

A Report on School Attendance in Devon.

Report of the Director of Children and Young People's Futures

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Committee before taking effect.

1) Recommendation

That the Committee be asked to:

(a) Note the contents of the report.

2) Background / Introduction

Nationally, school attendance (or rather school absence) has become a priority since 2020. In general, post pandemic attendance levels have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Different cohorts of pupils are disproportionately impacted by this, and it has caused consequent difficulties for some pupils and families. For example, the number of pupils now being educated at home is very high both nationally and within Devon. We have limited knowledge of the quality of home education, and very few levers to address this. There is a strong correlation between poverty and pupils who miss school, and national data shows the huge impact of eventual pupil outcomes if they miss significant periods of school. We also know such pupils are less likely to be safeguarded and more likely to underachieve in later life. It is an issue of national importance.

Consequently, the Department for Education (DfE) have published fresh guidance (May 2022) on how to improve the attendance levels in all schools and have identified key responsibilities for schools, families, and Local Authorities. This guidance will become statutory in September 2024 (the link is in the annex below). In Devon, our attendance levels have typically been below even the weaker national levels, but it is variable, and we have recently seen encouraging signs of improvement. This report shows the impact on different cohorts of pupils and includes some data on school absence for reasons other than illness (for example, permanently excluded pupils and pupils who are temporarily suspended). It also reports on projects already underway to improve this, and some plans to further develop and scale up those that work in the future.

The relevant hyperlinks are included as an appendix. However, the basic DfE requirements and methodology can be found here:<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/methodology/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england#content-section-1-content-5>

3) Outline of the challenge

Since the pandemic, the overall attendance of pupils at school has deteriorated from a national high in 2016 of just under 96% to a rate of 93.2% this year. This is a national

picture, but Devon is far from exempt. Indeed, Devon has sharp concerns in relation to some cohorts of pupils for whom a return to 'normal' patterns of attendance is proving stubbornly complex. In March 2024 in Devon our overall attendance rate was 92.7%. This is largely (but not entirely) due to secondary attendance levels being 2% below national. The primary school rates have improved to being slightly above national and the special school rates are amongst the highest regionally and above national. The national picture is worse than it was pre-pandemic, so being 'in line' with national remains a concern. This is in the context of the Southwest region being the worst of all 9 DfE regions nationally. It is a national and local priority.

The reasons behind this changing picture are complex, but in essence, the two years of pandemic lockdowns have led to high levels of anxiety for some pupil cohorts and a changed attitude to school attendance for some families. Some surveys (most notably those commissioned by The Childrens Commissioner) show family attitudes have changed with more readiness to keep children at home as a result of changed work patterns, minor illnesses and the expense of things such as uniforms, transport and meals. Similarly, pupils with an EHCP (Education, Health, and Care Plan) are poor attendees and that cohort has grown significantly both nationally and locally. The issue is complex, not a 'schools only' problem and likely to be a longer-term issue than anticipated or hoped. There are other related issues that have emerged which makes attendance an urgent priority. The numbers of Elective Home Education pupils have spiked in Devon to around 2600. There are three main reasons behind this (avoiding permanent exclusion, dissatisfaction with current school and social and emotional health problems post pandemic). Devon also suffers from a mix of all the key contributory factors seen nationally. The geography, the rurality, the coastal towns issue and the scale of the operation in Devon. This means our numbers are large but the proportion of the overall school population is similar, albeit higher still, than national.

To help combat this problem, the DfE published guidance in 2022 and established a small team of attendance advisers, some attendance hubs for advice and support, mentoring schemes, and a few other initiatives, including a communications plan and an increase in fines. Devon's nearest Attendance Hub is in Bristol, although Devon does have a relatively large attendance team which will be part of our solution. The guidance become statutory in September 2024 and will require a Local Authority response.

The cohorts within Devon that are of most concern include:

Pupils eligible for FSM (7% worse than peers), those with an EHCP (4.3% below peers), secondary age pupils (often Y10 and Y11), some ethnic cohorts (GRT, for example) and those who are at risk of persistent absence. The large spike in EHE is also of concern. Finally, any pupils with SEND within a mainstream school and (almost) any pupil known to social care but especially CIN and CP.

There are links to various reports in an appendix.

3.1) What do we mean by poor attendance?

The language around attendance can also be confusing. In essence, attendance levels are measured by the percentage of pupils who attend regularly. If, for example, every pupil attended for every session, an overall school attendance level would be 100% with 0% absences. To set realistic levels, DfE publish what they consider to be acceptable levels.

Nationally they expect around 95% attendance with some sub-thresholds. They set a level of 90%, and pupils who fall below that are considered persistent absentees. Pupils with below 50% attendance are considered severely absent (each of which are published cohorts) and there is a lengthy list of codes showing the reason for any absences schools are expected to report to (around 30 different categories).

Some individual cases are very complex. For example, pupils with high medical needs or who have EHCP plans or with high levels of SEND. Similarly, the overall percentage for an individual school can be impacted significantly by one pupil (if in a small school for example) and a cohort of pupils with medical needs (if in a special school). In general, the larger the data set, the more reliable the data. Thus, a large multi academy trust is more likely to be a reliable indicator than a small primary school. The largest data set available to us is of course all of Devon. The same rule applies, however. One large trust or school, for example, would impact significantly on our overall data.

3.2) The current overall attendance data for National and Devon (March 2024):

School Setting	Authorised Absence (%)		Unauthorised Absence (%)	
	National	Devon	National	Devon
Primary Schools	3.8	4.3	1.2	1.0
Secondary Schools	5.4	6.9	3.5	3.3
Special Schools	9.6	8.9	3.1	3.3

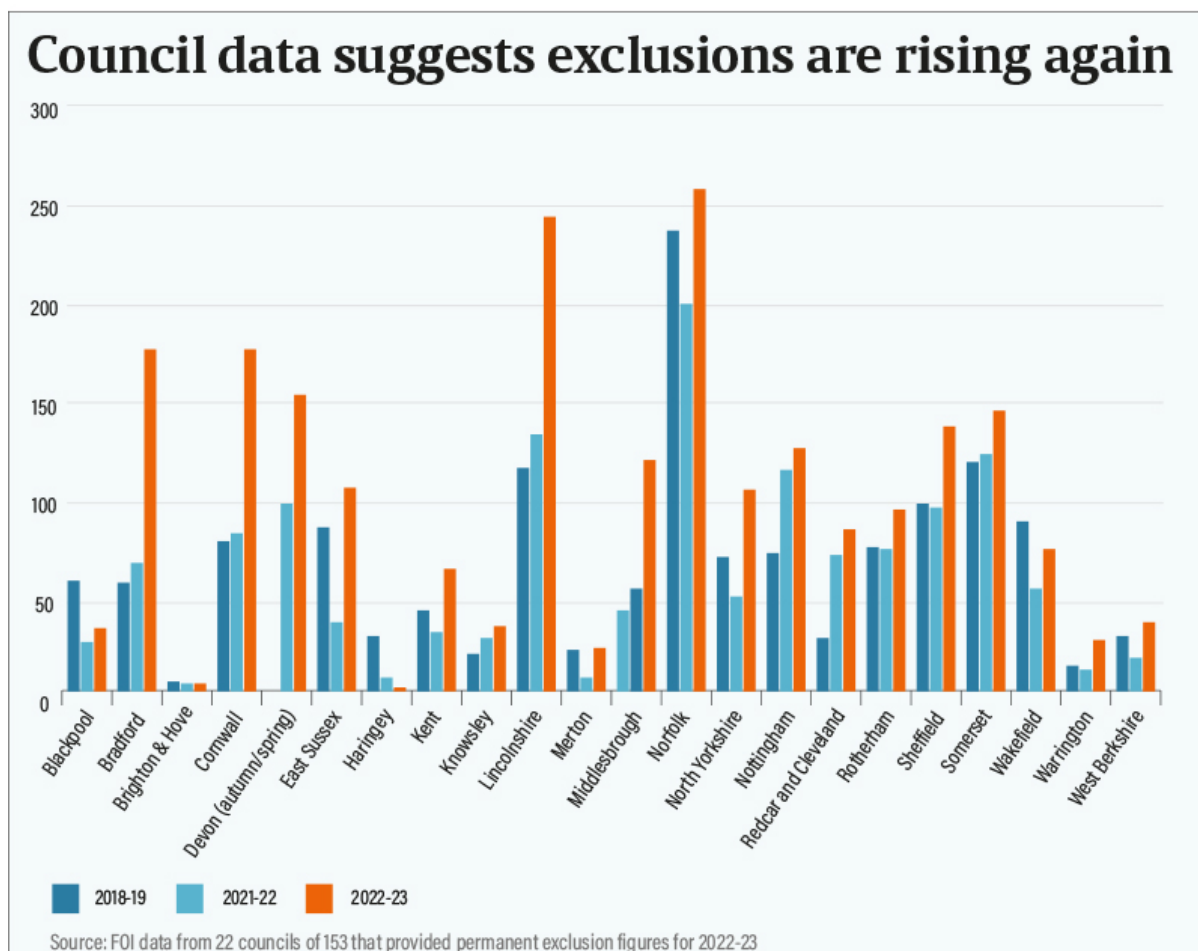
Attendance/Absence Type	Overall Absence/Attendance (%)	
	National	Devon
Overall attendance rate	93.2	92.7
Authorised absence	4.7	5.4
Unauthorised absence	2.2	2.0
Total absence rate	6.9	7.4
Persistent absence rates	20.3	18.8

(Thus, a fifth of pupils are missing at least a fifth of their school time).

These figures can change daily, but usually by a minimal amount. Pandemic closures made this more volatile. Special schools cover a particular cohort of pupils but with different characteristics, so not all special schools are the same. The figures are rounded.

The above headline figures do not show the improvement in the attendance rates for Devon. Primaries are in line with or slightly above national depending on the cohort of pupils but do show it recovering well. In secondary schools, the pattern of absence tracks almost exactly the national picture (which is proving stubborn to improve) but Devon is usually 2% below national. Thus, improving attendance in our secondary schools is our key priority.

The following charts are taken from national data and show the 2019 – 2023 trends. The early data is that they have risen again in 2023-34. Initial data suggests that, within Devon we have passed the 200 permanent exclusion threshold for the first time in recent months. This is of particular concern.



*Council permanent exclusions data

3.3) The current absence data with trends for Devon and recent changes to the local picture. What is happening locally and who is most impacted?

Some positive indicators but work to be done.

- Primary attendance has improved by almost 2% since 2022.
- Primary attendance has improved for persistent absentees by being reduced by 4% since 2022.

- Secondary and primary combined persistent absenteeism has reduced by 3.3% since 2002.
- Although special school attendance has remained lower than other sectors (reflected nationally) and has not improved overall – persistent absenteeism has reduced by almost 3% - and overall attendance has remained in line with national figures.
- The main concern is that attendance for pupils eligible for free school meals remains well below that for all other pupils (87.5% compared to 92.7%). This correlates with national trends almost exactly but indicates the strong link between low income and absence. This cohort thus becomes a priority for us.

3.4) What DCC is doing to address the challenge?

In 2023 some initiatives were commissioned to tackle some of the above – these were a short term SEMH project (based in schools but part funded by DCC and schools themselves). The second was a small reorganisation of the work of the attendance and EHE teams.

The SEMH projects have now completed a year and a review was completed in May 2024. Some have now completed but there were several which were poised to deliver, or which had staff appointed. These should continue. There is a recognition that they could have been initially more strategic rather than operational, but they were also commissioned rapidly.

There have been zero exclusions projects in the past which have failed or stalled. Consequently, time is being taken to secure the terms of reference and engagement of schools and trusts.

Devon has secured agreement from the DfE to establish an attendance hub along the lines of one in Bristol. This is with the support of three of our trusts geographically spread within the county and some maintained federations. The idea is to partner with a research school to evaluate the work and target particular cohorts (which will vary from school to school). We are also seeking some funding from two other sources (Education Endowment Foundation and a social mobility project). The Attendance hub will be the second in the Southwest. The pre-election protocols mean this will now start in September.

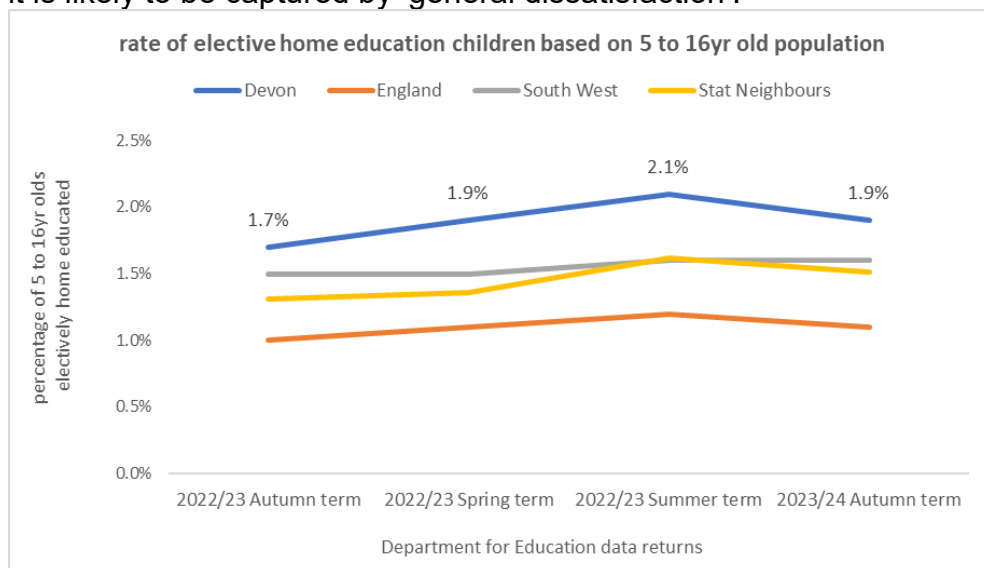
3.5) Elective Home Education (EHE): National and regional benchmarks

More children are electively home educated in Devon per population than that seen nationally and regionally. 1.9% of the 5 to 16yr old population (ONS population estimates) were EHE in Devon compared to 1.1% nationally. This is close to double the national picture. Thus, this cohort becomes a priority for us. Slightly more girls than boys are EHE.

School Phase - over two thirds of EHE children are of secondary school age, with a third of EHE children in year groups 10 and 11.

Of those reasons known or provided, the reason most reported nationally was philosophical or preferential reasons, accounting for 16% of pupils, followed by mental health (13%) and lifestyle choice (8%). This differs in Devon where the reason most reported was mental health, accounting for 24% of pupils, followed by philosophical (21%) and school dissatisfaction - general (11%). It does not include pupils opting for EHE to avoid a

permanent exclusion. We do not have this data as the ‘exclusion’ never then took place, so it is likely to be captured by ‘general dissatisfaction’.



3.6) Elective Home Education - May 2024 update

- To date 3,138 children and young people have been registered as home educated at some point during the academic year. This equates to 3.4% of the school age population. This figure is higher than the total for the previous year, 2,951 children, equating to 3.1% of the population.
- In addition to the number of registered children and young people, there are 150 recorded as not registered. They are known to be residing in Devon, but they have no involvement with the Elective Home Education Service. This is because there is no legal requirement to register if a child has never attended school or if they have moved to the area from out of county.
- During the last 5 years numbers of children and young people registered as home educated has risen each year except during 2019-20 when there was a slight decrease in numbers. This was due to schools being closed in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Numbers surged when schools reopened, particularly at the start of the Autumn term 2020.
- There have been 1,166 new cases to date in this academic year, which if numbers continue to increase is likely to surpass last year where there were 1,243 new cases.
- For the academic year to date, 411 children have returned to school, 27 moved out of county, 11 moved abroad and 73 were listed as Children Missing Education. During 2022-23, 363 children and young people returned to school, 83 moved out of county, 19 moved abroad and 54 were listed as Children Missing Education due to unsuitable home education provision.

Numbers of registered EHE children as a percentage of the school population:

Academic Year	Number of registered EHE children*	% of total school population**
2018/19	1940	2.1
2019/20	1907	2.1
2020/21	2389	2.6

2021/22	2502	2.7
2022/23	2951	3.1
2023/24 to 02/05/24	3138	3.4

*These figures represent all children and young people who were EHE at some point during the year.

*Historic figures in this report differ to those previously published as the school population is now calculated on the number of children in NCY 0 to 11 from the Spring school census, to match the EHE cohorts (NCY 0 to 11). 2023/24 pupil population data is taken from local Spring census records as DfE are not due to publish until July. 2022/23 and earlier pupil populations are taken from DfE published information.

Number of registered EHE children with Education Health Care Plans

- For the academic year to date, 287 children and young people with an Education Health Care Plan have been registered as home educated. This is a 19.6% increase on 2022-23 (240) and highest on record.
- There have been 94 new cases to date with an EHCP, compared to last year when there were 95 new cases with an EHCP.

Academic Year	Number with EHCP
2018/19	123
2019/20	166
2020/21	197
2021/22	217
2022/23	240
2023/24 to 02/05/24	287

*These figures represent all children and young people who were EHE with an EHCP at some point during the year.

Numbers of registered EHE children at each Key Stage:

- For this academic year to date, the number of primary age home educated children is 983, compared to 1039 in 2022-23. The number of secondary age children continues to rise with 2,155 to date, compared to 1912 in 2022-23. This is an increase of 12.7%. The overall numbers of secondary age children being home educated has seen year on year increases for the last 5 years.

Academic Year	EY & KS1	KS2	KS3	KS4
2018/19	255	539	606	540
2019/20	270	553	534	550
2020/21	367	776	718	528
2021/22	294	731	872	605
2022/23	282 (50 EY)	757	1131	781

2023/24 to 02/05/24	257	726	1206	949
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- Poor mental health continues to be the main reason provided by parents for deciding to home educate, followed by philosophical or preferential reasons. This is the second year where mental health is the main reason for EHE.

3.7) Ensuring children receive a suitable education:

- The EHE team offer home visits to families where educational or safeguarding concerns have been identified or they have significant special educational needs. Advice and support are also provided through virtual meetings, telephone calls, emails and the EHE website.
- The overall number of home visits has now returned to pre-pandemic levels, however, due to the significant increase in EHE numbers, a smaller proportion of children overall are being seen.
- In 12 cases where EHE was judged unsuitable, the school attendance order process has been instigated; 1 has ceased due to the family leaving Devon, but exact whereabouts still unknown; 2 have ceased due to evidence of a suitable education being provided; 1 in-year application submitted to School Admissions (prior to the order being issued) although yet to go on roll despite a school place being allocated. The remaining 8 case are on-going with the legal team.

3.8) Statutory DfE changes and implications.

The DfE new statutory requirements come into force on August 19th 2024. For Devon County Council the main requirement is that we are now required to provide a named contact with every school (or trust) who can help improve attendance and who can act as a point of contact. Specifically, the new responsibilities are to:

- Have a strategic approach to improving attendance for the whole area and make it a key focus of all frontline council services.
- Have a School Attendance Support Team that works with all schools in their area to remove area-wide barriers to attendance. Provide each school with a named point of contact in the School Attendance Support Team who can support with queries and advice.
- Offer opportunities for all schools in the area to share effective practice.
- Hold a termly conversation with every school to identify, discuss and signpost or provide access to services for pupils who are persistently or severely absent or at risk of becoming so.
- Have an acknowledgement across schools and academies on sharing school level attendance data in the near future.
- Where there are out of school barriers, provide each identified pupil and their family with access to services they need in the first instance.
- If the issue persists, facilitate a voluntary early help assessment where appropriate.
- Take an active part in the multi-agency effort with the school and other partners.
- Provide the lead practitioner where all partners agree that a Local Authority service is best placed to lead. Where the lead practitioner is outside of the Local Authority, continue to work with the school and partners.

4) Options / Alternatives

The issue is about to become statutory and is already of national and local priority. It is time critical. The initiatives already in place can be refreshed and realigned to continue with those that are either delivering positive outcomes or poised to do so. Sharing good practice would then bolster or support current initiatives. We also plan to develop some attendance networks and wider training activities.

5) Consultations / Representations / Technical Data

There have been no formal consultations on this issue.

6) Strategic Plan

This report is clearly linked most closely to the County strategic priority to show increased ambition for children and young people. It also dovetails with tackling poverty and inequality and helps improve communities (if we consider the impact on a local area of, for example, high levels of exclusion). The data for Devon is reported here and the impact of various initiatives already underway.

- Be ambitious for children and young people.
- Support sustainable economic recovery.
- Tackle poverty and inequality (address poverty, health, and other inequalities)
- Improve health and wellbeing, including any public health impacts.
- Help communities be safe, connected, and resilient.

7) Financial Considerations

There are no specific financial considerations, but the capacity of the team will be kept under review. There is an opportunity for a traded cost service. Schools will require training which could be charged for.

8) Legal Considerations

There are some specific legal considerations. The Department for Education guidance ('Working Together to Improve Attendance') becomes statutory in September 2024 (specifically on August 19th). This places a legal responsibility on the Local Authority to provide some additional personnel support to all schools in their efforts to improve attendance. Devon County Council is well placed to respond to this, but there is also a need to redeploy some individuals in the Attendance Improvement Team to be more school facing rather than office based.

9) Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change, Sustainability and Socio-economic)

There are no environmental impact implications of this.

10) Equality Considerations

There are significant equalities implications in this. Those groups most impacted by poor attendance are those with protected characteristics, who have SEND or EHCP and thus have additional need or are eligible for FSM. These are our most vulnerable and underserved groupings within education. We also know that their lower attendance sets up

future considerable need for later life with the implications of poor life chances for the individuals concerned and a subsequent future higher claim on public resource.

11) Risk Management Considerations

We will work with DfE and schools to ensure that we are compliant with the new statutory recommendations in the DfE working together to improve attendance.

12) Summary / Conclusions / Reasons for Recommendations

The report above shows some of the detail in the latest position regarding overall attendance pressures and the impact of some particular cohorts. Recommendations are as time limited and resource finite as possible.

This priority has strong links to the Council Strategic Plan and to improving both social mobility and equality.

Stuart Collins

Director of Children and Young People's Futures

Electoral Divisions: All

Councillor Andrew Leadbetter, Cabinet Member for Childrens Services and Schools

Local Government Act 1972: List of background papers:

[Link to latest DFE statutory guidance:](#)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6274ecb2d3bf7f5e3916fb5f/Summary_table_of_responsibilities_for_school_attendance.pdf

[Link to Childrens Commissioner Reports via BBC:](#)

[School attendance: England Children's Commissioner sets out plan to get all pupils back in school - BBC Newsround](#)

[Link to Public First report survey:](#)

[Understanding the attendance crisis in english schools - Public First](#)

[Link to Devon Strategic Plan:](#)

<https://www.devon.gov.uk/strategic-plan>

[DFE Attendance Summary Tables:](#)

[DfE Attendance Summary Tables.xlsx \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

[Codes for absence schools are required to report to daily: Please note these codes are about to change in September 2024.](#)

Code Reason

/ Present (AM)

\ Present (PM)

L Late (before registers closed) marked as present

I Authorised absence due to illness (NOT medical or dental etc. appointments)

M Authorised absence due to medical / dental appointments

R Authorised absence due to religious observance

S Authorised absence due to study leave

T Authorised absence due to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller absence

H Authorised absence due to authorised family holiday

E Authorised absence as pupil is excluded, but still on the admission register, with no alternative provision made

C Authorised absence for reasons not covered by any other authorised absence code, this code should only be used in exceptional circumstances

B Approved educational activity as pupil being educated off site (not dual registration)

D Dual registered (at another establishment) - not counted in possible attendance

J Approved educational activity as pupil is attending interview with prospective employer or another educational establishment

P Approved education activity as pupil is participating in an approved supervised sporting activity

V Approved educational activity as pupil is at an organised educational visit or trip

W Approved educational activity as pupil is attending work experience

G Unauthorised absence as pupil is on a family holiday, not agreed, or is taking days in excess of an agreed family holiday

U Unauthorised absence as pupil arrived after registration closed

Code Reason

O	Unauthorised absence as the school is not satisfied with the reason given for the absence, has not authorised the absence and it is not covered by any other code / description
N	Unauthorised absence as pupil missed session/s for a reason that has not yet been provided
X	Non-compulsory school age absence - not counted in possible attendances
Y	Non-compulsory school age absence - not counted in possible attendances
Z	Pupil not yet on roll - not counted in possible attendances
#	Planned whole or partial school closure - not counted in possible attendances

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