Effective Multi-Agency Meetings

Collaborating for the best results

Let's end homelessness together

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Introduction

There are many organisations and groups working in the homelessness sector, from local authorities and commissioned charities to small faith-based community groups and grassroots activists. To get the best results for people who are homeless, effective joint working is essential, but too often this is easier said than done. Disparate groups have different ways of working, different funding and resources and, often, different aims and values. The language we use to describe our work, the way we talk about and with people who are homeless, and our definitions of success can all vary greatly. When we encounter these differences, working relationships may break down or fail to develop in the first place.

Yet the power of an effective multi-agency response is huge. Collaboration can ensure best use of resources (of all kinds – funding, volunteers, buildings, local intelligence etc), avoiding duplication and working to the strengths of each organisation. Joint working can help to achieve systems change, to co-produce services, and to improve the skills and motivation of your teams. It is worth spending time getting it right, and that means taking action when it's going wrong.

This document sets out a range of steps to help you set up or review your local multi-agency meetings and structures. We hope it will help you to improve joint working locally.

Homeless Link's Partnership Managers can provide support – find contact details for the team here:
www.homeless.org.uk/about-us/our-people/meet-partnerships-team

This guidance is part of a suite of resources on Creating Effective Partnerships:
www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/resources/effective-partnerships

Choosing the right type of meeting

Strategic versus Operational

There are many different combinations of meeting type, which can be categorised broadly into strategic or operational meetings. Homelessness forums are more likely to be strategic, whereas people-centred meetings are primarily operational. Issue-based meetings may have elements of both, depending on how they are framed and the desired outcome.

Homelessness Forums

Many areas will have an established homelessness forum meeting on a regular basis, usually somewhere between monthly and quarterly. Each forum will have its own remit, generally focused on sharing updates about local activities, innovations and developments. Forums are often not designed to be action-oriented, though tasks may be identified if the forum offers an opportunity to flag concerns and identify issues. This can lead to the formation of smaller working groups to explore issues further, or Task & Finish groups to complete a set of identified actions/achieve an outcome within a set timeframe, which report back to the main forum. This helps to keep the forum's agenda more streamlined and allows for a wider membership of the main forum with more select membership as relevant to working groups or Task & Finish groups.

Forums are generally open to anyone who wants to attend, and typically include representatives from the local authority, voluntary sector, and faith, community and grassroots groups. Often the forum will be hosted by the local authority or a large voluntary sector organisation and may well be chaired by them. Forums are an excellent opportunity for services and the local authority to share updates and identify trends.

Positives:

- Networking and building alliances between disparate organisations with different agendas.
- A space in which to engage with community and faith based groups and to start the process of building collaborative relationships.
- An opportunity for transparency around what is being developed and planned.
- Share updates about national and local policy an e.g. local homelessness strategies.
- Help reinforce the idea that we are all working together regardless of different ideologies, faiths, approaches and methods.

Negatives:

- It may become a 'talking shop' with few tangible outcomes.
- Risk that one organisation/voice may dominate, if not chaired effectively e.g. by a neutral member.
- Sometimes the local authority tells the Forum about what they are doing, with few opportunities for other providers to share updates or influence LA actions.
- It can be complicated to meet the needs of everyone on the room, as people have different learning styles and differing levels of knowledge when it comes to homelessness and service provision.
- Potential difficulties giving everyone the opportunity to participate – sometimes the loudest voices are the only ones heard.
- May become too long and/or too large, resulting in unmanageable time commitment and participants struggling to pay attention.

Issue-based Meetings

Sometimes arising from the homelessness forum as Working Groups or Task & Finish groups, or to facilitate work with another team e.g. anti-social behaviour or safeguarding. They may be a regular meeting to work on long term issues or short term, task-and-finish, to address a specific issue.

Typical issues might include:

- street activity
- responding to tents and encampments
- ASB
- abandoned belongings
- identifying gaps and barriers to accessing services
- improving access to move on opportunities
- innovation and good practice

Issue-based meetings are more likely to be invite-only, with people attending due to their specialist knowledge, ability to influence decisions with a wider stakeholder cohort or ability allocate resources (human and financial) to tackling the identified issue(s).

Meetings may be single issue or addressing multiple linked issues which take more time.

Generally, the aim of an issue-based multi-agency meeting is to seek collaborative solutions, allocating tasks to those present with a timescale, milestones and a deadline for completion. The meeting may also identify the need for additional members to join the group in order to solve a particular issue.

Positives:

- Can effectively explore an issue in depth, and make a plan happen using the knowledge and expertise from a range of partners.
- The narrow agenda and solution focus should result in a set of tasks or actions for those present to ensure there is progress on addressing the issue(s).

Negatives:

- Preconceptions about professional roles and joint working may result in the exclusion of voices who would make valuable contributions.
- Assumptions from the chair or participants might shape the group's directions without adequate exploration of the issue first.
- Easily dominated by larger organisations with more strategic power.
- Time-consuming and requiring a skilled chairperson to reach consensus on difficult issues.
- Assigning too many tasks, or to the wrong person, may make them less achievable.
- Requires commitment from participants to be held accountable for completing their actions.

Case Management / Person-Centred Meetings

Multi-agency meetings to explore how to work together on support for individual cases can be effective in resolving issues and generating solutions to support people with complex lives. Typically, these come in the form of rough sleeping action groups or Task & Targeting meetings, Anti-Social Behaviour casework meetings, or homelessness prevention meetings. They create space for individual people/cases to be discussed and for practitioners to give an update – this is particularly relevant where an individual has contact with multiple agencies e.g. outreach, police, soup run, addiction services, street pastors, day centre.

Effective casework meetings:

- Define the client group and the criteria for referral to the meeting.
- Confirm the basis for information sharing between the agencies present e.g. the consent of individuals or alternative grounds where consent has not been established but information sharing is deemed necessary (see separate briefing on data protection).
- Define the referral process and criteria. Time is limited in any meeting so there will need to be a way to prioritise which cases are discussed each time.
- Define the criteria for attendance and whether this changes depending on whose case is discussed and what consent is in place.
- Create ways for individuals who are being discussed to attend with, or be represented by, an advocate.
- Set out how decisions are made. For instance, the criteria for a case to be raised at the meeting and how cases are closed.

Case Conferences: these would normally be focused on an individual or couple and involve frontline professionals and senior managers. The aims of a Case Conference may be to:

- Identify ways to make progress towards successful outcomes e.g. ending someone's homelessness.
- Ensure that services are not duplicating tasks or offering contradictory support or information.
- Manage and reduce risk for individuals considered to be at risk of harm.

Any professional can call a case conference if the need is identified, these are not only the remit of statutory services. Ideally, the person concerned will have the option to attend the meeting (or some of the meeting) with an advocate if needed, or to be represented by an advocate.

Holding an effective multi-agency meeting

Setting up a meeting

Any meeting must have a clear aim and purpose. Some meetings have grown organically from people coming together seeking to work things out, who have collaboratively agreed the aims and purpose of the meeting. Others have been established as part of a wider strategy or vision generated by a community or local authority with a predetermined vision and aims. The aims and purpose can be encapsulated in the Terms of Reference alongside other key information that all combine to keep meetings focused and on track.

Who to invite

Who comes to meeting will greatly affect the results. If it is an open forum with invites extended to 'anyone in the borough with an interest in ending homelessness' this will be a very different group to 'a group of caseworkers and service coordinators coming together to talk through specific cases to prevent repeat incidences of rough sleeping'. Therefore, it is essential to define what the desired outcome of the meeting would be – is this to broaden knowledge and provide a space for networking and interagency relationship development, or is it to identify a set of tasks relating to a specific group of people?

In addition to the local authority and voluntary sector organisations, there is a wide range of potential partners for any multi-agency homelessness meeting: police, Citizens Advice, local churches, mosques and synagogues, substance misuse services, outreach teams, day centres, supported housing, Adult Social Care, people with lived experience, general health services, street kitchens, night shelters, debt advice services, migrant and asylum support services, fire service, park wardens, members of the business community, social workers, domestic abuse services, youth workers and more.

Purpose of the meeting

This should be clear and concise so that people know whether their organisation should be there. Examples might be:

- To nurture better collaborative relationships to address homelessness issues in the local context.
- To generate creative multi-agency solutions to complex cases.
- To provide a space for the community and local authority to work together collaboratively.
- To develop effective responses to ASB and street activity.

Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference (ToR) is a document that sets out the purpose of the meeting, the means by which the meeting seeks to achieve its aims, and the structure within which the meeting will operate. They will also outline who, or which organisations, holds responsibility for specific roles. ToR should be reviewed by participants at, or following, the first meeting and then reviewed on a regular basis (e.g. annually) to check that the group remains relevant and effective.

Terms of Reference typically include:

- Frequency of meetings, location and access requirements.
- Who will be included in the meeting invite and who will be excluded. This will require some detail.
- What the expectations are of attendees. For instance, is it essential for the individual or organisation to commit to a certain number of meetings?
- Any consequences of non-attendance.

- How decisions and actions will be agreed. For instance, through full consensus or a quorum (minimum number of attendees). In some groups, decisions might rest with the chair or with an organisation that has a statutory responsibility relating to the issue at hand. This should be clear from the outset.
- Which key stakeholders need to be present at each meeting e.g. local authority, outreach team, police, social services, mental health team.
- Minute-taking: who will take notes and how they will be stored and shared (i.e. which organisation is the data controller).
- Which organisation or individual will act as chair; will this change e.g. fixed term or rotating chair; and what is their remit.
- Who will set the agenda, how the agenda will be structured, and who will circulate papers to the group.
- Practical arrangements e.g. venue(s) or online platform, and who is responsible for them.

Depending on the type of meeting, it may be advisable to state the reasons why someone may be asked to leave a meeting, either as a one-off or permanently. For example:

- The use of racist or other discriminatory language.
- Concerns re: conflicts of interest.
- Abusive or threatening behaviour.

A statement of intent or Code of Conduct outlining what participants are agreeing to in terms of behaviour and acceptable communication can set the tone and head off difficult interactions later on. Co-produce this with participants ahead of the first formal meeting.

Bear in mind that, especially with more open groups, some participants might be new to meeting structures and need some guidance on how to take part.

Roles and Responsibilities

Chair: essential to effective meetings – managing the agenda against available time, enabling a balance of contributions from different people/groups, summarising discussions and confirming the actions agreed. They should collaborate closely with the minute-taker, checking that key points are noted and any actions agreed have a lead person and timescales for completion. At times the Chair may need to make decisions about which items are prioritised in the time available. For some meetings, the Chair will take on some of the Administrator function e.g. setting the agenda and sharing papers.

Administrator and/or Minute-taker: The minutes need to be accurate and shared promptly. Ideally, the minutes are recorded by someone who is less involved in the discussions. They need to have time to write the notes soon after the meeting. The Administrator/Minute Taker does not need to be from the same organisation as the meeting Chair, however this can make things easier.

There can be an awkward moment at the beginning of meetings when the Chair asks for a volunteer to write the minutes. This can be uncomfortable for people who are less confident in writing at speed, who are unfamiliar with what the task entails, or who may have hidden disabilities such as dyslexia or hearing difficulties. It can also create inconsistent minutes as people have very different styles of minute-taking.
The Chair should take responsibility for confirming a minute-taker in advance and, where possible, having the same person each time.

Agenda

Agendas often include set headings. But bear in mind formal language can make people feel less welcome. Only use the headings that you need, in plain English where possible:

- **Apologies and introductions:** introductions can be helpful to give context to your contributions and for the benefit of the minute-taker. Only ask for organisation and role where relevant – people attending as individuals with lived experience or volunteers may feel alienated by a focus on job roles.
- **Review of the minutes**: this is an opportunity for the minutes to be formally accepted as accurate – participants shod have had time to read them in advance of the meeting.
- **Matters arising:** things that came up at the previous meeting and still need to be discussed or concluded. They may already have been carried forward to the new agenda.
- **Update on actions agreed**: check that allocated tasks are complete or carried forward.
- **Agenda items and new actions:** issues, cases or topics under discussion. State actions agreed after each item is discussed.
- **AOB – Any Other Business**: leaving time for items people have thought of during the meeting, or that came up too late to be added to the main agenda.
- **Date and time for next meeting:** where possible, agree a date and time for the next meeting with the people present.

Dates and times

Meeting frequency should be based on need. Case management or person-centred meetings should be more frequent to ensure that actions are completed and outcomes achieved for the individual in question. Homelessness forums are more likely bi-monthly or quarterly as they are typically less action-focused. It is always a good idea to set sufficient time at the end of each meeting to schedule in the next one. Some services may be excluded from attending if the meeting is repeatedly scheduled for the same day or time of day, especially smaller charities or community groups with limited staff and volunteers. Also bear in mind things like school holidays and whether participants have to travel far to attend.

Timekeeping

Responsibility for timekeeping falls to the Chair, who may ask for support from another participant if they are managing a particularly busy agenda. Timekeeping can be a significant trigger point for discontent, particularly if issues on the agenda are not discussed. At times, it may be necessary to allocate more time on a topic, this is best done by asking the group and saying what the consequences might be e.g. *we can continue to discuss the disposal of rough sleeper belongings however this may mean we have no time to discuss street based food giving. Would the meeting like to defer that item until next time?* Where possible, devolve these decisions to the group, but the Chair may have to take a call if consensus is hard to achieve.

Attendance and sign in

Signing in to the meeting helps the minute-taker to keep an accurate record of who was in attendance, which can help promote accountability for decision made and for completing actions. A paper can be passed around for people's name and email. Check the spelling of anything that is unclear, as receiving numerous bounce-back emails can be time-consuming to resolve.

Actions and accountability

Actions should be agreed for each agenda item and summarised by the Chair during the meeting, including the named lead person/organisation and timescale for completion. Each meeting should review the actions from last time, with attendees explaining the reasons why any action is not yet complete. The Chair should not let actions roll over multiple times – it may be that a review and different action is required, or that the action has been allocated to the wrong person/organisation.

Actions that remain incomplete could indicate a bigger problem in the local system that needs to be addressed e.g. through a separate working group. It may also be the case that an action has been set at operational level that really requires senior strategic buy-in that the lead worker cannot secure, or that a strategic manager has been asked to do something that requires operational knowledge.

Lived experience and inclusion

People with lived experience of homelessness or multiple disadvantage should be part of developing strategic and operational responses. However, there are often barriers to active participation. To make the meeting as inclusive as possible, consider:

- Jargon: encourage attendees to keep jargon to a minimum, always provide explanations and foster a meeting culture where questions are welcome.
- Acronyms: these can easily exclude people, yet the homelessness sector uses many more than are necessary. Again, explain them, provide glossaries, and encourage attendees to call each other out (politely!) when they use acronyms.
- Accessibility of venues e.g. physical location and public transport, lifts/toilets, provision of hearing loops.
- Power and roles: reduce or do away with the use of job titles so that people with lived experience and volunteers can participate on a more equal footing.

For more on co-production, see: www.homeless.org.uk/co-production-toolkit and www.expertlink.org.uk/training-and-events

Data Sharing

Data sharing can cause anxiety for participants whose organisations do not have clear policies and procedures to follow e.g. small volunteer-led groups. This is a particular issues for person-centred or case management meetings where agencies need to be able to talk about individuals in order to help end their homelessness. Before attending this type of meeting, each participant must be clear about the basis on which they might share personal information about someone they support. For further guidance, please see the briefing on data sharing in multi-agency meetings that will accompany this guidance.

Case Studies

Case study: Devon and Cornwall Rough Sleeping Partnership (DCRSP)

The Devon and Cornwall Rough Sleeping Partnership (DCRSP) was originally set up in 2010 on the back of Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) funding allocated to reduce rough sleeping across Devon and Cornwall. The original tranche of funding helped to set up a phone line to report rough sleeping (pre-dating StreetLink) and to ensure that all areas across Devon and Cornwall had an Outreach Service. The initial funding also helped to bring partners around the table and ensured that there was a collective will to reduce rough sleeping across the Peninsula, especially in rural areas.

There were three main aims of the Partnership:

1. Mapping the number of people sleeping rough in Devon, concentrating outreach in rural areas which have previously had little or no services
2. Capacity Building – identify community and faith groups who currently offer support. Offer training and to develop new community services.
3. Direct Service provision – offer a range of interventions to people who are sleeping rough, including reconnection, access to emergency accommodation depending on clients individual needs, and the use of individualised budgets for more entrenched rough sleepers.

In April 2011, DCLG awarded a further £200,000 and, whilst Cornwall was the initial focus, the residual money was used to further enhance the work that was already underway. Roll on 10 years, and the Partnership continues to meet at least quarterly. Lots has changed over the time, people and providers have come and gone, but the willingness and dedication of services, in an ever increasing and uncertain financial climate, remains the same.

Today the meetings are an excellent opportunity to discuss and share good practice, update on recent Rough Sleeping Initiative Funding and Rapid Rehousing Pathway Funds, share concerns which are impacting on rough sleepers (recently this has included the issue of County Lines and increase in Drug Related Deaths). The meeting has also been extremely useful in setting yearly autumn counts, ensuring that all 11 Local Authorities are aligning their counts/estimates on the same day/week, reducing the likelihood that people are counted twice.

What have been the challenges?

Initially the challenge was to get 11 Local Authorities and 20 partners around the table, but this was helped with funding being made available. Today the biggest challenge is where to hold the meeting. Last year we took the Partnership on tour, meetings had usually been held in Exeter, but in 2019 we held meetings in Cornwall, North Devon and Plymouth. This had a really positive impact with a number of new organisations attending who hadn't been able to before and maintained the consistently high turnout. It's always pleasantly surprising to see how many people attend the meetings and I guess the Partnership will continue for as long as people still attend.

What are DCRSP's successes?

There have been many over the 10 years, but I think the biggest success has been that we're still meeting regularly. There is still that passion to learn from one another and work together. Perhaps a further 'spin off' was the formation of a new group in 2018, working with criminal justice organisations. The Short Term Prison Resettlement Group (STPRG) aims to improve the overall service delivery, as well as system integration, in relation to the resettlement process for prisoners being released from the Devon prisons, as well as Eastwood Park women's prison, and for the involvement of multiple services working with prisoners pre and post release. Many of these short term prisoners have been rough sleepers before prisoners, and the STPRG members collectively are now (2020) working with different organisations to find suitable private rented accommodation for prisoner/rough sleepers and provide support to these individuals. The STPRG is also spearheading the provision of modular, purpose built accommodation within a prison, to be placed on unused land.

What is the learning for other areas looking to establish a similar group?
Why wouldn't you! It's a fantastic opportunity to come together to discuss how to have a consistent approach to reducing rough sleeping across a large area.

Case study: South East Homelessness Forum (SEHF)

South East Homelessness Forum has been running for 20 years. It was originally set up with support from a Government of South England project officer, but when the GOSE closed this support and funding was lost. Feeling that the Forum was too valuable to lose, it was continued by a group of volunteers with administrative support provided by Homeless Link.

The SEHF is now voluntarily run by a small executive group of members from homelessness organisations, local authorities, housing associations and lived experience, as well as Homeless Link. There are challenges around finding time to organise meetings around calendars and across geographical spread, as well as operating without a budget. They often make use of Zoom for online planning meetings, as it is impossible to get everyone together often.

The Forum meets every quarter, and moves location each time to a host within the South East. The host will give an insight into what is happening in their local area, including any challenges and solutions they've come up with. This helps promote learning from sector colleagues in other areas, and also reminds people that they are not alone in the problems they're facing. Notes are sent out to attendees after the meeting.

Following review of the meeting, the Forum has more recently moved to a more interactive style where there are several set table-top discussions where people can discuss current, relevant issues. This is to increase the opportunities for attendees to network and learn from other areas and feedback for this approach has been positive.

Case study – overcoming barriers to collaborative working

Why was a multi-agency group needed? What were the barriers?
A multi-agency approached was needed to re-establish partnership working between the local authority, and voluntary, community and faith groups organisations after relationships had broken down.

There had been a lack of communication within the sector at a local level about what funding and provision was being offered to people experiencing homelessness. This had resulted in duplication and mixed messages between services. Some organisations were openly critical of others on social media. There was no clear route for communication on local developments, funding or joint working opportunities. While frontline staff were often working well together, at a strategic level there was a lack of communication and the voluntary sector felt excluded from strategic development within the city. At the same time, there was a visible increase in the number of people sleeping on the streets.

How were the barriers overcome?
Representatives from statutory, faith and voluntary sector organisations came together to address the breakdown in communication. Homeless Link facilitated mediation space where representatives could speak openly and honestly about their concerns relating to provision for people experiencing homelessness. Out of this discussion came a set of actions with the aim of developing community partnerships and collaborative working. Partners also produced a shared statement to enable a better understanding of the issues that had arisen and why it was important to resolve them. Actions included:

- Independent facilitation of a strategic development workshop for both homelessness prevention and rough sleeping and family homelessness
- The creation of a homelessness forum with an independent Chair
- Establishing Communities of Practice to give frontline staff the opportunity to network and share good practice, as well as providing a way for frontline staff to give feedback shared with strategic group meetings

This process was helped by partners recognising the responsibilities and restrictions that each organisation has to work within, often arising from funding and commissioning arrangements, targets/KPIs, or statutory/non-statutory responsibilities.

Impartial support was a key element in facilitating the mediation process. There was also independent facilitation, from MHCLG and Homeless Link, of strategic workshops for representatives from across the sector to enable shared ownership of strategic and operational planning and implementation.

What next?
The group is now working to:

- Foster better working relations with various providers
- Support the development and review of the homelessness prevention and rough sleeping strategy
- Establish wider sector involvement in the mapping of services available to support those experiencing homelessness
- Develop a robust pathway of support offered to those experiencing homelessness
- Create a change in practice which is community focused
- Influence a change in culture to strengthen a community approach
- Find positive outcomes which benefit the community and those who access services

How can an ineffective meeting be improved?

Problems	Potential solutions
The meeting is a talking shop – we have a lively discussions and everyone's really passionate, but we never seem to agree actions and we're not meeting our aims	• Firmer chairing – limited time for each item, stop to review actions before moving on to the next item • Review membership – do you have strategic people in the room when actions will be at an operational level? • Review purpose – are your aims too broad? Can you break them down? • Review format – a Task & Finish approach with a deadline might focus people's minds • Review need – if actions are happening elsewhere could this meeting be surplus to requirements?
Actions are being carried forward month after month – people aren't being accountable for getting things done	• Note reasons for non-completion in the minutes when you review the action • Consider if it's still the right action – have things changed? • Is the action assigned to the right person? • The Chair may want a private conversation to ask what's preventing completion – perhaps their line manager doesn't see this meeting as a priority? • Chair may decide to escalate to more senior staff in the accountable organisation e.g. inviting the lead's line manager to the next meeting
Attendees are sending junior staff or no rep at all	• Consider whether it matters – if the meeting is effective and achieving its aims, chances are you have the right people in the room • Review Terms of Reference on seniority and membership – is it clear what the meetings require? Has this changed since the ToR were last reviewed? Could those organisations be replaced by new members? • Clarify if there is a reason why junior staff can't attend and, if so, explain this to the original attendees.

Problems	Potential solutions
There's never any time for all the items on the agenda	• Review format – do you need to extend the length of the meeting? Is there a standing item on the agenda that always takes up more than its allotted time? Can you switch the order to prioritise other items? • Consider using working group(s) – move some activity into a separate group with a narrow focus, reporting back to main meeting • Review ToR and contributors – if people are spending a lot of time on discussion, does this fit with the meeting

	purpose? Or is there detailed discussion of individual cases that is not appropriate to the meeting? • Review Chair – is there an option for more assertive Chairing? Can a second person support the Chair with timekeeping? Agree at start of meeting time available for each item and stick to it. • Review format – could some items be covered prior to the meeting e.g. a briefing/presentation shared in advance.
One or two attendees dominate proceedings	• Code of conduct agreed by group and referred to by the Chair at the start of each meeting • Firmer Chairing to ensure balance of contributions – being willing to interrupt, directing everyone to go through the Chair, stating the order in which people will speak • Chair might speak to them outside the meeting to politely explain that they are preventing others from speaking • Rotating Chair – vary chairing styles and attendee roles
People keep making contributions that are off-topic or of a personal nature	• Chair explains purpose at the start of the meeting • Set an agenda and stick to it • Chair follows up after the meeting to see if a new agenda item is needed next time • Where possible, offer an induction to anyone joining the group who has no previous experience of formal meetings • Consider a buddying/mentoring approach between people with different levels of experience

What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

Let’s end homelessness together

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