to a Working Group." (Governance Group member)

The majority of Governance Group respondents said that the VAP experience had not changed their understanding of volunteering. However, several members did mention how it had reaffirmed to them the importance of volunteering and the people who champion it.

"I have involved volunteers throughout my career in different aspects of the organisation's work. The VAP has cemented my belief that volunteering can be a catalyst to effect change and the importance of a collaborative approach to enable it to achieve its full potential." (Governance Group member)

"Mostly it has helped to remind me again how many amazing people there are, with so much knowledge of volunteering in Scotland, who are so willing to give freely of their time and energy to support volunteering - continually inspiring." (Governance Group member)

7.4 Future engagement in the VAP process

Belief in the VAP process – at the time of the VAP Evaluation Survey in April 2022, 87% of Working Group respondents and 100% of Governance Group respondents still believed in what the VAP process was trying to achieve.

Future involvement – half of Working Group respondents (50%) said they wanted to be involved in the next stages of the VAP process, with a further 43% saying they possibly wanted to be involved. For the Governance Group respondents, the respective figures were 67% and 33%.

7.5 Overall impact assessment of the VAP partnership initiative

Volunteer Scotland's own 'stakeholder survey' in April 2022 included a question: "How would you rate the overall impact of the Volunteering Action Plan partnership initiative?". Of the 20 respondents, 30% assessed impact to be 'high' and 60% 'moderate'. Only 10% of respondents thought there was 'low or no' impact. There were also positive comments such as:

"It's been great to see Volunteer Scotland take a leadership role in the VAP process. The lunch and learn sessions led by Volunteer Scotland staff were invaluable and positioned Volunteer Scotland as the knowledge experts on several topics."

8. Guidance for VAP Implementation

This section reviews the evaluation evidence described in Sections 2-7 to help inform the future rollout and implementation of the VAP. There was also a final wrap-up question: "How do you think the Working Groups/Governance Group and VAP process could be improved?".

The guidance presented in Table 4 reflects the views of Volunteer Scotland based on its analysis of the evidence. We would welcome feedback from VAP members on this guidance.

Table 4: Guidance to inform VAP rollout and implementation

| Topic	Guidance for VAP rollout and implementation
Objectives	• The need for greater clarity on what VAP is trying to achieve at the task group and action list level. Purposely, the Action Plan is quite broad. • So, there needs to be crystal clear understanding amongst team members on the more detailed operational objectives. • Everyone on the same page, with clear direction of travel.
Engagement	• Being clear up-front on the responsibilities and expected time commitments of members supporting the VAP rollout. Recognition of the 'time poor' issue faced in VAP development phase. • It's better to have a smaller number of committed members than a larger number with variable commitment. • Consider the active and networked members model for the VAP groups. • Matching people's skills/experience to the right roles. • Chair roles are particularly important to get right (one of the key strengths of the action planning process). • 'Fill the gaps' - there were a number of skills and areas of expertise that needed to be filled such as community engagement. • Build on people's engagement to date – so, communicate with the 'engaged'. • The chairs of the new groups to be responsible for the recruitment of their own group members. They also have good knowledge of who the engaged members are, which

Topic	Guidance for VAP rollout and implementation
	is relevant to recruitment in the follow-on groups, specifically 'policy' and 'communications'. • The sign-ups on the VAP website to be screened for their level of engagement.

Structure	• There are 10 proposed VAP groups in the 'Living the Plan' delivery mechanism (see Figure 2). Importance of:
	   o Clarity on each group's rationale and objectives
	   o The right people in the right role
	   o Keep it simple – a key lesson from the VAP development process was the over-complicated governance and management structure
	• There are a lot of groups in the new model. Suggestions:
	   o Review the modus operandi of the groups – some may require frequent engagement and others may work fine with, say, two main meetings a year.
	   o Timing – not all the groups need to be launched immediately – consider a phased rollout.
	   o Do we need all the groups? Some could be merged e.g. Plan management and Communication; and Monitoring & Evaluation and Research Groups.
	• Consider how best to deliver the Management Group's responsibilities. The need for an effective devolved model where the VAP groups are more autonomous and the central management team provides more of a facilitation, enabling role – 'with less doing'.

Process	• Less theory and less complexity. Less 'process heavy'. Plain English and easy to understand systems and procedures. • Effective inter-group communication is critical, and a process needs to be developed to make this happen (see 'Communications). • Make time for 'getting to know each other' – people need to learn about each other - their skills, experience and character – all part of the important bonding process. • Recognise and make allowances for people being at different stages on the learning journey. • Engaging other 'voices': o The volunteer voice must be heard directly, not indirectly

Topic	Guidance for VAP rollout and implementation
	○ Specific demographic groups such as ethnic minorities and young people ○ Increasing the practitioner voice and reducing the academic/ professional voice ○ Filling gaps in specific areas such as local authority representation - Secure buy-in to the Action Plan from participating members of the VAP process (their staff, volunteers and trustees) and wider sector colleagues including the voluntary, public and private sectors. - Not 'going over old ground' – using research evidence to save unnecessary investigations and so help 'move the agenda along'.
Funding	- Respondents expressed concerns over the funding of the Action Plan's implementation. Therefore, the role of the Funders' Consortium will be critical and careful attention needs to be given to: ○ Which organisations and individuals are represented on the Consortium ○ Clarity on its objectives and terms of reference
Accountability	- Providing clarity on which organisation(s) are responsible for the Volunteering Action Plan. - Volunteer Scotland has been tasked by the Third Sector Unit to lead implementation of VAP. - However, there needs to be clarity on the accountability of other organisations relating to their contribution to VAP: ○ Third Sector Unit for the evaluation of its funding of organisations/ programmes relevant to the delivery of VAP (Volunteer Scotland, TSI Scotland Network, Volunteering Support Fund, Make Your Mark inclusion project) - Encourage those Group(s) which organise around an action to set objectives and report progress.
Communications	- Improved forward planning, not just planned outputs and dates but what specifically each group expects to achieve and over what time period. - Clarity of 'the ask' - being crystal clear on what you ask for. For example, determining the specificity of VAP 'actions'.

Topic	Guidance for VAP rollout and implementation
	• The need to improve cross-group communication so that groups are sighted on each other's work. • A comms platform for VAP groups and interested parties to share progress, challenges, innovative ideas and cross-cutting issues. • Wider communication with key stakeholders, including volunteers, volunteer involving organisations, and the wider public. • Consideration for a 'volunteers' section to the VAP website.
Tools	• Tools such as guidance notes, learning workshops, analytical methodologies, and IT platforms are all valuable in their own right. But…...lessons to reflect on: o 'Less is more' – running too many tools in parallel, tools that are too complex, and require significant chunks of time have downsides: low uptake, creating stress for members and feelings of under-achievement. • Devolve control to ensure that the VAP groups have the freedom to develop/use the tools and systems that work best for them. • Scope for some consistent tools applicable to all VAP groups such as reporting and monitoring. • Human Learning Systems – the consensus feedback is that this analytical methodology is not appropriate for top-down widescale application in VAP rollout. • The only exceptions would be if specific groups or organisations wanted to apply the principles of HLS in their own work, subject to consensus in their group. • Use of HLS requires the allocation of sufficient time and training for all those involved in the process.
Learning	• This evaluation study has shown how important learning has been during the VAP action planning process – both individual learning and organisational/group learning. • Therefore, the VAP rollout and implementation phase must continue this journey of learning through: o Process evaluation – tracking the development and implementation of the VAP delivery mechanism to learn lessons in real time.

Topic	Guidance for VAP rollout and implementation
	o Impact evaluation – to review the impacts of the VAP groups and actions that are being rolled out; and, also, the personal learning of those involved. • Ensuring that monitoring and evaluation is planned from the very beginning of VAP implementation.

Figure 2 - Proposed VAP Group Structure [2]
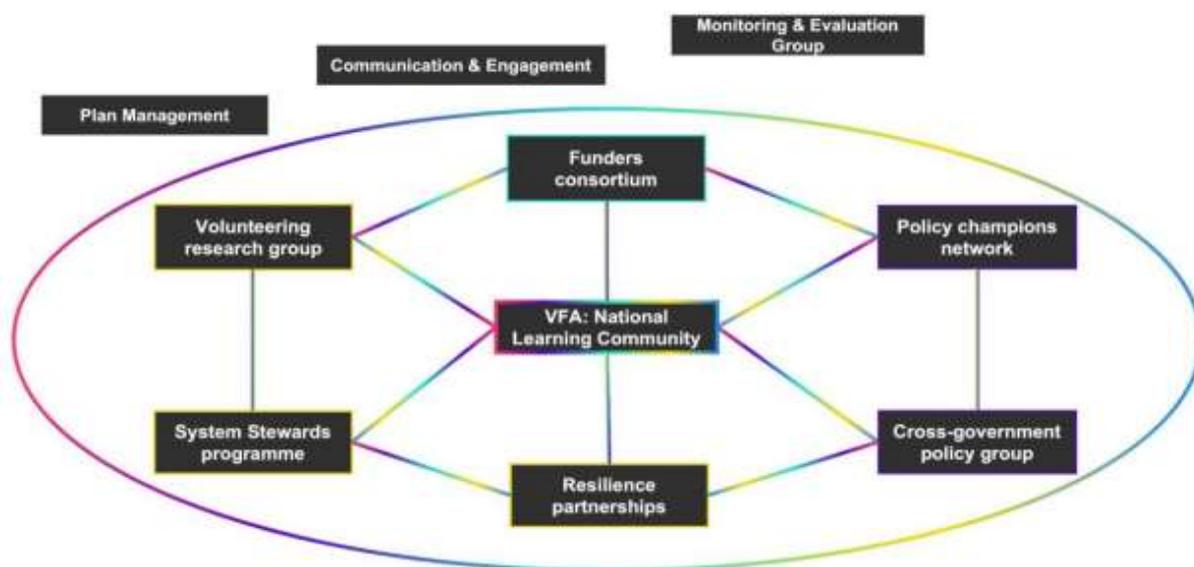
Conclusion

To conclude, the VAP action planning process has demonstrated how a wide range of organisations can come together with a shared purpose to deliver a complex project through a genuine co-production philosophy. The project demonstrated great partnership working, lots of learning, and a high level of commitment across all elements of the delivery mechanism: the Governance Group, the five Working Groups and the Management Team. The quality of the Action Plan is a testament to the success of this endeavour.

There was also a lot of positive evaluation feedback from Working Groups members regarding the performance of group chairs, the adoption of a co-production approach, communication, and support from the Scottish Government and Volunteer Scotland.

However, the Governance Group members (only 6 respondents) were, in general, less satisfied with the structure, operation and performance of the action planning process. A large element of this stems back to the design of the governance and delivery structure. In hindsight, it would have been more effective to use the skills and experience of the Governance Group members to support the Management Team and Working Groups directly, with no Governance Group. This would have simplified the structure, improved communication and utilised the members of the Governance Group much more effectively.

The evaluation study has also highlighted important limitations of the process in areas such as member engagement – many people were too 'time poor' to become 'active members' – the complexity of the VAP process, the low uptake of VAP tools and the challenges of the Human Learning Systems' approach. However, this evaluation feedback has provided important learning for the VAP rollout and implementation phase, as discussed in Section 8.

We also need to recognise the unanswered questions which remain and ensure that these issues are acknowledged and addressed in the next phase of the Action Plan rollout. This feedback from a member of the Governance Group gives a stark reality check on the challenges ahead:

> "What are we trying to achieve, is it achievable? Who will be accountable? There are no resources attached to this Action Plan which is really short sighted. Already overburdened colleagues across Scotland simply do not have the additional capacity to deliver ambitious plans with no resource. Sustainability of internal work is hard enough and financial pressures are going to get worse for organisations. I know we have discussed the funding

landscape in meetings but this is an urgent concern. We need buy-in to enable this Action Plan to be achieved, that includes buy-in from our own organisations, staff, volunteers and wider sector colleagues including the voluntary, public and private sectors. There were a lot of influential people not involved in the process at all like COSLA and HSCP. If this Action Plan is too ambitious with no resources then it will be a struggle to achieve. Ultimately, we all want to see this work. I reflect on the Connected Scotland strategy, this was launched with £10 million attached to it, why has that not happened with the Volunteering Action Plan?" (Governance Group member)

However, if we are prepared to learn from the evaluation evidence, we have the foundations to address these challenges and come up with solutions through the spirit of co-production and effective partnership working which so ably supported the action planning phase. In particular, it was very encouraging that at the time of the VAP Evaluation Survey in April 2022, 87% of Working Group respondents and 100% of Governance Group respondents still believed in what the VAP process was trying to achieve.

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