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Resourcing Historic Environment Services: Is less really more ?

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A recent survey of local authority resources for historic environment conservation shows a picture of declining staff and financial resources, increasingly varied organisational arrangements, and a growing range of cross-sectoral approaches to conservation. The historic environment is encompassed in new economic, social and educational initiatives, its conservation is justified as a key element in regeneration and community programmes and above all it offers people a sense of belonging to and caring about their locality. Working in conservation, we apparently have fewer dedicated resources but more access than ever to new funding programmes and opportunities for partnership. Can the trend towards less resource be reversed to deliver more for the historic environment ?

Last October English Heritage commissioned a rapid study into the resources that are available for local authority work in conservation of the historic environment. It was designed to complement a research study into the resources generally available for planning authorities commissioned by DTLR (now ODPM) from Arup Economics and Planning. The context for both studies is the Government's commitment to improving both the responsiveness of the planning system and the quality of its outcome; and to reviewing the whole way in which the planning system works locally and regionally. The Arup research was published in February as 'Resourcing of Planning Authorities', with a summary of the English Heritage study findings (Arup Economics 2002). The English Heritage study, based on the research carried out jointly by David Baker and myself, is published under the title of 'Heritage Under Pressure' on the English Heritage Web site (www.english-heritage.org.uk/heritageunderpressure).

The intention was that the outcomes of both studies should usefully inform both the Green Paper on Planning, now published as *Planning: Delivering a Fundamental Change*, and the forthcoming Public Spending Review 2002; and to that end they were both submitted to the DTLR in November 2001. It is difficult to say now whether either study was successful, or indeed sufficiently timely, in influencing thinking in relation to either. But the project - in setting out to provide a perspective on resources in the historic environment sector as a whole - has certainly raised issues that are germane to today's subject. This paper presents an overview of the findings of the research and the issues that it raises for the new century's agenda.

Knowing about resources is only useful if you can connect the resource - the amount of money available or the number of listed buildings designated or the number of people employed in conservation - with the results that they produce in the environment, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and the scale of need. Finding out what resources are available for historic environment conservation in local planning authorities is one matter. Measuring how effective these are and whether they meet needs are quite different questions. What are the benchmarks for performance? And what are the outcomes of those public services in terms of the historic environment - its sustainability and its value for people?

We began by undertaking a high level benchmarking exercise ourselves to define the core tasks of a local authority conservation service. The main sources for this were the former Department of National Heritage's guidance to local authorities on conservation provision (issued for local government reorganisation in 1995) and information from a number of Best Value exercises. We then looked for sources of information about provision along two axes: first **resources**, both in the local planning authorities and supporting them; and secondly, **conservation services and performance**.

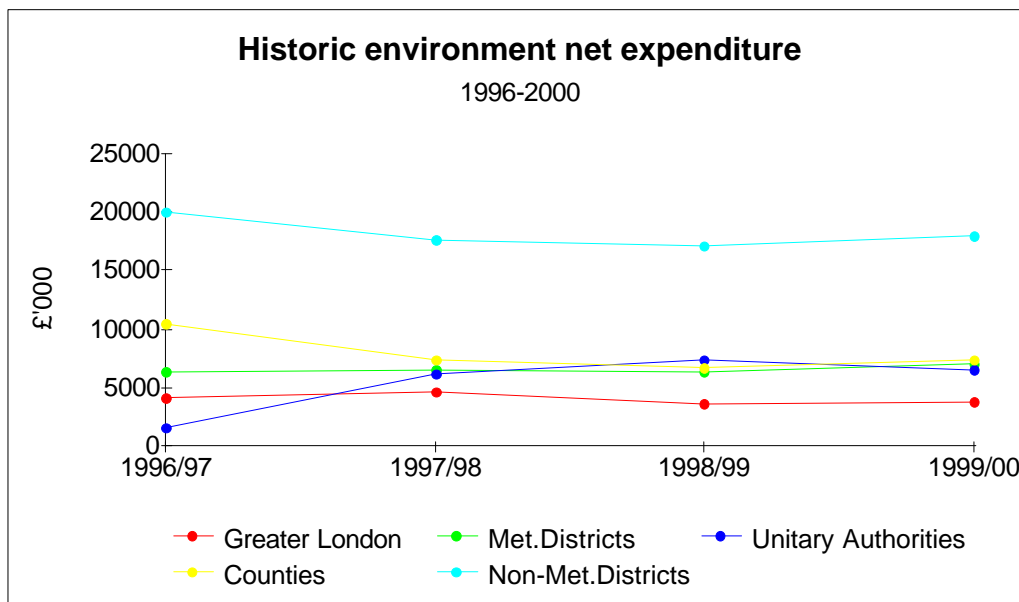
RESOURCES

There are plentiful sources of information about particular conservation resources: studies, surveys and assessments commissioned and carried out by English Heritage, by IHBC, by ALGAO, by IFA, by the CBA, SAVE, the Statutory Amenity Societies,

by bodies like the National Trust, by research students, universities, and above all by local authorities themselves. Appendix 3 to the published report provides details of those that were consulted. Sources that provide a more general picture across the whole conservation sector are few. There is the excellent *Heritage Monitor*, now even more useful in its new form (but the most recent issue sadly not available at the time) which covers headline data on various kinds of outputs like numbers of listed buildings, numbers of Conservation Areas (Hanna 2000, Baxter, 2002). DTLR / ODPM itself publishes quarterly statements of the numbers of planning applications and listed building consents determined per authority. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) collects annual forecast and actual spend statistics from local authorities under a large number of headings, for all local authority services and with some analysis according to head of local population. For the past few years in the CIPFA Planning and Development statistics, a separate section has been compiled for 'Conservation of the Historic Environment'. This appears to be the only source available for overall expenditure on conservation in local authorities and the graphs and statistics provided below are based on this data.

As Figure 1 shows, the distribution of resources for conservation between different types of authority has changed through the 1990s as the result of local government reorganisation. The trend has been towards decline in county and non-metropolitan

Figure 1: Net local authority expenditure on historic environment conservation, 1996-2000 (uncorrected for compound inflation estimated at 15% over the last five years)

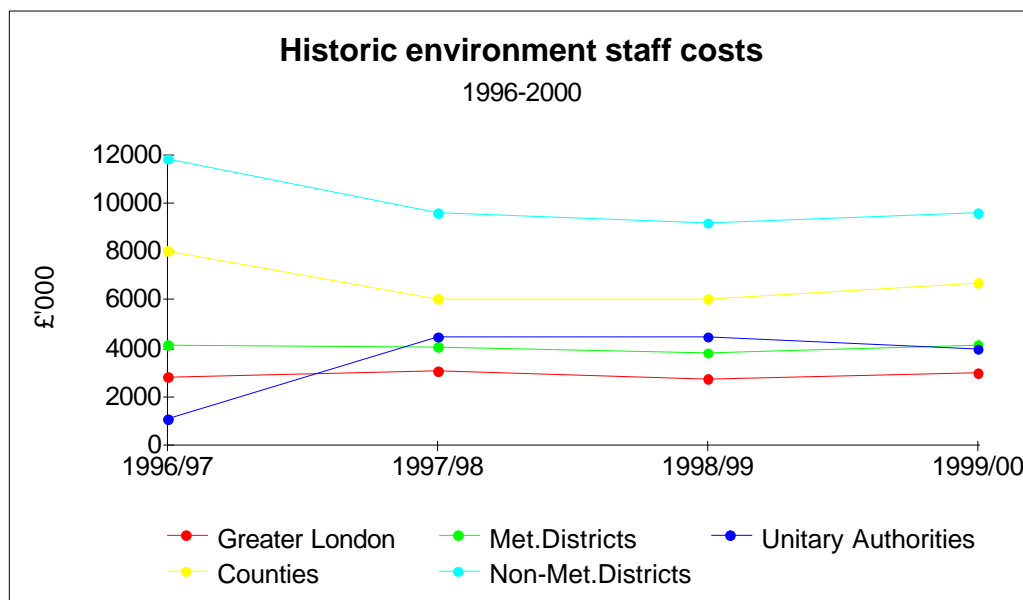


districts and some increase in unitary authorities, as illustrated. Analysis for the main planning resource study by Arup Economics and Planning showed the same picture: a marked decline in county authority spend on all environmental and conservation work, it also shows that in the unitary authorities (where one could have expected to find some compensatory increase) resources and staff numbers have declined. The Arup study found that in order to achieve levels of resources equivalent to those for 1996/7, there would need to be increases of 37% for unitary and district authorities and 23% for county authorities.

Effectively the amount spent by local authorities on historic environment conservation has stood still and depending on how you calculate it, net expenditure on historic environment conservation by planning authorities has declined by 8% - 15% in real terms over the last five years. We have not then been imagining that things have been getting tougher.

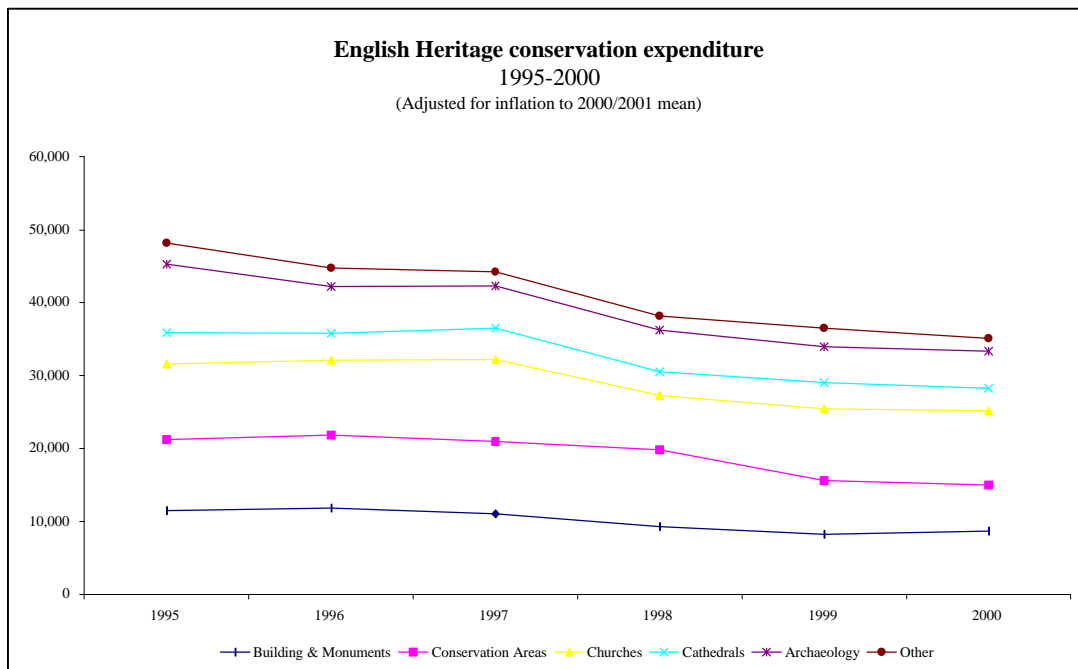
There are other indicators. CIPFA figures for actual spend on conservation staff show an even greater decline in resources. This was lower in 2000 than it was in 1996.

Figure 2: Net local authority expenditure on staff for historic environment conservation, 1996-2000 (uncorrected for compound inflation estimated at 15% over the last five years)



While there are reservations about the consistency and value of the CIPFA data, and like all statistics they can be presented to demonstrate different things, they do have the virtue of being reasonably inclusive. When you try to get behind these overall statistics on resources, the divided character of the sector begins to emerge. For archaeology there are several studies of employment and surveys of numbers of archaeologists working in planning and local authorities, and there are published annual reviews of jobs in archaeology (e.g. Aitchison and Dennison 1999). There

Figure 3: English Heritage conservation grant expenditure 1995-2000 (corrected to take account of inflation over the period)

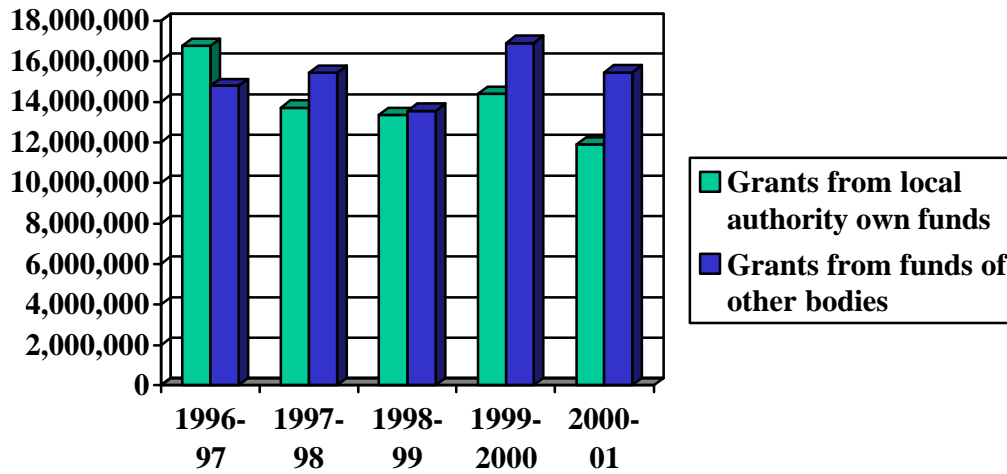


were no equivalent studies for conservation officers. This has to be qualified; there is now the work being carried out by Oxford Brookes University for English Heritage. The statistics that Bob Kindred has maintained over the years for his authority in Ipswich and for the wider picture were immensely valuable for the study (Kindred 2001a, 2001b). One way of cross-cutting to assess resourcing was to look at the number of new posts in conservation that English Heritage has supported over the last five years. We found that overall about 100 posts - conservation officers and planning archaeology officers - have been supported albeit with tapering funding by English Heritage since 1996. There are numerous other posts that have also been created in local authorities with English Heritage funding to support historic landscape

characterisation work, conservation area character appraisals, Historic Environment Regeneration Schemes (HERS), urban archaeology and conservation projects. It is a striking fact that even with this additional resource, local authority spend on staff for conservation overall is still dropping.

What about English Heritage grant expenditure overall? The picture here reflects a similar decline. As Figure 3 shows, English Heritage grants have dropped by 23% in real terms over the period. Information was not available as to how much of this resource went to local authorities and how they have fared in relation to other calls on English Heritage's purse. Turning to look at local authority grants, we find a steady decline in grants from their own funds but a more or less sustained growth in grants from funds of other bodies (including English Heritage) which have steadily overtaken the resources that local authorities can find themselves (Figure 4). The high figures for 99/00 and 00/01 are probably due to special funding for millennium projects. This trend begins to illustrate the issue about 'less being more'. Increasingly local authorities obtain the resources they need to make environmental improvements happen from complex packages of funding and schemes in partnership with other bodies: European programmes and projects, Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), agri-environment schemes, New Opportunities Fund, Regional Development Agencies programmes, the private sector. Small amounts of officer time injected into initiatives taken forward by others, by building preservation trusts, community action groups, and in regeneration programmes can draw down significant resources. We found it difficult to assess the contribution made by resources from partnership in the overall conservation picture. But an interesting indicator was that where a local authority's resources were overstretched they were least likely to be able to take the opportunities for leveraging in funding through partnerships without distorting the delivery of primary services. This is reflected in low take up, for example, of HLF schemes for enhancing local historic environment records, with the most successful bids tending to come from authorities that are already reasonably well resourced.

Figure 4: Local authority grant expenditure 1996 - 2001 (uncorrected for compound inflation estimated at 15% over the last five years)



Modest amounts of investment can lever in significant returns for the historic environment. As *The Heritage Dividend* (1999) study shows, £10,000 of English Heritage investment can lever in up to £48,000 of match funding from other resources, delivering new jobs, economically valuable property assets and improving the quality of the environment. The same holds true for local authority resources if they can be used in this strategic way. What is disappointing is that there is at the moment no systematic way of demonstrating the enormous value that small amounts of local authority resource can realise when used in this way.

For archaeology, there have been some attempts to assess the PPG16 dividend. Most recently Kenneth Aitchison's study of funding for professional archaeology estimated that in the year 2000, there was £68.3m investment by private developers in archaeological projects. In the same year spend on local authority archaeology services was estimated at £19.8m which, recalculated, means £10k of local authority funding releases £34k of private sector funding (Aitchison 2001). While the basis for calculating this is perfectly sound, this overall figure of £100m spend on archaeological work looks extraordinary if it is set against a total local authority spend on historic environment conservation for the same year of £42.6m, according to CIPFA statistics. This kind of comparison is simply not valid, we are not comparing like with like, but because we have no shared framework for gathering this data

systematically the outcome is a situation that can appear even more divisive. No research has yet been carried out to assess the considerable investment in historic environment conservation from the private sector

CONSERVATION SERVICES AND PERFORMANCE

Turning now from resources to services we see an opposite picture - not of a steady decline but of a steady increase in conservation-related casework, and in its diversity and complexity. These are pressures that affect the planning system generally. There has been a 26% increase in the number of planning applications since 1996 (Arup Economics and Planning 2002, 44). This kind of pressure raises important organisational issues about prioritisation of workloads, and balances between long-term and short-term objectives and between statutory and non-statutory functions.

The study shows that up to a third of all applications dealt with by a Local Planning Authority can require specialist advice on historic environment considerations - including historic building, historic areas, urban design issues and archaeology. According to government figures, it appears that only about 7% of all planning applications are for works that require Listed Building Consent and Conservation Area Consent (DETR 2000). However this figure is deceptive since it relates only to applications that have been notified to the Department. It does not include those planning applications that require specific historic environment consideration advertised under Sections 67 and 73 of the 1990 Act as affecting the setting or character of a listed building and conservation area (Kindred, 2001a). In more realistic terms, the percentage can range from 11 - 30% although further research that would provide a definitive answer is lacking. In addition there are a large number of cases with design and urban design issues in historic centres that can benefit from the input of conservation expertise. About 11% of planning applications also receive appraisal for their potential archaeological implications, with 2% receiving further detailed assessment.

Research shows that this reactive and demand-led casework receives priority in most local authorities. Grant-aided schemes that lever in additional funding are also prioritised. With resources under pressure, engagement in more long-term work, such

as enforcement, Buildings at Risk cases, compiling Local Lists or appraisal and enhancement schemes, receives very low priority. We found that at least a quarter of authorities had never kept a Register of Buildings at Risk and many of those compiled have never been updated. We found that two thirds of authorities wished to maintain a Local List but only around a quarter had been able to do so. Similarly we found that only about a quarter of SMRs had been able to verify the continuing existence and condition of the sites and buildings recorded in their Records.

The way in which a local authority organises its services can create obstacles to implementing wider strategies and effective working. Conservation services may be co-located with planning services, or may be based in another service area, or may be obtained from outside the planning authority. We can expect the diversity of this picture to increase. We found that strategic supporting services tend to be more strongly represented in county and lead authorities serving several district and unitary authorities. Typically, these larger integrated services are based outside the planning authorities directly responsible for development control and local services, potentially giving rise to greater problems of communication. Reorganisation of services can fragment provision unless positive measures are taken to ensure integrated working. This was an outcome of local government reorganisation in 1996, and it will be an issue again for the inevitable changes that will accompany the introduction of regional governance.

Virtually no systematic monitoring of the condition of historic assets or of the outcome of listed building and conservation area consents is taking place so we know very little about the quality and effectiveness of this aspect of the planning process. Consistent measures to provide indicators for assessing the quality of conservation service performance and of the changing state of the historic environment in general are lacking for all aspects. The Best Value inspection process has brought this sharply into focus. Again for archaeology - because there is a smaller scale of casework and also due to the way in which PPG16 has been implemented - there is relatively good year on year data about the numbers of cases and outcomes of consents with conditions (Darvill and Russell 2002). The implications of monitoring listed building consent casework in the same way that conditions for archaeological work are scrutinised cannot be quantified. At present we cannot assess even at the highest level

what kinds of changes to the historic environment are taking place through the LBC process. There are statistics for demolitions and these show a steady decline. The Council for British Archaeology has looked at using its Listed Building notification database as a way of charting changes in a more discriminating way but the enormous variation in local authority practice in notifying the statutory amenity societies would not support a systematic study.

At the crudest level, the DTLR statistics show that LBC applications take longer to determine than most other planning applications but that more of them are approved. There are several theories about why this should be the case. What is clear from this study, however, is that the poor quality of information accompanying applications is a significant reason for delays: both English Heritage and local authorities have substantiated this. Another issue is that the planning system makes no allowance for the differing complexities of types of application and, as cases with an historic environment dimension are typically more complex in terms of design and impact assessment, they will tend to require more time.

Finally, the inadequacy of information and communication networks is a theme that runs through all these issues. These are fundamental to integrated working and informed decision-making. The limitation on resources affects important targets for achieving *e-government* by 2005, inclusive access to public information, communication with local communities, and interoperability for maximising the utility of data holdings for regional government. Under-investment in this key area is perhaps one of the clearest indicators about the difficulties of the present situation. The disparity in record keeping practice across the sector is marked. While the scope and coverage of systems for archaeology are well known, there is little information about the use of information systems for historic building work.

A rapid survey conducted by David Baker in connection with this project (Baker 2002) shows that at least a quarter of authorities, perhaps as many as half, have no information system to support their historic buildings and areas work. A survey about to be published by the NMR conducted by Martin Newman shows by contrast that over 80% of SMRs hold information about listed and unlisted building. How many of these are actively used to support historic building and area casework is not known.

As the Listed Building System becomes available in the form of downloads to local authorities later this year, it is a worrying prospect that we might see a proliferation of local systems being set up in an ad hoc way by hundreds of local authorities, duplicating what English Heritage holds and is already indexed in SMRs all over the country. Without agreed data standards and common practice, there is no likelihood that these records can be made available for cross-searching or strategic use. Nigel Clubb's paper today addresses other issues connected with information strategies for making historic information widely accessible.

The results of this study of resources have many different implications but for an 'agenda for the 21st century' there are some key issues

Clear **benchmarks for the quality and quantity of service provision** are urgently needed to improve consistency of service levels and monitoring of performance, for use generally and in the context of Best Value Reviews.

Agreement on a system for **compiling annual statistics on indicators of performance and state of the environment** is needed across the sector. These might be compiled jointly by local authorities with English Heritage, and promoted through the professional Institutions (IHBC, IFA / ALGAO). Changes to the collection of data through CIPFA could improve assessment of actual expenditure on conservation and a more meaningful comparison of spend with local resources and need.

Local authority **services for conservation of the historic environment** would benefit from a restatement of a minimum standard for provision, working from the guiding principles issued to reorganised authorities by the DNH (now DCMS) in 1995 / 1997. The objective is an effective critical mass of expertise in a mixed pattern of authorities, well-integrated relationships between and within authorities, with ownership by the local planning authority at the point of delivery.

Frameworks for good practice are needed and could be co-ordinated effectively by the professional Institutes within the parameters of guidance

from government and English Heritage. Related to this is the need to develop education and training programmes to remedy skills shortages and improve mutual awareness of professional interests and standards across the sector.

The Planning Green Paper has signalled the review of PPGs 15 and 16 (DTLR 2001). They could be integrated as **a single guidance document for the historic environment** in order to consolidate and simplify the present dual policy guidance. The new document might highlight relationships with other regulatory systems.

Resources and expertise for **environmental information systems** would benefit from co-ordinating arrangements between national and local interests, and utilising the emerging 'planning portal'. The wider value of environmental planning and the usefulness of environmental information for **general public interest and education** should be recognised in the resourcing of links with other local authority services such as libraries, archives and museums.

In conclusion, in answer to the question 'Is less really more?' the answer is both 'Yes' and 'No'.

'Yes', because even though there are fewer resources in the public sector, some authorities and organisations are still delivering more for the historic environment by releasing the dividends of partnership and joint working across the public and private sector. We need to share that good practice and experience, avoid duplication and double handling, and set thresholds for what should be achievable.

'No', in that conservation has fewer resources and there are ever-increasing demands upon services for historic environment conservation. Important proactive work is being neglected and it appears that in some authorities the sector is falling below threshold of acceptable service provision. But to lobby effectively for greater resources there has to be a substantial case that shows how and where provision is falling short and its impact on the quality of the environment and quality of life for communities. We need to be able to show comprehensively the real benefits that flow from caring for the historic environment and where the greatest need lies.

Finally, as authors of the study, we would like to express our gratitude for all the assistance that we received from so many people in local authorities and other organisations who generously provided information, reports and statistics - in an impossible timescale. This is our opportunity to thank them all and to acknowledge the contribution that the conservation community as a whole made to this study.

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