



Transforming the Early Years for children with SEND



# Annual Impact Report 2023 - 24





Transforming the lives of children and families



Driving positive change around SEND in the early years



Promising the best start for every child

# Welcome from Chair of Trustees, Russ Fowler

Our talented team at Dingley's Promise has been supporting children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and their families for over forty years, an achievement to be celebrated and reflected on. During this long period, the charity has positively impacted many young lives, giving children with SEND the opportunity to develop and grow, to access mainstream education, or to transition successfully to a specialist educational setting. Dingley's Promise has also provided a lifeline to families struggling with the complexities and challenges of getting the best start for their child. Resources are scarce for many children, and the experience and expertise that the charity has built over such a long period enable us to give children the best possible chance of fulfilling their individual potential – something we believe every child has the right to.

Two years ago, we spent some time reviewing what we had achieved and where we wanted to go and concluded that we had the unique capability to give children with SEND the best possible start. But as a local charity with a small number of centres, we were only scratching the surface of the children and families in the UK that would benefit from what we provide. Since then, we have been on a mission to maintain our high standards but to increase our reach, and begin the journey to become a National Charity. We are, and will continue to achieve this by focusing on three sources of growth, and therefore increased reach. Firstly, we are constantly working to open new centres, by partnering with Local Authorities who share our passion to offer powerful solutions which enable pre-school children with SEND to experience the best possible start to their education.

We opened one new centre in Gloucester in 2022/3, and two in this financial year in Southampton and Bournemouth, meaning that the charity has almost doubled the number of children and families we can support. We are in dialogue with numerous other LA's about potential centres for the future. Secondly, we have been developing a training arm to the charity, giving practitioners in any pre-school setting the length and breadth of the country the opportunity to tap into the expertise we have built over forty years. Finally, we believe that we are uniquely placed to contribute to the national agenda on nursery education for children with SEND, and we have been proactive in attending and supporting various national bodies and forums.

Catherine McLeod our CEO, and her team, are rightly proud of what has been achieved, especially the growth that has been driven in the last two years, but it is only the beginning. Expertise and resources for children with SEND and their families are extremely limited, and we will continue to strive for growth of our national presence whilst maintaining our standards of excellence. To achieve this, we rely entirely on the commitment of our funding partners, ranging from Local Authorities and Charity Funding Schemes to corporate and of course individual donors. We are excited to continue working with our partners, existing and new, to do what we do on a national basis: give children with SEND the best chance of fulfilling their potential.

**Russ Fowler**

**Chair of Trustees**



# Our Reach and Impact

## 2023 - 2024



The total number of children we directly supported increased 71% since the previous year, we are again reaching more children than ever



96% of families rate our Family Support Workers as Excellent or Good



92% of families rate our Learn Through Play sessions as Excellent or Good



100% of families feel more confident supporting their child



68% of our children transitioned to mainstream education



100% of families feel more positive about the future since starting with us



We reached 487 children directly through our centres and Family Support Service



# Reflections on the Year from Catherine McLeod, CEO

It has been another incredible year for growth at Dingley's Promise. In light of the continued growth of the charity, we have strengthened our Operations team to ensure that we can provide effective support to existing and new centres, introducing a Head of Quality to focus on the consistent delivery of high-quality practices and regional Operations and Quality Managers who support the effective running of the centres. This year our hardworking teams reached 71% more children via our centre and outreach support compared with last year, and an impressive 68% of our children were able to transition into mainstream education when they left us, a 15% increase on the year before. Our centre teams continue to be the backbone of our organisation, and without the life changing work they do, we would not be able to share our experiences, train others and drive wider change in the way that we do now.

We have made great strides in influencing Government this year. In advance of the general election, we launched our Manifesto for Early Years Inclusion at the House of Lords, where we shared our vision for achieving a fairer and more accessible early years. Others in the sector have told us that our Manifesto has helped to bring together different voices in calling for improvements in early years SEND inclusion. We are in regular communication with Ministers and civil servants to ensure that our key recommendations for children with SEND in the early years remain at the heart of discussions, and as a result the Department for Education released a communication to all local authorities outlining how they should be funding early years SEND.

This year has also seen much wider coverage of Dingley's Promise both online and in traditional media. As our name becomes more well known it is likely that more families will access services, more practitioners will access inclusion training and more local authorities and settings will access our information and guidance.

We are so proud of the impact of our training, and we continue to work on development of practical courses which are relevant and accessible for the early years workforce.

## Key Plans for 2024-25

- To continue our ambitious expansion plan in the South of England and the Midlands, with new centres also opening in the North of England next year
- To influence the government agenda around early years creating a simpler and more accessible funding process for families and settings
- To work with Ofsted to develop inspections guidance that supports inclusion
- To create an EY SEND Assessment toolkit in collaboration with the DfE for national use
- To increase national training take up to 21,000 learners

**Catherine McLeod MBE**

**Chief Executive of  
Dingley's Promise**





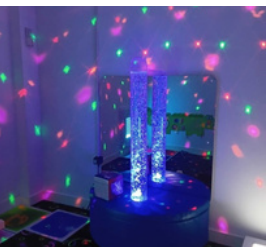
## Introducing our Bournemouth Centre

We are very proud to have opened our Bournemouth Centre in April 2024. We have worked with the Area SENCO, Portage and Health services in the area to ensure the support offered to families is bespoke to their needs. The primary category of need for this period is communication and interaction, and therefore Dingley's Promise has offered speech and language information sessions and supported children with their communication needs.

Since opening this year, the centre has supported 101 families through nursery centre placements, family outreach support and through the universal stay and play offer. Dingley's Promise Bournemouth recognises how isolating having a child with special educational needs can be for parents and continue to offer opportunities for parents to socialise and meet each other.

Feedback from our service has told us how parents have seen improvements in their child since starting with us, and that they are enjoying that their child is happy which allows them to feel comfortable leaving a child with special educational needs in an early years setting. Parents have gone on to say that Dingley's Promise Bournemouth is not only a valuable resource for children, but also a great support for parents and families.

We are so pleased with the impact we've had in such a short space of time and are excited to continue in the Autumn term. We look forward to what we can continue to achieve and support the families in our community with, and feel honoured to have a positive impact on so many children and families.



# Updates from our Southampton Centre

Since opening we have welcomed 17 children weekly to the centre for specialist learn through play sessions, we have enjoyed working with the local authority to assess need and put the support in place which really makes a difference in our community. We are delighted that as a result of the tailored activities we were able to provide to accelerate their developmental progress.

10

children transitioned to a mainstream setting

3

children transitioned to a specialist setting

4

children continue to be supported at the centre

As a team we are enjoying developing links with local settings and offering dual placements - working collaboration with the setting, sharing learning and developing processes which ensure routine and stability for the child and support transitions in the longer term.

Families have fed back that this much needed provision in Southampton has had a hugely positive impact on their children's development and wellbeing. One of our families were rejected by many nurseries due to their child's level of need and were struggling to understand how they could support him best. Without understanding of how the UK education system worked and the application processes involved, the family were in turmoil. At the centre we were able to support parents to complete school applications and supported a smooth transition to a mainstream provision, working collaboratively with staff to ensure all key information was shared and the child's level of need was understood.

We are grateful to our entire Southampton team for their commitment and hard work this year. Our centre has gone from strength to strength and we look forward to the challenges and opportunities heading into our second year.



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*Our son was diagnosed with Autism and Global Developmental Delay at the age of 2 and his special needs were very apparent. We struggled to take him to playgroups because it was always too busy and overwhelming for him. When it came to finding a nursery, we were turned away from most, with them saying they were not able to meet his needs or keep him safe. We were beginning to think that our son would not be able to access any education or early years support until he reached primary age, which would have led to him being even further behind his peers, but then we found out about Dingley's Promise who welcomed him and offered wider support to our family.*

*Our son now attends nursery at Dingley's Promise 3 days a week, this enables me to catch up on family tasks as well as having some much-needed respite, knowing that he is safe and being supported by specialists who understand his needs. Our son attends Playschemes over the holidays so we get to spend quality time with our daughter.*

*Our son absolutely loves to attend Dingley's Promise. Every one of us have noticed remarkable difference in him since he started attending. His eye contact has improved, he now wants to interact with peers and adults, is more curious and has a lot more confidence, he is really coming out of his shell. He is becoming much more aware of his surroundings, his understanding is increasing, his attention span is getting better. Dingley's Promise provides the right support for his sensory needs and therefore he is able to engage in the activities specifically tailored to aid his understanding and cognitive skills.*

*We are part of the outreach programme and attend stay and play sessions when possible. We have also been supported with everyday essentials at points when money is tight. We have the Family Support Worker to reach out to at any point to talk to if we ever need to, for advice, for support or just a listening ear.*

*The situation for children with SEND in the early years is really challenging. Children like my son are being regularly turned away from settings and many people working in early years settings do not feel equipped to meet their needs. Dingley's Promise is working really hard to support children in and around their centres but they are also working to support local authorities and settings across the UK to be more inclusive. If staff in the early years get the right training, they will not be worried about catering for the different needs of children and will be able to adapt, giving every child the chance to learn and develop alongside their friends.*

*We would have been lost without Dingley's Promise, so we are very grateful to them. The staff are so open-minded and are welcoming to all children and their families. We need more centres like Dingley's Promise to give children like ours the best start in life.*

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# Dingley's Promise Training

It's been another brilliant year for our training team! We are continuing to deliver an extremely successful training programme with Comic Relief, reaching over 17,000 learners so far. In 2024 we partnered with 9 organisations to deliver training, offering more people than ever the chance to build their confidence and skills in supporting children with SEND.

We have developed a training search engine to make it quick and easy for potential learners to find locally funded courses on our website. We are working hard to develop training videos and practical resources to further support early years inclusive practice on a range of subjects available on our website.

We introduced our Mark of Achievement award to recognise a 'whole setting' approach to inclusion. This has been really popular, with over 130 settings achieving the award to date.

## We are committed to:

- developing 5 more training courses
- investing in resources to market the courses, enabling more practitioners across the country to access the training
- the accrediting of our short courses to ensure they are recognised for the impact they have on inclusive practice
- developing strong links with more local authorities to ensure we provide the support needed to improve sufficiency and delivery of inclusive practice in their local areas

2017 - Level 3 Early Years Inclusive Practice launched

2020 - Two short courses created to reach practitioners during the first Covid 19 lockdown - reached approx 100 practitioners

2021 - Successfully applied for a Comic Relief grant to train 30.000 practitioners using our existing short courses plus 8 more

2022 - 3 more short courses were launched and by the end of this year we had reached over 800 learners

2023 - In addition to our Comic Relief programme we partnered with several Stronger Practice Hubs and Local Authorities - over 5000 learners reached

“Dingley's Promise Training is a very useful tool. It was easy to follow and understand and the short quizzes really helped us embed our knowledge. It has been very beneficial, we work with several children and families with special educational needs and the knowledge that the training has provided us with ensures we can provide the very best for our children.”



Mark of  
Achievement  
setting



## National Impact

This year has seen a huge rise in the influencing power of Dingley's Promise, as we are increasingly seen as a national organisation. The highlight of the year was a reception in the House of Lords in November sponsored by our Patron Lord Brownlow to launch our manifesto for early years inclusion. Ministers, MPs, families, partners and sector leaders joined us to lay out our recommendations to improve access to early years education for children with SEND. As a result, partners have expressed to us that early years SEND is markedly more united than other areas of the early years sector, and we have had a major influence on that.

Our Manifesto highlights 3 specific 'calls to action' to address the current challenges in relation to:



Workforce  
Development



Funding  
for Inclusion



Sufficiency  
of Places

Interactions with the Department for Education have grown stronger over this period and we act as advisor on a number of groups that they convene. After a meeting with the Minister, it was agreed that the Department would send a communication to all local authorities outlining to them the importance of funding support for children with SEND in the early years, which was an important step forward. We have developed a strong theory of change that outlines the key barriers to early years inclusion, considers what needs to happen to overcome them, and how Dingley's Promise can help to drive that change. These tie in to our manifesto, and we aim to provide decision makers with the information and support that they need to ensure every child with SEND gets the best start.

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## Working in Partnership

We have been delighted that our early years partners have shared aspects of our manifesto widely and that many of their calls to action are informed by our recommendations. We are the only national organisation that focuses solely on early years SEND, and so we have a range of key partners across the disability and early years sectors. We are committed to ensuring that SEND is at the heart of every conversation about early years, and that discussions about SEND recognise the critical importance of the early years.

Our partnership with Coram Hemsalls on the Childcare Works contract has led to three papers for local authorities focusing on how to build early years SEND sufficiency, and a suite of videos for providers to support inclusive practice on the playroom floor and in leadership and management of settings. We expect this work to develop further in the coming year.

We have joined the steering group of the Childcare and Early Education Coalition with the remit of ensuring SEND is considered at all times in the lobbying and influencing work of the coalition. We continue to represent early years SEND on a range of coalitions and advisory groups both within the Department for Education and across the third sector, and we continue to be the secretariat for the Early Years SEND Specialist Providers Forum.

We recognise that in order to bring about major change, we have to continue to partner with our peers, and that the more we can provide information, support and guidance to key stakeholders, the more likely these changes will take place.

My name is: \_\_\_\_\_

My date of birth is: \_\_\_\_\_

My key person is: \_\_\_\_\_

My communication method is: \_\_\_\_\_

Interaction		Expressive communication		Receptive communication	
I show excitement during one-to-one turn taking games	I respond to interactions initiated by others	I can use my method of communication to demonstrate a need or want	I commentate on things I see around me verbally or by using gestures or signs	I can join in with familiar rhymes, songs or books using my method of communication	I can focus on a directed activity for up to 1 minute
ES	ESI	ES	ESI	ES	ESI
I seek interaction through movements or vocalisations	I can request more during a highly motivating activity	I can communicate my choice between two options	I can combine two or three words when communicating, this may include signs or symbols	I can follow a simple instruction involving my method of communication	I can follow an instruction involving two parts
ES	ESI	ES	ESI	ES	ESI
I demonstrate distress when left alone	I can complete a back-and-forth interaction using my method of communication	I can make some non-speech sounds	I am learning new words or visually or signs regularly	I attempt to copy actions or sounds in familiar rhymes, songs or books	I can look between two objects when shown them (recognises two objects are present)
ES	ESI	ES	ESI	ES	ESI



## Family Support

Demand for our family support service has continued to grow over the past year, with our family support workers reaching 71% more children compared with last year. We are constantly reviewing the way we provide support to ensure that it meets the changing needs of our families. Through the year families have reported that they struggle to get hold of professionals, to speak to or make an appointment, and we have tried to bridge this gap and provide SEND support using our knowledge and expertise. We have worked hard to support communication challenges through the creation of bespoke resources such as visual aids for families. We've also collaborated with other settings to ensure that the transition of children from our setting, or within dual placements is smooth and not disruptive for the child and family.

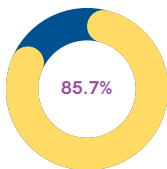
We have supported a number of carers and parents through mental health challenges, which they face often as a result of the pressure of caring for a young child with additional needs. As a result of our help this year we are proud that 100% of families completing our end of year survey said they felt more confident to support their child and were more positive about the future. This is a huge accolade for our brilliant family support workers, who take time to understand the challenges families face, build relationships with parents and carers and direct to the support they need. We are lobbying for more accessible funding and support for families of young children with newly identified SEND, as much time has been spent on supporting the completion of DLA forms, blue badge applications and sourcing funding for families. These processes are often evidence heavy and overly complex for families.

We work hard to link families with professionals locally for specialist support and have also extended the variety of opportunities for families to connect with each other this year. We now offer Stay and Play sessions, connect sessions, information sessions and coffee mornings during which advice, information and support can be shared. We will continue to ensure that families do not feel alone and to build their confidence and resilience so that they recognise the amazing support they are giving to their child and that there are many local support services who can help to reduce the emotional and physical pressures they are facing.

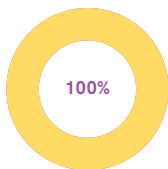


# Since starting at Dingley's Promise, families feel:

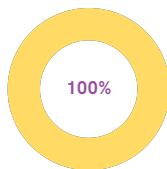
Less isolated



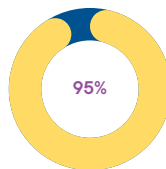
More positive  
about the future



More confident about  
supporting my child

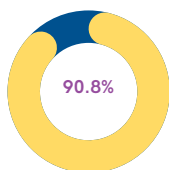


More united  
as a family

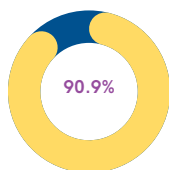


## Families rating our services as good or excellent:

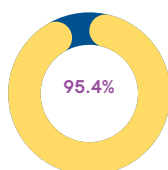
Learn through  
play sessions



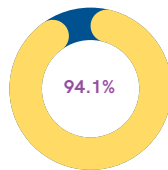
Stay and play  
sessions



Family support  
worker



Information for  
families



“

*My family support worker has been amazing, she is a great listener and when I speak to her I don't feel judged. She made me realise that by taking things in small manageable steps, the challenges we were facing with my son were possible to overcome, I didn't feel alone any more.*

”





*Photos: Simon Way*



## Raising Awareness

This year we were fortunate to be successfully chosen to appear on the appeal section of the Red Nose Day televised fundraising event. As funders of our Comic Relief Programme to train staff working in early years across England in Inclusive Practice, we were able to demonstrate the impact of our partnership working through a video showing the amazing progress of a child at our West Berkshire Centre as a result of our specialist Learn Through Play sessions.

Nyla and her wonderful parents shared their journey, which was on the first appeal of the evening raising over £1 million pounds for Comic Relief charities like us and raising awareness of our work across the country.

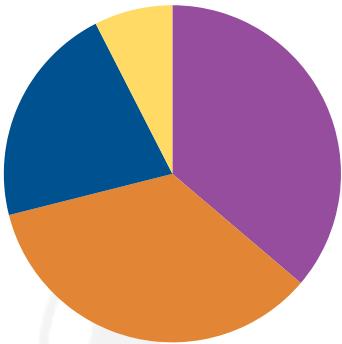
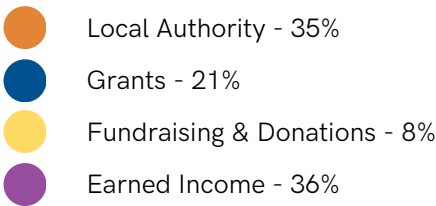
In January of this year another of our wonderful families was part of a BBC news piece, highlighting the difficulties families face when finding nursery places for children with SEND. This coverage supported our ongoing lobbying work to improve sufficiency of places for families and exposed the current crisis families are facing. A huge thank you to the family involved for sharing their emotional journey with others so freely and giving other families hope that support is out there from Dingley's Promise and other amazing charities.

Our team in Wokingham also welcomed a BBC crew to the centre, with parent Sudarsana sharing the story of her son Liam and the family's challenges before finding the support of Dingley's Promise. Thanks to our Wokingham team, Liam has been able to make significant progress and loves his time with his friends and staff at the Wokingham Centre.

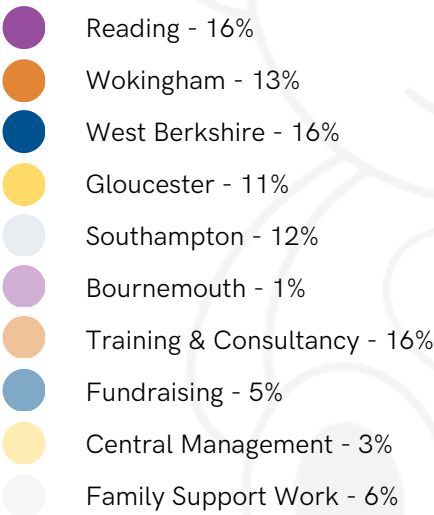
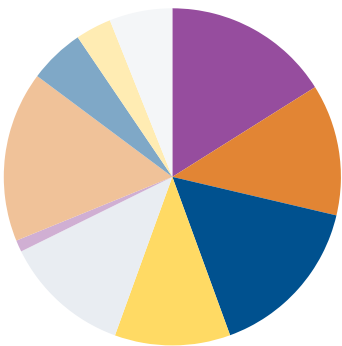
Personal stories like these are so important for illustrating the real challenges and pressures families of children with SEND face, and we are so grateful to our families who have shared their stories to act as a catalyst for change and to grow awareness of Dingley's Promise.

# How we fund our work

## Total Income - £1,576,090



## Total Expenditure - £



The largest part of our income is from non-statutory grants including large charities, trusts and foundations.

Earned income includes the Nursery Education funding distributed by local authorities on behalf of central government.

This is a summary of information extracted from the full audited and unqualified annual accounts of Dingley's Promise for the year ending 31st March 2024.

Copies of the audited accounts and financial statement are available from our website, the Charity Commission and Companies House.



## Fundraising

The fundraising landscape continues to be challenging but we are so grateful for the many businesses and individuals who have taken time out of their busy lives to fundraise for Dingley's Promise. Without their commitment and generosity, we would not be able to fund much of our vital work reach the children and families who need us.

- We saw a 20 strong team climb the O2 on a bright and sunny day in central London, raising over £5000
- Our Wokingham staff team and families took on the Wokingham Walk for another year – they were amazing and really enjoyed themselves
- 4 amazing supporters including our Operations Manager Louise took on the leap of faith, skydiving from 15,000 feet for Dingley's Promise
- The fabulous Wokingham Rock Choir raised £1,000 to support our work with fundraising events throughout the year

Supporters have taken on 10ks, half marathons, Tough Mudders, they have baked, knitted, sung their hearts out and donated prizes and money throughout the year! Many also attended our Gala event enjoying Bollywood dancing, glitter tattoos, a steel band and cuisine from around the world at the wonderful Reading Hilton. Thank you to each of every one of you, you have changed the lives of so many children and families.







## Local Support

Support from our communities is more important than ever as our centres try to provide the best possible environments and experiences for our children. We are extremely grateful for all support given this year, including:

- Volunteer days from Vodafone in Newbury who have supported the improvements to the indoor and outdoor spaces at the West Berkshire Centre
- Easter eggs for children provided by Hilton LivingWell Health Club in Reading
- The amazing donations of Christmas gifts to Connect Reading Giving Tree for our Reading children
- Vouchers donated to our Reading centre by B&Q for internal refurbishment
- Party food and decorations donated by Tesco Newbury
- Christmas gifts donated by the local Tesco Christmas appeal in Wokingham
- Amazing volunteer help from the Ascot Racecourse team, building furniture, clearing and tidying the garden areas and painting

These are just a few of the wonderfully generous examples of local support for Dingley's Promise over the past year!





## 40th Birthday Event

We'd like to say a huge thank you to all of our families past and present who celebrated our 40th birthday with us at Camp Mohawk! With support from Irwin Mitchell, we hosted a fantastic day that was enjoyed by all. We're so grateful for all of the support over the last 40 years of Dingley's Promise!





# Thank you to all of the Trusts, Foundations, businesses and community groups who have supported Dingley's Promise this year:

Action Coach Reading	Peter Baker Foundation
Ascot Racecourse	Provide Security
Awards for All	Reading Abbey Rotary
Beaufort Financial	Reading Borough Council
Berkshire Community Foundation	Reading St Laurence Church Lands
Big Lottery	RSM Reading
BNi Wokingham	Shanly Foundation
Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council	Softtalk Consultancy and Services
Brighter Futures for Children	Soteria Planning
Bruce Wake Charitable Trust	Southampton City Council
CBZ Media	St James's Place
Children in Need	Tesco Groundworks
Comic Relief	The D'Oyly Carte Charitable Trust
Connect Reading	The Good Exchange
David Brownlow Charitable Foundation	The Hobson Charity
Dynamic Media Solutions	The John Sykes Foundation
Englefield Charitable Trust	The Plough on the Green, Newbury
Global Make Some Noise	The Stevenson Family Charitable Trust
Gloucester Disability Fund	The Syder Foundation
Gloucestershire County Council	The Woodpecker, Newbury
Greenham Trust	Totalsurf
Greenham Trust Youth Committee	University of Reading
Hilton Hotel Reading	Waitrose Wokingham
Iconic Project Management	West Berkshire Council
Irwin Mitchell Solicitors	Wokingham Borough Council
John Lewis Reading	Wokingham Town Council
Miss Lawrence Charitable Trust	Wokingham United Charities
Newbury Town Council	Wooden Spoon
Onebite	
Openworks Foundation	



[www.dingley.org.uk](http://www.dingley.org.uk)



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