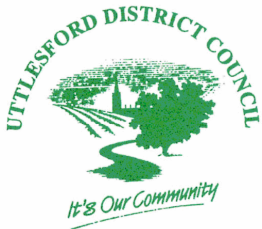




Annual Report to Tenants

Uttlesford District Council 2010

October 2010



UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Chief Executive: John Mitchell



Welcome to the housing department's annual report for 2009/2010

Uttlesford District Council together with its tenants and leaseholders has produced a draft report to show how the council is meeting its tenants' needs in line with the Tenant Services Authority's national standards. Uttlesford District Council has a long history of strong tenant involvement, the first tenants' forum being set up in 1995. The Tenant Compact, an agreement set up between tenants and the council, has been in place for more than 10 years, the latest version having been revised in June 2009. The council believes that to provide the best customer services, the customer has to be not only involved but engaged with the service providers, to enable both parties to fully understand and co-operate to produce a harmonious, efficient, high-quality and economically viable delivery of customer service. The council continuously supports, encourages and promotes involvement.

The purpose of this report is to assist tenants by correlating information in this one document to help make clear how services are provided and monitored under the five key areas, defined as: involvement and empowerment; home; tenancy; neighbourhood and community; and value for money.

I would like to thank the members of the tenant forum who have supported me and the housing team, by participating in development of policies and sitting on other forums and working groups. Without their time and commitment it would not have been possible to have made improvements in service delivery.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report.

**Nicole Shephard-Lewis
Tenant Participation Officer**

The Tenant Services Authority Standards

Tenant involvement and empowerment standard

a) Customer service, choice and complaints

The housing service has a range of customer service standards, which are displayed on the website. Standards are measured through satisfaction surveys and specific local performance indicators such as new tenant visits, satisfaction with repairs and the processing time for housing applications.

Customer feedback is critical to ensuring we are providing efficient and effective services. The customer service strategy represents the council's policy for handling contact with the public and underpins its approach to customer service and care. In order to gain important face-to-face feedback from customers we support a number of customer panels such as the Uttlesford Area Access Forum, the Disability Equality Forum and the Uttlesford Tenant Forum.

We undertake regular customer satisfaction surveys regarding a range of services for example the choice based lettings system and repairs to our housing stock. In July 2008 the Council re-launched its website including a much improved section on housing services. The Council is currently in the process of reviewing its corporate customer service compliments and complaints procedures and consultation has been undertaken asking customers about the types of services they would like to receive and to gain better feedback on how services are being delivered. As a consequence, monitoring and management of customer feedback is becoming more effective.

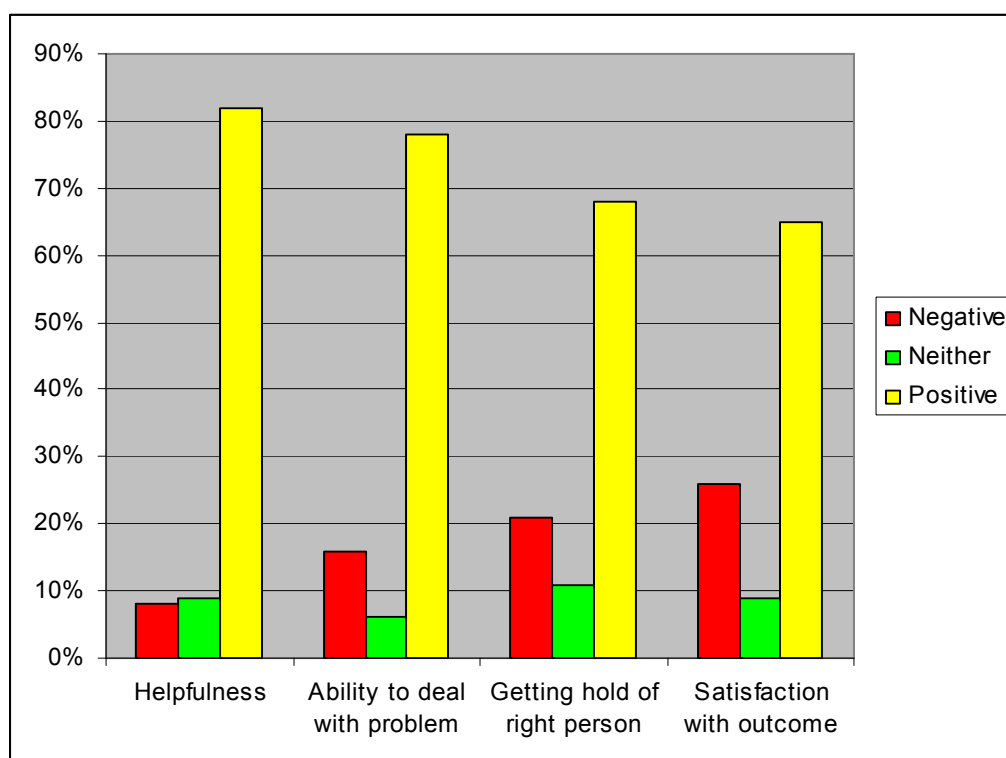
Complaints regarding any failures to meet with the TSA standards will be reviewed separately. They will however be treated and responded to under the same policy and procedures that are in place for all complaints.

Annual service user events and consultation exercises influence future service development. For example a new model for delivering supported housing services has been developed following feedback from service users. Customer satisfaction forms have been re-designed for all services and are monitored through a range of methods. All forms are included on the council's website.

A full tenant satisfaction survey was undertaken in 2008/09, with questionnaires sent to 1600 tenants. This showed general satisfaction, the areas of concern were housing repairs and the fear of anti-social behavior. Following this ASB has become a priority area for the Housing Initiatives Working Group. The response to

concerns over housing repairs was to restructure the department to become more customer focused.

The graph below show the satisfaction levels for tenants who contacted the council's housing services.



Source Status Survey 2008

b) Involvement and empowerment

Tenant Involvement

Below are the standards of service that you should expect to receive from us to promote and support your involvement in your housing service.

We will:

- Publish a tenants' newsletter at least twice a year
- Consult with you in various ways about matters that affect you and take your views into account when we make decisions
- Carry out surveys to obtain your views on different aspects of our service and to act on their results where possible
- Make sure equal and genuine opportunities are provided for you to become involved in the planning, delivery and monitoring of our housing service
- Establish and develop a range of ways for you to become involved
- Provide training for tenants as required
- Support the tenant forum
- Adhere to the Tenant Compact

- Further develop the participation strategy with a view to formulating and agreeing local offers by 1 April, 2011

To further develop tenant engagement from tenants other than those currently supporting the housing department, a new initiative of “village-based” meetings is proposed to take place where all local tenants and prospective tenants will be invited to give their views and ideas to the forum and officers to further advance the co-regulatory approach ensuring Uttlesford’s tenants have a genuine and practical way in which their views and solutions can be properly heard.

The council will establish open meetings and invite local tenants to discuss matters of concern to them and try to further engage and involve the development of local offers. The meetings will be open to current and prospective tenants alike. The formula for this was set at the “local conversations”, which took place in both the north and south of the district, both in the evening and afternoon to maximise tenant input.

The tenant forum is currently involved in all areas of decision-making. Forum members also sit on a number of working groups and the chair and one other member, currently the vice-chair, attends the community and housing committee meetings. One member also sits on the disability forum. Tenants were also involved in the development of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan.

Leaseholder Involvement

The Council manages 122 Leasehold properties.

Leaseholders have their own dedicated officer to assist with their needs. Every leaseholder receives a welcome pack and a leasehold handbook. Leaseholders are invited to have their own representative on the tenant forum.

c) Understanding and responding to the diverse needs of tenants

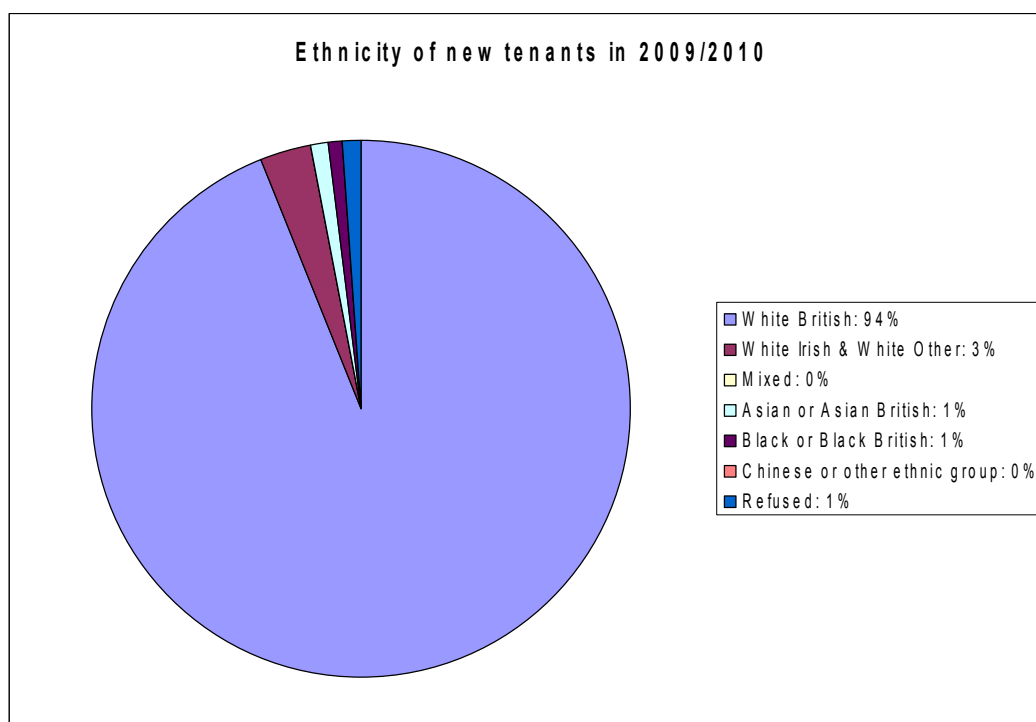
The housing service is fully committed to ensuring equality of treatment for all customers without discrimination or prejudice based on a person’s class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, nationality, age, disability or illness.

The council has its own comprehensive equality policy which outlines the commitment to promoting equal opportunities and ensuring social inclusion in everything we do.

Specifically the council recognises the requirements regarding race under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and has produced and is continuously reviewing a race equality scheme. The same applies to disability and gender. The authority will also recognise the requirements of the Single Equality Act when it is introduced. The council will continuously review its approach to inclusiveness and equality of opportunity for its service users.

The housing department has adopted its own race equality policy for rented housing and a policy and procedures document for dealing with victims of domestic abuse

The chart below shows the breakdown of new tenants in ethnic groups for 2009/10:



Source CORE Annual Report April 2009/10

A review is currently being carried out of the way in which the council collects data with regard to the seven core diversity strands. The housing department is actively in support of a corporate comprehensive analysis of its collection and monitoring of this data.

Uttlesford District Council's Disability Equality Scheme (DES) shows the commitment of Uttlesford District Council to ensure that disabled people within the community are treated equally and that equality for disabled people is embedded into the culture of the organisation.

The council also has a gender equality scheme and a race equality scheme.

Supporting People

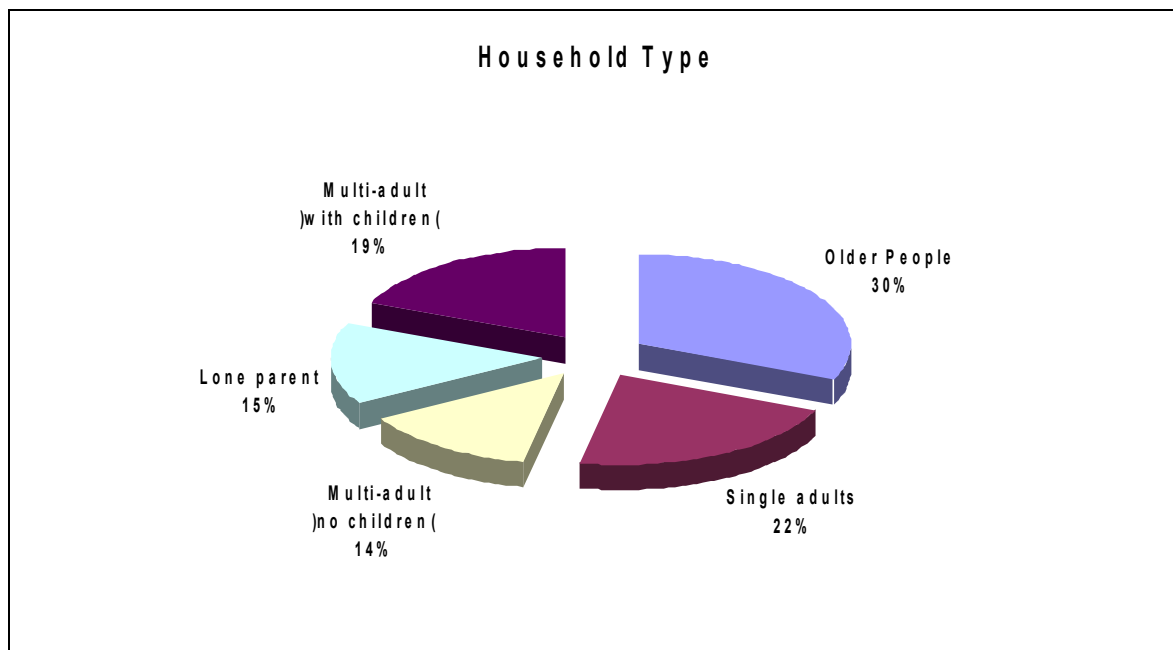
Uttlesford is proud to already have developed a local offer on service delivery for sheltered tenants. The council listened to tenants who had voiced concern over the service by which each and every tenant regardless of need received a daily visit from a sheltered housing officer.

The council realised that the "one size fits all" approach was no longer what tenants wanted. People living in sheltered accommodation still lead active, full lives, so many did not want the daily visit. A comprehensive review of the whole service took place. All sheltered sites were visited and an open meeting was held where all residents were invited to comment on the service they were receiving

and asked for their input on how the service could be improved. Each tenant was subsequently visited to ascertain their individual requirements.

The results were very exciting and the council now has a modern, customer-focused service that meets the needs of each and every individual. The new service will be reviewed annually.

New Lettings Summary Statistic 2009/10 - the following chart shows the make-up of new tenant households:



Source CORE data 2009/10

Home standard

a) Quality of accommodation

The Decent Homes Standard

The Decent Homes Standard was introduced by the government in 2001.

All councils and housing associations were required to meet the standards set out by 2010. A 'decent' home is one that meets the following criteria:

- It meets the current minimum standard for housing
- It is in a reasonable state of repair
- It has reasonably modern facilities and services
- It provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort

Uttlesford District Council has been committed to maintaining its properties to a high standard for many years. This has resulted in its current position, where over 98 per cent of the stock meets the Decent Homes Standard. A Decent Homes

Strategy was drawn up to ensure that all council-owned properties meet the standard.

Right to Buy sales figures:

Last year (2009/10) four three-bedroom homes were sold

b) Repairs and maintenance

An analysis of tenants' satisfaction survey shows that overall, 97 per cent of tenants were satisfied with the repairs service.

Currently a number of performance indicators are reviewed by the tenant forum, who have been asked to decide which they feel will be of most interest and could be monitored in relation to local offers, such as CP12 gas servicing. The new contractor Oakray has already made great advances in progressing with tenants who refuse to have their boilers serviced. Officers are involved in setting up new stringent methods to ensure that 100% of boilers are serviced annually, together with assistance from the tenant participation officer and housing officers for those more vulnerable tenants, who may need additional information and or support.

Number of repairs carried out in 2009/10: 13,103

Percentage of urgent repairs completed within government time limits: 92%

Average time taken to carry out a non-urgent repair: nine days

The percentage of valid gas certificates (CP12): 97.88%

Number of emergency repairs completed on first visit: 77.95%

Number of routine repairs completed on time: 91.53%

Property Maintenance

Close ongoing monitoring of the housing revenue and capital programme has enabled the council to ensure that available resources are used efficiently. The following summary, illustrates how the council performed last year. All programmed objectives were achieved last year.

Nature of Repair	Budget 2009/10	Outturn 2009/10	Variance %
Ad-hoc Repairs	900,000	983,420	9.35%
Planned Maintenance	896,110	789,647	-0.86%
Planned Works	1,716,080	1,889,682	10.12%

Programmed works carried out 2009/10	
No. of Properties	New Fittings
151	Window Replacement
124	Front doors
85	Back doors
241	Boiler Replacement
32	Kitchen upgrades
30	Bathroom upgrades
242	Electrical rewires and upgrades
440	External decoration plus two sheltered housing schemes
86	Disabled Adaptations

Tenancy standard

a) Allocations

The council as at April 2010 owned 2,872 properties, of which 471 were sheltered properties.

A comprehensive consultation process has just taken place and a new allocations policy has been produced, using the new fair and flexible guidance recently published by the Government, that reflects the need of current tenants, prospective tenants and the wider community. It is more transparent and offers genuine equality of opportunity to all. We are also consulting with our housing partners on local lettings policies and sustainable community policies on new developments

Lettings in 2009/2010
265 lettings to Council properties
105 lettings to Housing Associations

Choice Based Lettings

Uttlesford Council use a choice-based lettings scheme in Uttlesford called HomeOption. HomeOption has been formed by Uttlesford, Brentwood, Epping Forest, Broxbourne, Chelmsford and East Herts councils. Currently consortium partners are in discussions on how the HomeOption scheme can be enhanced for service users.



Applicants through the HomeOption freesheets receive feedback on the properties that have previously been advertised. This shows them the points level of the successful applicant and the time they had been on the register, from this

information homeseekers and tenants are able to make informed decisions about the type of housing they wish to consider, the likelihood of them being successful and the time it may take.

Grant for Moving Home

The council can assist with moving costs if a tenant wishes to downsize their property.

When an Uttlesford Council tenant moves from a three or four bedroom home into a two- or one-bedroom property owned by the council you will be offered £500 towards the cost of removal fees and an additional £500 for each bedroom “released” up to a maximum of £2,000. The grant is subject to conditions.

Mutual Exchange Scheme

The council uses an online mutual exchange facility, HomeSwapper, to increase the choice of accommodation available to tenants.



The HomeSwapper database holds details of people wanting to exchange within Uttlesford as well as details of those wishing to move here from outside the district.

The council has funded this service to enable Uttlesford tenants to register free of charge. Registration can be carried out via the internet (free access is available from the London Road Council Offices in Saffron Walden office), or by completing an application form available on request by calling 01799 510576 or 510376, or calling into our Saffron Walden offices.

Cash Incentive Scheme

Under the 'Cash Incentive Scheme' grants of up to £25,000 may be given to vacate your council home to purchase a property on the open market.



For further information call 01799 510576 or 510376.

Empty Properties (Voids)

Together with the tenants' forum a new letting standard has been developed.

The council is always looking at ways to reduce the length of time a home remains empty and recently carried out a review of the void process. This has resulted in an improvement in the time taken to re-let properties from 43 days in 2008/09 to 32.8 days 2009/10.

b) Rents

Average rents and increases

The rent collection service continues to perform well despite the ongoing difficulties of the present economic climate.

The average weekly rent of £76.36 is net of current service charges as at 6 April 2009, based on a 52 week year.

It has been assumed, in line with current guidance, that actual rents will converge with target rents in the financial year 2023/24. This is under the revisions made within the Housing Revenue Account subsidy determination for 2009/10.

From the latest subsidy determination, the average target rent for 2009/10 is £84.66, some £8.30 different from the Council's actual 2009/10 average rent.

Most tenants have a good record in paying their rent. In 2009 the Council reviewed its rent escalation policy to ensure that it is fully compliant with pre-court protocols and best practice.

c) Tenure

The conditions of tenancy are currently under review and are out for consultation.

A tenancy sustainment policy is also currently being developed to assist tenants to maintain their tenancy.

A new, more comprehensive tenants' handbook will be issued by 1 April 2011, which will provide a wide variety of help and advice for tenants about living in their home.

Neighbourhood and community standard

a) Neighbourhood management

A facilities manager oversees the cleaning and general upkeep of all communal areas in Uttlesford sites. Communal areas are kept free of dust, floors swept and surfaces washed to keep free of cobwebs and dirt. Window ledges are kept free of dust and cobwebs.

Windows are cleaned on a quarterly basis on all communal properties including sheltered housing. In compliance with Uttlesford's climate change policy a reach and wash system is used. To avoid use of chemicals purified water is pumped through a filter giving clean results both for the windows and the environment.

In sheltered accommodation all service providers sign a visitors' book when on site so checks can be made to ensure all services are received. Tenants have requested that this system is extended to all communal areas in general needs blocks also, to ensure services are being provided, when they have been requested, for the correct period of time and the frequency promised. A new monitoring system is being trialled shortly.

A survey is shortly to be drawn up with the tenant forum asking tenants who have communal areas questions about the maintenance service they receive, so as to improve services where necessary.

b) Local area co-operation

Consultation and partnerships

Uttlesford has an open and positive approach to partnership working. We work strategically and operationally in partnership with neighbouring authorities and other agencies and stakeholders in delivering services to customers.

The council's corporate plan prioritises partnership working. In addition to leading Uttlesford Futures (Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)) working in partnership is firmly embedded in practical ways throughout the Council's services. The council's housing services are key players within the LSP.

Strong partnerships are an essential part of the housing strategy and ensure that key projects can be delivered even with limited resources. For example the Council has formed a homelessness partnership with key partners and agencies to progress Homeless strategy action plan.

c) Anti-social behaviour

Uttlesford District Council recognises that to be able to provide a high-quality housing service, the problems created by antisocial behaviour need to be addressed in a fair but firm manner. Tenants are entitled to live in a quiet and peaceful environment and to that end Uttlesford District Council will endeavour to act quickly and efficiently to tackle incidents of antisocial behaviour when necessary.

Uttlesford District Council will not tolerate incidents of antisocial behaviour and this will be made clear to all tenants, prospective tenants and residents of the district.

The environmental health team have policies and procedures for dealing with environmental health issues. There are a number of enforcement issues available to them such as written warnings, seizure of equipment, abatement notices, fines and court proceedings.

Value for money standard

(a) Value for money

Value for money is challenged in a number of ways. Costs are challenged annually through the budget process and management of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). The MTFS for 2010/15 has been set in the context of the economic downturn and the council's limited resources.

The council has recently been commended by the Audit Commission and other external agencies for its vastly improved approach to financial management over the past two and a half years. In the latest Annual Audit letter, the Commission stated that Uttlesford District Council *"has effective financial planning, budget monitoring and statutory financial reporting"* and that *"the council's vision for services is clear through its corporate and service planning"*.

Following the recent re-inspection of Strategic Housing Services in May 2010 Mark Elsworth, Audit Commission Lead Housing Inspector, said: "Since our last inspection, the council has significantly improved its financial position, as well as sustaining its delivery of new affordable homes and tackling homelessness. It is now a more stable organisation with clear leadership in place that should support it to deliver the improvements required, including the necessity to improve its approach to improvement planning and performance management."

Procurement

The tenant forum plays an important role in the repairs department procurement process. Involving tenants in the procurement of services has brought valuable tenant insight which the new procurement manager intends to nurture. The Building Services Manager, was delighted at the standard and the clarity of questioning from the tenant forum at the last procurement meeting and believes that this will pay dividends in future standard of works and practices. As a consequence he has asked that tenant representation be sought on monthly contractor meetings to further improve the service.

Uttlesford is currently a member of a procurement hub and the housing service has been instrumental in developing a number of framework contracts that have benefited not only Uttlesford but also other member authorities. The council recently employed its own procurement manager, so future procurement will be carried out in-house.

Climate Change

Uttlesford's climate change strategy action plan will also help to develop better value for money. The tenant participation officer together with the newly appointed climate change manager, is developing a pack to help tenants become more aware of changes they could make to their daily lives to help combat climate change and save them money.



Many of the documents referred to in this report can be found on the Council's website: www.uttlesford.gov.uk

Documents used in compiling this document:

The regulatory framework for social housing in England from April 2010 TSA
HouseMark Annual Report Toolkit
Participation Strategy 2010/13
HRA Business Plan 2010/14
Housing Service Plan 2010/11
Anti-Social behaviour Policy
Local strategic partnership plan
Housing Strategy 2009/14
Homelessness Strategy 2009
Core Annual Report
Climate Change Policy

All comments, questions or proposals on this report are strongly encouraged, and can be sent to the tenant participation officer by post, email or telephone:

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