

Meeting	Communities Scrutiny Committee
Date	19 January 2023
Title	An Outline of the Waste and Recycling Service review work programme
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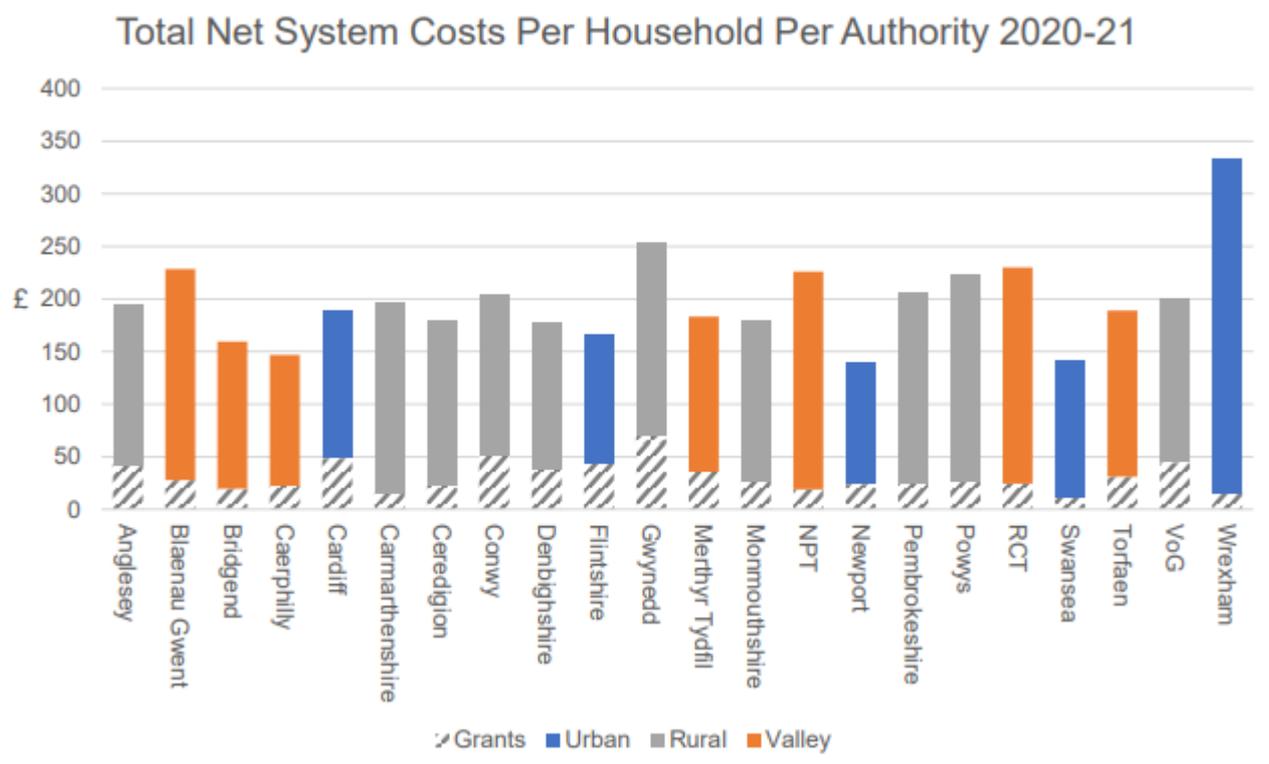
1. Purpose of the Report

1. To outline the matters requiring attention in the areas of Waste and Recycling.
2. To present a work programme for reviewing the matters requiring attention in the areas of Waste and Recycling.

2. Background and context

- 2.1 As part of changes to the corporate senior management structure, the Cabinet decided that the responsibility for collecting and processing waste and recycling should be transferred from the Highways and Municipal Department to the Environment Department.
- 2.2 Since this decision on 28 June 2022, the Head of Environment Department has been familiarising himself with the work of the waste collection and processing and recycling units. Meetings have been held, and are continuing, with staff across the areas, as well as site visits and getting to understand more about collection arrangements and the processing of materials. The operational responsibility for Waste and Recycling Services has now transferred since October 2022.
- 2.3 There is no doubt that the staff in these services carry out a vital function, and the workforce's efforts are appreciated by households across the county. They are responsible for collecting recycling, food waste and residual waste from 63,466 domestic properties across Gwynedd, and also collect garden waste, nappies and medical waste from some homes. They also provide a commercial waste service to businesses.
- 2.4 It is evident from the period of observation and familiarisation, that these committed members of staff take pride in their work and are keen to ensure high-quality services.
- 2.5 We have seen a clear increase in the county's recycling performance over the years, with recycling levels having more than doubled by around 30% in 2007/8, reaching the Welsh Government's latest target of 64% in 2019/20. This came about after the introduction of more frequent recycling collections for Gwynedd households, reduction in the frequency of residual waste collections, and developing a network of recycling centres in the county. Collections of domestic food waste was introduced, and a specialised provision to treat this waste was developed.
- 2.6 Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the last few years have been incredibly challenging, with the introduction of changes to the collection system in the three areas of the county, and moving to a 5-day a week system. Furthermore, the pandemic has meant that the services have focused on maintaining the collection arrangements, with less focus on the efficiency of the services. The work completed during Covid, as the Council continued to carry out collections, is testament to the efforts of staff to maintain the service for the people of Gwynedd.
- 2.7 But, we must address the costs of maintaining the service. In comparison with other Welsh councils, the report "[Waste Finance Data 2020-21](#)" by the Welsh Local Government Association shows that the net total spend per household on waste services (2020/21) in Gwynedd is amongst the highest in Wales – namely £232.11 (second highest) compared with the median in Wales of £181.37 per household. (Table 1)

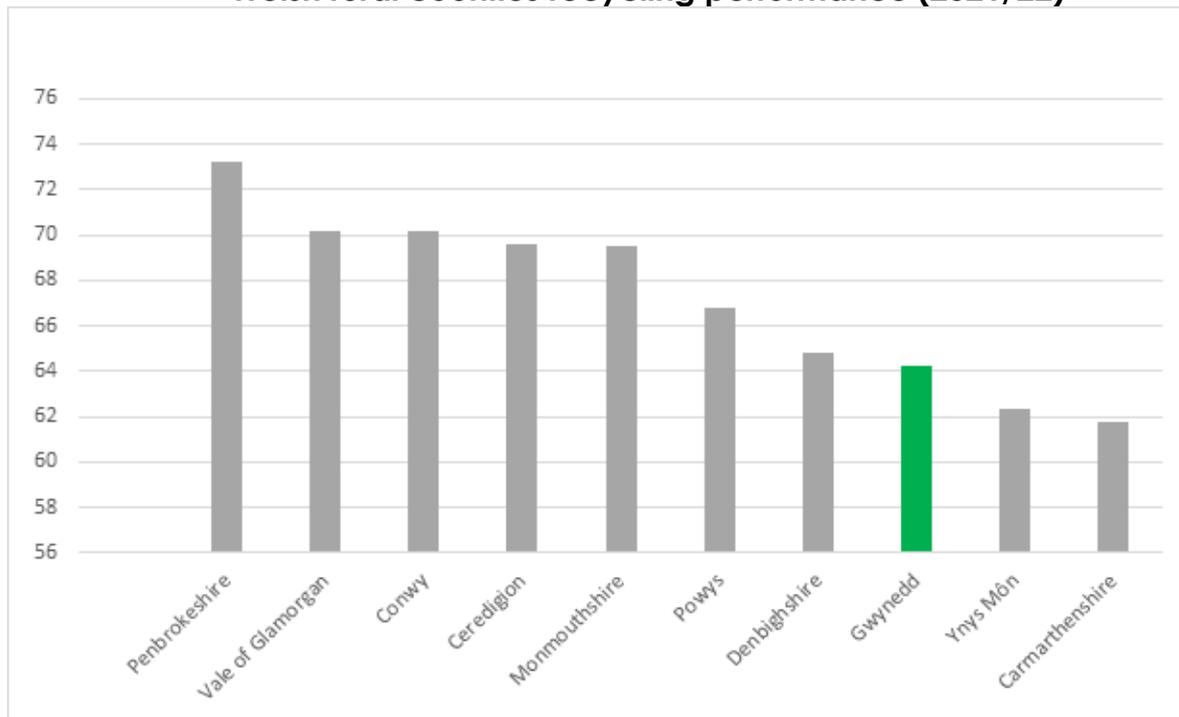
Table 1



- 2.8 It is important to recognise that the Highways and Municipal Department had already begun work to review arrangements with a Ffordd Gwynedd exercise. As we continue with these efforts, we are receiving support from waste and recycling experts, WRAP Cymru, and work to examine in detail aspects of the service is proceeding. We outline below the areas where we need to conduct more detailed review work, consider possible options and recommend a way forward.
- 2.9 It must be acknowledged that the field of waste and recycling has faced substantial cuts over the years, which has inevitably affected the services. Several matters are now the responsibility of a significantly lower number of managers than in the past, and work has started to secure additional capacity for managing the fields.
- 2.10 In accordance with the Welsh Government Strategy ['Beyond recycling'](#), all councils in Wales are facing an extremely challenging target of recycling 70% of waste by 2025, as well as a desire to see Wales being a zero-waste nation by 2050. The Government's strategy also sets the desire for councils to implement the principles of the circular economy. In order to achieve this, we must change our mentality regarding materials and reduce our dependency on 'single-use' materials, with emphasis on re-using to keep items out of the waste stream.
- 2.11 The latest figures (2021/22) show that Gwynedd recycles 64.2% of waste collected, compared with 65.5% the previous year. The performance of counties in Wales varies from 73.2% to 58.2%, with an average of 65.2%. Therefore at present, the performance in Gwynedd ranks at 16th amongst the 22 Welsh counties.
- 2.12 Compared with rural counties as interpreted by the Welsh Local Government Association (Table 2), the recycling performance in Gwynedd was 8th out of the 10 councils in 2021/22.

Table 2

Welsh rural counties recycling performance (2021/22)



2.13 It is therefore clear, based on the current situation, that it will be challenging to reach a recycling target of 70% of the county's waste by 2025. It is timely, with the responsibility for the field having recently transferred, to examine the current arrangements in detail and consider aspects where we need to revise and review in order to reach national recycling levels and ensure that the management of overspend continues.

3. Initial observations and further work

Working arrangements of waste and recycling collectors

- 3.1 Since 2019, collection arrangements were changed from 6-day, 12.33 hour shifts (one week on, one week off), to 5 days 37 hours – this was without any “task and finish” arrangements. The changes were introduced gradually across the county, in Dwyfor in April 2019, Arfon in October 2019 and then in Meirionnydd in April 2021 (having slipped from the original date of April 2020 because of the pandemic).
- 3.2 As part of savings schemes following the 'Gwynedd Challenge' exercise, a figure of £150,000 has been identified to be realised by changing waste collection working arrangements. There is a very significant risk that it will not be possible to achieve this saving.
- 3.3 There is no doubt that collection work is very physical work, but it is clear that sickness levels have increased in recent years. Since introducing the changes, there have been challenges in completing some routes, and additional resources have been used to complete collections. We saw an increase in staff overtime, and there appear to be high levels of sickness in the workforce.
- 3.4 Although the “task and finish” system ceased when new working arrangements were introduced, this approach was tolerated during Covid in order to avoid workforce crews gathering together. This arrangement has continued, and needs addressing so as to ensure that collection lorries are used to their full potential during the working day.
- 3.5 With the changes introduced in all three areas, we feel it is timely to review these arrangements as they have by now had a chance to embed. This will allow us to weigh-up the success of changing from 12.33 hour shifts to 7.5 hours and consider whether further changes are needed.

Addressing overspend

- 3.6 There have been clear budgetary challenges in the field of waste collection for some years, and you will be aware of the efforts by the Head of Highways and Municipal Department to manage this.
- 3.7 As already noted, we are receiving expert support from WRAP Cymru to identify options that will enable us to address the overspend in this field. This work is continuing, and will link in with the work programme that has been drawn up for the waste and recycling field.
- 3.8 In terms of the financial context, the 1st Quarter Financial Review this year for Waste Collection shows an overspend of £1,332,484 (from a budget of £4,978,660).
- 3.9 It appears that the overspend is linked mainly to high sickness levels amongst the workforce, and the overtime arrangements that are partly associated to ensure that collection routes are completed. The highest levels of sickness absences are in the areas of Arfon and Meirionnydd, but overtime payments are very high in all three areas.
- 3.10 There has been an obvious increase in recent years in sickness absences in the field of waste collection, which obviously affects expenditure.
- 3.11 The number of days lost to sickness have increased over the past few years. However, changes to the shifts system, and increased pay levels for posts means it is difficult to compare the actual situation. There is a clear correlation between sickness levels and higher expenditure, because 'cover' is required every time a work day is lost to sickness in order to ensure the continuation of the service.
- 3.12 Please note as well that the number of domestic properties served has increased – 1,820 additional properties in Gwynedd received a collection in April 2022 compared with the same situation in April 2016. It is fair to note that the service did not receive adequate extra funding to accompany this increase.
- 3.13 The Head of Environment Department is confident that the financial situation can be brought under control over time. We need investment in technology, and to consider the most cost-effective way of collecting waste, and find collection solutions to address this.

Arrangements for collection of recycling

- 3.14 At present, recyclable materials from the county's households are sorted by the residents, using the blue boxes or the 'cartgylchu' trolley. Engagement work carried out as part of the current Ffordd Gwynedd exercise note comments about the cartgylchu breaking, with papers and plastics littering the streets from the recycling boxes – especially in windy conditions. The workforce who were asked also reiterated that the carts can break as they are emptied.
- 3.15 There are financial implications to providing brand-new boxes, and it also affects residents' capability and desire to recycle.
- 3.16 Although the Welsh Government blueprint favours a separate collection procedure, recent work shows that the standard of the recyclables collected in Gwynedd is low and that there is a high level of contamination. There is potential for "cleaner" recyclables to generate more income.
- 3.17 An assessment of the current arrangements will be undertaken in order to consider whether this is the most effective way of collecting items, and whether alternative options could contribute to improving the service and ensuring higher levels of recycling amongst Gwynedd residents.

Dealing with complaints

- 3.18 The current procedure of dealing with enquiries or service requests by the public regarding collections appears to be over-complicated. There is an opportunity to improve the efficiency of this procedure in order to offer a better service to residents.

- 3.19 There has been a tendency for the recycling team to seek information from waste collection team leaders, and then respond to the public, but in reality, their main responsibility is to change residents' behaviours by helping to raise awareness of the importance of recycling. The fact that they are dealing with a number of enquiries about collections means that they cannot prioritise their primary responsibility of promoting services so as to encourage the residents of Gwynedd to take full advantage of the services available.
- 3.20 It appears that there are some unnecessary steps in the current arrangements, and consideration should be given to whether more efficient arrangements could be introduced for dealing with complaints to address the needs of the people of Gwynedd.
- 3.21 The service should consider whether there is room to develop the efforts of highlighting more effectively what the public can do themselves/find out themselves on the corporate website, ApGwynedd app etc.

Timely data

- 3.22 The current procedure of gathering and processing data about recycling/waste levels is fragmented and consideration should be given to updating it. Data about recycling percentages is reported to the Welsh Government on a quarterly basis as part of statutory arrangements for monitoring levels across Wales.
- 3.23 But, capturing more live data would enable the service to operate in a more timely manner. The Council does face the risk of a financial penalty if we as a county fail to reach the Government's statutory targets.
- 3.24 Obtaining data that is useful to us, and that is available more regularly than the current quarterly system would enable us to prioritise efforts to change behaviour in fields/areas requiring improvement. The ability to compare data following an intervention would subsequently assist us to measure success.
- 3.25 We are therefore keen to introduce arrangements that will enable the services to monitor the waste/recycling situation regularly so that we can monitor success in various aspects, and respond or change direction as required.
- 3.26 Attached to this, there is room to improve the use of smart technology to monitor the efficiency of routes and to try to ensure that any collection problems are resolved as promptly as possible.

Changing behaviour

- 3.27 As noted in 3.19, much of the recycling officers' time is spent on dealing with enquiries from the public. But, if we wish to encourage more households in Gwynedd to recycle, we must prioritise the key work of changing behaviours in order to encourage residents to take full advantage of the services that are available.
- 3.28 In the past, more of the recycling officers' time was devoted to planning and undertaking proactive campaigns, and they would engage and communicate with school children, organisations and local groups in Gwynedd.
- 3.29 It seems there is room for improvement in terms of ensuring that households make better use of the food waste collection service. Releasing the recycling team's time will enable them to drive a county-wide campaign to promote the benefits of the weekly food collection system.
- 3.30 This means that officers will be able to engage with households and target specific areas where there is evidence of need. This also highlights the need for a more live data system (see 3.23) which will enable the targeting of specific areas.

Communication

- 3.31 Although there are efforts to participate in national campaigns to encourage recycling, a comprehensive communication plan should be developed to encourage the public to make the most of the Council's recycling services. Again, this is linked to the fact that the team of recycling officers spend much of their time investigating and dealing with enquiries from the public.

- 3.32 A clear communication plan will enable us to update and share information with residents and services – whether that is through promoting the services that are available, or more proactively updating the public about any delays with routes etc.
- 3.33 The current Ffordd Gwynedd exercise has also highlighted that the workforce feels that internal communication could be improved. Strengthening the arrangements for communicating and engaging with the workforce will be a means of ensuring that they feel part of the Council and part of an important team within the Department.

Waste assets

- 3.34 Much of the machinery on waste treatment sites is reaching a time where it requires replacing. Since many of these machines have seen better days, there are repercussions for the work carried out on the sites when they require maintenance or repairing.
- 3.35 The main waste processing site, Caeryglchu, has been in use for 15 years and more, and we need to consider its suitability for the future.
- 3.36 We must discuss possible options in order to ensure a waste treatment service that will address the future needs of Gwynedd. We should consider what plant is needed, the suitability of current treatment sites, and what would be the level of required investment to ensure that our waste treatment arrangements are fit for the years to come.
- 3.37 As part of the Welsh Government's 'Beyond recycling' strategy (2021), there is a clear directive to introduce waste collection and recycling vehicles that have very low emissions and to invest in the infrastructure to power these with renewable energy. There have been commendable efforts initially to introduce such vehicles, but further work is needed to secure the appropriate charging provision.

Contracts

- 3.38 The nature of the service means that there are several contracts with external providers in terms of the material being purchased for waste collection, along with arrangements with companies that accept the waste material we collect. Some of these are regional arrangements where the Council is working with other councils from north Wales on joint contracts.
- 3.39 The nature of the market means that prices can vary in terms of the income received for materials that are collected by the Council. Further work needs to be undertaken to ensure there is firm control of contracts with other parties that take our waste and the income received for it.
- 3.40 We will also be reviewing to ensure that all the materials we purchase (for collections and treatment) are fit for purpose and offer value for money.
- 3.41 Scrutinising the arrangements will allow the Department to consider whether there are opportunities to formalise arrangements in order to ensure value for money.

Health and Safety arrangements

- 3.42 Ensuring that relevant health and safety processes and arrangements are implemented is of key importance in this field. There is room to reinforce training arrangements and ensure that guidelines are easily available and provided regularly to staff.
- 3.43 As already noted, sickness levels are high amongst the collection crews. From all the sickness reports, 54% note that the reasons relate to musculoskeletal problems. It is quite possible that improving training and raising awareness of health and safety issues, as well as improving working arrangements would reduce sickness levels in future.
- 3.44 There appear to be more injuries and sickness amongst the crews that collect recyclables, and a rota system could help to vary the work.

Waste and Recycling Strategy

- 3.45 With a recycling target of 70% in 2025, we need a robust strategy to get to grips and address this, with scope as well to extend the percentage to the future, including maximising efforts with regard to the circular economy. The Council's previous Waste Strategy was developed back in 2010, which set the path to reach the national target of 64% of the county's waste being recycled by March 2020.
- 3.46 It is timely, therefore, that we review these matters in order to set a clear direction following consideration of the relevant challenges through a holistic approach. This will secure a plan and timetable to drive the task of increasing the county's recycling percentage and reduce the risk of a financial penalty should we fail to reach the government's targets.
- 3.47 As part of the planning for the future, we will need to address the Welsh Government's expectations that any commercial recycling and residual waste is collected separately from October 2023. This necessitates a change to the current procedure and we will need to consider how to address this substantial change in practice, and the fact that there is no certainty of additional funding being available from the Welsh Government to realise the change.

Arrangements for distributing receptacles

- 3.48 It appears that we need to formalise the way requests for bins and waste and recycling receptacles are managed.
- 3.49 In some circumstances, there appears to be extra wheelie bins being put out for emptying on the routes, with recyclable materials in them. This undermines the recycling and waste collection efforts, and also means additional expenditure on wheelie bins.
- 3.50 We are therefore keen to start creating an inventory of the receptacles that are on our streets, and establish a way of ensuring control of the distribution of the cartgylchu and new wheelie bins to residents.

4. Main findings and proposed work programme

- 4.1 Taking the above matters into account, the Department has drawn up a work programme to enable us to review some fields further and propose solutions to ensure that the Waste and Recycling field offers efficient, high-quality and safe services, and that we continue to address the Welsh Government's ambitious recycling targets over the coming years.

Waste services work programme

- 4.2 Please see attached (Appendix 1) the timetable for the work streams together with details for each individual work stream below.

Reference	Activity	Description	Estimated Date/Timescale
G1	Review working arrangements of waste/recycling collectors	Consider the success of changing from the 12.33 hour shift system to 7.5 hours. Consider whether further changes are needed. Assessment of possible options and way forward.	To be completed by December 2023.
G2	Review arrangements for collecting recycling, including expected increase in recycling levels in future	At present, recyclables are sorted by residents using blue boxes or the 'cartgylchu'. Is this the most effective/successful way of collecting? Assessment of possible options and way forward.	To be completed by December 2023.
G3	Review the complaints procedure	Need to consider whether the current arrangements are effective and address Gwynedd residents' needs. Assessment of possible options and way forward.	To be completed by June 2023.

G4	Data that is useful and regularly available	Measuring the recycling percentage is produced once every quarter. This is not enough to monitor success in different aspects and respond to a change in trend swiftly enough. We need to establish modern arrangements that will enable the services to monitor the waste/recycling situation regularly.	To be completed by June 2023.
G5	Change behaviours to reduce the level of residual waste and maximise recycling	Work carried out to change behaviours through education, campaigns and advertising has reduced. If we are to change behaviours we must ensure that we capitalise on every opportunity to ensure the goal of reducing residual waste levels and increasing the recycling percentage. This should be done by using high standard data and evidence.	We need timely data to prioritise campaigns - we intend to resume the practice of engaging with Schools and Groups soon, and for this to be fully operational by January 2024.
G6	Waste assets plan	With the machinery in Caeryglchu having long passed their 'sell by date', we need to consider what type of equipment we should invest in towards the future to ensure quality and efficiency. This is in addition to assessing the future suitability of the Caeryglchu site. Assessment of possible options and way forward.	To be completed by January 2024.
G7	Manage overspend [stemming mainly from workforce sickness and overtime]	Consideration to be given to the substantial annual overspend, and analyse what percentage of this cannot be cut, and what requires better management. Assessment of possible options and way forward.	We hope to see an annual reduction in the overspend levels in the period up to March 2025.
G8	Ensure there is firm control of contracts with other parties that receive our waste	We need to be completely clear that the materials we purchase are fit for purpose and offer value for money. There are also contracts with firms that receive our waste where we receive income. Need to ensure effective and robust arrangements.	Work to commence January 2023 and continue until January 2025.
G9	Communication Plan	Ensure that the services have a clear communication plan for providing updates and sharing information with residents. We also need stronger arrangements for communicating with the workforce to ensure that they feel part of the Council.	To be completed by October 2023.
G10	Health and Safety arrangements	Ensure there are strong and robust arrangements in place to protect the workforce and the public with regard to the collection and treatment of waste, that expectations are completely clear, and that there are regular reminders and reviews to strengthen our care.	To be commenced immediately in terms of changing behaviours, but robust arrangements to certainly be embedded by October 2024.
G11	Establish a firm strategy for Waste and Recycling	With a recycling target of 70% in 2025, we need a firm strategy to get to grips and address this, with scope to also extend the percentage in future.	Work to commence from January 2023, and the strategy to be in place by March 2025.
G12	Review the service's existing arrangements for distributing bins, boxes and bags to residents.	Review the current arrangements and consider ways of managing the demands on the service in order to improve budgetary control.	To be completed by March 2024.

G13	Establish a work programme for replacing vehicles for low-carbon vehicles	Consider options for the future in terms of the use of low-carbon vehicles for collecting waste in future, and create a strategy / work programme.	The type and numbers of vehicles in future will depend on G1 and G2.
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