

Going to Plan?

The London Assembly Transport Committee's review of School Travel Plans
in London
April 2007

The Transport Committee

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The Transport Committee's general terms of reference are to examine and report on transport matters of importance to Greater London and the transport strategies, policies and actions of the Mayor, Transport for London, and the other Functional Bodies where appropriate. In particular, the Transport Committee is also required to examine and report to the Assembly from time to time on the Mayor's Transport Strategy, in particular its implementation and revision.

The Transport Committee agreed the following terms of reference for this review on 8 June 2006.

- Examine the proposals around school travel in the Education and Inspections Bill and the potential impact that these will have on local authorities and schools devising travel plans for every school in London
- Examine case studies from TfL's 'Safer Routes to School' Scheme' and other school travel pilots across London to assess the impact that these have had on road safety, the take up of sustainable alternatives to car usage and other potential consequences
- Seek to establish a viable timetable by which every school in London could have in place a working school travel plan and make recommendations as to how this might be achieved

The Committee would welcome any feedback on this report. Please contact Tim Jarvis on 0207 983 4390 or via e-mail at tim.jarvis@london.gov.uk if you have any comments. For press queries, please contact Lisa Moore on 020 7983 4228 or via lisa.moore@london.gov.uk.

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Rapporteur's foreword



Anyone who regularly travels in London between 8.30 a.m. and 9.30 a.m. on a weekday cannot fail to notice the difference in their journeys during the school holidays. Roads are clearer and journey times drastically reduced. This is not surprising given that in term time one in five cars on the road at 8.50 a.m. is on the school run. Despite the fact we boast one of the most extensive public transport systems in the country, nearly one third of children in London travel to school by car, the same level as the rest of the country.

Clearly, more children being driven to school leads to more congestion and more pollution. Also, the fact that fewer children are walking or cycling to school has implications for children's health and childhood obesity rates. And reducing the effect of the school run is one of those 'little' steps in behaviour change that will cumulatively be part of our city's strategy to tackle global warming. We therefore decided to examine the effect of a key policy to reduce the number of children travelling to school by car in London.

A major part of the Government's 2003 Travelling to School Action Plan was the introduction of school travel plans: joint strategies designed to encourage and enable children to travel to school by means other than car. The Government's target was for every school in the country to have a school travel plan by the end of 2010. London was more ambitious. The Mayor announced that this target should be reached a year earlier in London.

In examining the introduction of school travel plans in London, we were keen to establish how well they were being implemented, whether London is on course to meet the 2009 target and what effect school travel plans were having on the number of children travelling to school by car in London.

We found that the data collected by Transport for London on school travel plans were not sufficiently comprehensive to give us a clear answer to these questions. The figures that were available suggested that far from being ahead of the rest of the country in terms of the proportion of school with approved plans, London was lagging slightly behind. Furthermore, there appears to be little detailed research to back up Transport for London's claims that school travel plans have led to a 5.5% reduction in single occupancy car trips.

Transport for London has allocated significant resources to implement school travel plans but has not supported this funding with sufficient monitoring of the effectiveness of the plans. When trying to encourage parents to find more sustainable ways than the car to get their children to school, it is not clear what works and why. This information is essential to demonstrate whether school travel plans are an efficient and cost-effective way of reducing the reliance on the school run in London. We have made a number of recommendations to Transport for London designed to ensure that in seeking to reach its challenging target of each school having a travel plan by the end of 2009, work is undertaken to ensure that they actually make a significant contribution to changing children's travel patterns. School travel plans must not be an end in themselves.

John Biggs AM
Transport Committee

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The proportion of children travelling to school by car has doubled over the last 20 years. It is now estimated that one in five cars on the road in urban areas at 8.50 am is on the school run.¹ This contributes to localised traffic congestion and increased pollution. It has also generated concern about children's loss of independent mobility and, particularly recently, the number of children taking regular exercise and the potential effect on rates of childhood obesity.
- 1.2 There are a number of reasons for the increase in the prevalence of the school run and individual behaviour is likely to be influenced by a complex combination of factors. The Government has pointed to parental concerns about the potential vulnerability of their children to attack by strangers. In doing so, it notes the relatively greater risks to children's safety associated with car travel.² Research commissioned by the Scottish Executive found other influences on the trend included increasing levels of car ownership; increasing distances to travel to school exacerbated by free parental choice of schools; and increasing numbers of single parent households and households where both parents work.³ The research also points to evidence of a vicious circle: increased traffic flows deter parents from allowing their children to walk or cycle to school.
- 1.3 In September 2003, the Department for Transport (DfT) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) launched a joint Travelling to School action plan. The plan was developed with the aim of bringing about "a step change in home to school travel patterns to cut congestion and pollution, but also to allow many more pupils to take regular exercise."⁴ Proposals included funding for school travel advisers to help put together school travel plans. These are strategies that are developed in partnership between local authorities and individual schools to encourage and enable children to travel to school by more sustainable means other than travelling in a private car.
- 1.4 Funding has been available since April 2004 from the DfT for school travel advisers and regional advisers based in local authorities. The DfES also provides capital grants to schools which have produced agreed travel plans. These fund initiatives such as engineering improvements around schools and additional services negotiated with commercial operators.
- 1.5 The school travel plan initiative is voluntary and depends on the co-operation of schools and the ability of school travel advisers to encourage schools to engage with the process. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 places a general duty on local authorities to promote the use of sustainable travel and, in particular, to develop a strategy on transport infrastructure to cater for the travel needs of children and young people. School travel plans are likely to form an important role in enabling local authorities to fulfil this duty.

¹ Department for Transport and Department for Education and Skills, *Travelling to School: an action plan*, September 2003, para. 2

² Ibid, para. 4

³ *Why do parents drive their children to school*, Granville et al, Scottish Executive Central Research Unit 2002 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/cru/kd01/blue/pdcs-00.asp>

⁴ DfT and DfES, September 2003, p 1

- 1.6 The picture in London is complex.⁵ Although levels of car ownership in London are lower than the rest of the country, the proportion of children travelling to school by car, at 32%, is the same as the national average. Fewer children in London walk to school compared with the average for the rest of the country but more travel to school by bus. The average journey length for primary children in London is 1.6 miles.
- 1.7 The Government's target is that all schools, including independent schools, should have a school travel plan by the end of 2010. The Mayor has made a commitment that this target should be met in London by 2009.
- 1.8 This target is challenging. Transport for London (TfL) has allocated significant resources to the initiative. It has also highlighted the role of school travel plans in its broader strategy to change transport behaviour and encourage what is known as modal shift; that is, the change in people's use of one form of transport to another, usually from cars to more sustainable transport options.⁶ The Committee therefore decided to examine travel plans in London primary schools as part of its wider interest in the general issue of school travel. John Biggs AM was appointed Committee rapporteur for this inquiry.
- 1.9 In this Report we seek to assess progress towards the 2009 target, consider whether the emphasis on school travel plans is appropriate, and analyse the available evidence to attempt to answer what we believe to be the key question: do school travel plans make a significant contribution to changing patterns of travel behaviour?

2. Implementation of School Travel Plans in London

- 2.1 TfL employs a School Travel Programme Manager who manages the TfL school travel budget, allocates funds and supports borough school travel advisers. The funding supplements central government funding for school travel advisers to cover the additional costs associated with London weighting and enables the implementation of a wide range of measures, such as highway engineering and supply cover for teachers working on implementation of the plan. TfL increased its annual funding for school travel plans from £8.4 million in 2005-06 to £13.2 million in 2006-07 and 2007-08. Total TfL funding allocated to school travel plans to 2007-08, including that previously provided through the Safer Routes to School initiative, is £34.4 million. No funding for school travel plans beyond 2008 has been committed to date.
- 2.2 TfL collects data on the implementation of school travel plans from borough school travel advisers. However, a number of boroughs are in dispute with TfL about the actual number of approved plans. Schools reported problems with the iTrace database system set up to collect information from schools on travel plans and this is likely to have been a contributory factor to the disputes over the data. The figures should therefore be treated with a degree of caution. It was a matter of regret that definitive and up-to-date figures were not available

⁵ see, Regional Transport Statistics: 2006 edition, available from: <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/regionaldata/rts/2006aa/regionaltransportstatistics21833>

⁶ *Transport 2025: transport vision for a growing world city*, Transport for London, November 2006, p 13

to the Committee and this raises questions about the extent to which the systems are in place to enable TfL to monitor progress towards its 2009 target.

- 2.3 TfL told the Committee that 1,034 of the 3,052 primary schools in London had an approved travel plan by May 2006. At 33.9% this compares with 40% of schools in England with approved plans by the end of March 2006.⁷ This suggests that significant progress would need to be made if London were to reach the target of each school having an approved plan one year earlier than the rest of the country.
- 2.4 Progress since May 2006 seems to have been disappointingly slow. By February 2007 a further 50 schools had had travel plans approved giving a total of 1,084 schools, 35.5% of the total. TfL told us that it expected significant increases in the number of approved plans between February and May 2007: a further 545 plans were expected to be approved in this period leading to 53.4% of schools with approved plans by the end of May.
- 2.5 It was impossible for the Committee to make an accurate assessment of the likelihood of TfL's projections being met given the timeliness and quality of the information available. It is possible that a number of plans have been implemented but are awaiting approval against the national standard. Nevertheless, TfL appears to be relying on a very large increase in the number of approved travel plans over the next few months to demonstrate progress towards its challenging target. We await the publication of up-to-date figures at the end of May with interest.

Recommendations:

(i): Transport for London should publish milestones towards the target that each school in London should have an approved school travel plan by the end of 2009. This will enable progress towards the target to be monitored.

(ii): TfL should take demonstrable steps to improve the timeliness and quality of its data collection. It should publish six-monthly figures on the number of schools which have implemented school travel plans to enable effective monitoring of progress towards the 2009 target.

- 2.6 It is clear that TfL is working hard to increase the number of school travel plans in London. It has substantially increased the resources available to this end and officials have been active in organising conferences and engaging borough school travel advisers. It should also be noted that TfL is one step removed from the schools and heavily relies on borough school travel advisers to encourage implementation on the ground. They in turn rely on the good will of schools; there is no obligation on schools to develop and implement a school travel plan.
- 2.7 The Committee surveyed all the borough school travel advisers and received evidence from a sample selection of primary schools. The information received suggests a range of reasons why some schools have made little progress in developing a travel plan. Some cited "initiative overload": the situation where schools receive information on a plethora of proposals from central government

⁷ HC Deb 31 January 2007 c 328W

which require staff time and resources. Such criticisms have been well documented at a national level.⁸ Others referred to the level of bureaucracy involved in developing plans. Responses from the boroughs suggest that many of the schools which have not yet engaged in the process of developing a travel plan are likely to be particularly resistant to the idea and may be unwilling to divert resources to the initiative.

- 2.8 There is a particular issue relating to independent schools. Independent schools are entitled to the same support from TfL but not to the capital grants from the DfES. We were told that many boroughs are unlikely to have the established links with independent schools on which to build when trying to encourage such schools to develop plans. TfL considers independent schools a 'hard to reach' group and has taken steps to target them through conferences. They are likely to remain difficult to engage.

Recommendations:

(i) Transport for London should build on its work with independent schools by seeking to engage them through representative bodies such as the London and South East regional section of the Independent Schools Council.

(ii) Most of the schools which are supportive of the concept of school travel plans are likely to have at least started the work required to develop an approved plan and drawn on the support available. In order to meet the target of all schools having an approved plan by the end of 2009, TfL and the boroughs will need to engage 'hard to reach' schools and this will require a different approach. In its response to this report, TfL should set out its strategy to the end of 2009 to engage schools which have so far resisted encouragement to develop travel plans.

3. The Effectiveness of School Travel Plans

- 3.1 It is clear that reaching the target of 100 per cent of London schools with approved travel plans by 2009 will be challenging and will require an imaginative use of resources. Nevertheless, in the drive to meet this target there is a risk that a more fundamental issue is ignored: do school travel plans have a significant effect on individuals' transport choices?
- 3.2 Although school travel plans can include engineering solutions to traffic congestion around schools, TfL emphasises the importance of "soft" measures. Examples of such measures in school travel plans examined by the Committee included escorted cycling schemes; new bicycle storage facilities; walking buses; and incentive schemes to encourage parents to walk to school with their children. Walking buses were a particularly common feature of school travel plans. A walking bus is a group of children who walk to school along a set route, escorted by several adults, collecting other children along the way at 'stops'.
- 3.3 We were told that when walking buses are organised by schools they can be expensive because employed escorts need to be checked by the Criminal Records Bureau. This introduces costs and delays. Those organised by parent volunteers are easier to establish but may be more at risk of collapse due to a

⁸ see, for example, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/677212.stm>

lack of volunteers. There is also evidence that such schemes might be better targeted at the 6-7 years age range and, as such, should not be seen as a 'cure-all'.⁹ Research on the effectiveness of walking buses in Hertfordshire suggests they can, when properly targeted, have an effect on car use.¹⁰ This research found that about half the trips on walking buses were previously made by car.

- 3.4 There appears to be no available published research on the effect of school travel plans on travel patterns in London. TfL told us that London Buses organised research into the relative benefits and costs of different measures to reduce car use in 2004 and this looked at school-related travel for three areas of London. The detailed results of this research have not yet been published but TfL have said that measures to encourage walking performed much better than dedicated bus schemes.¹¹
- 3.5 There was some evidence that sources of data held by different sections within TfL, which could contribute to an assessment of the effectiveness of school travel plans, were not being used. For example, while school travel plans are not primarily accident reduction measures, accident statistics would contribute to an assessment of the extent to which engineering measures in particular have been successful. However, we received little evidence that such information was routinely shared with staff working on school travel plans or that the school travel plan initiative had a high profile across TfL.
- 3.6 For its public statements on the impact of school travel plans, TfL relies on the results of schools' "hands-up" surveys. These surveys are a requirement of the national framework and involve periodically asking children how they travelled to school on a particular day. The results of these surveys in London boroughs have led TfL to claim that school travel plans have resulted in an average reduction of 5.5 per cent in single occupancy car trips.¹²
- 3.7 The data which underlies this figure are not sufficiently comprehensive to support TfL's claim. Figures were unavailable from 12 of the 33 boroughs. Some of the boroughs which did supply figures reported relatively large percentage reductions based on data from only 1 or 2 schools. Furthermore, the 5.5% figure is an average of the percentages supplied by each borough which means that large percentage increases in small numbers of schools skew the final figure. Finally, in order to establish a direct causal link between school travel plans and car use, account needs to be taken of other factors which may have reduced car use. For example, the introduction of free travel on buses and trams for under-16s in September 2005 is likely to have had an impact on the number of pupils using public transport to go to school. A similar survey exercise in schools without a school travel plan would go some way to informing the significance of such factors.
- 3.8 TfL was only able to provide detailed data from the borough of Bromley. This showed nearly 60% of primary schools in Bromley have an approved school travel plan. Results from hands-up surveys in 65 of Bromley's schools

⁹ *Walking buses in Hertfordshire: impacts and lessons*, Mackett et al., Centre for Transport Studies, University College London, November 2005

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Information provided by TfL at UK Transport Practitioners Meeting, July 2005

¹² see, for example, TfL press notice (PN-030) 16 February 2007

suggested a 14% reduction in the number of car journeys. It is unlikely that such a reduction can be explained away by other factors. Nevertheless, given the level of resources and priority attached to the introduction of school travel plans across London, there is a clear need for some robust research into their effectiveness and, in particular, which elements of the plans are most effective at encouraging modal shift and which are not.

- 3.9 The problems of data collection and the paucity of evidence available to assess the effectiveness of school travel plans are not confined to London. Researchers commissioned by the Department for Transport found that the data that were available for the work were “generally of poor quality and coverage”.¹³ They therefore concluded that:

“the analysis comparing modal split before and after implementation of a school travel plan, and the comparison of modal shift in schools with and schools without school travel plans, is only valid for the pupils and schools for whom suitable data were available. It is not possible to extrapolate conclusions to all pupils or schools in the local authority or region, or to draw conclusions from this analysis about the impact of the Travelling to School initiative nationally.”

- 3.10 We believe that TfL should exercise similar caution when extrapolating conclusions for the whole of London from the data currently available from the boroughs on modal shift.
- 3.11 The Committee received largely positive feedback about the interventions and schemes supported by boroughs and TfL through school travel plans. Our concern is not that the national policy to introduce school travel plans has not been pursued in London nor that none of the initiatives introduced under the plans has influenced modal shift. Rather we have concerns that there is a lack of comprehensive evidence to support the claims about the effect of school travel plans. Also, there is a need for analysis of why one school or borough is achieving significant modal shift whilst others are achieving less success.

Recommendations:

(i): TfL’s claims about the effects of school travel plans have been overstated and potentially misleading and need to be backed up by further research. It should direct its resources towards taking the lead nationally in monitoring their effectiveness by increasing the coverage and improving the quality of data collected; undertaking a robust assessment of the value for money of expenditure by commissioning detailed research on modal shift which takes into account other factors; and using results of the research to highlight examples of good practice and measures which have resulted in significant modal shift. This work should identify “what works” and thus inform future policy.

(ii) TfL should publish research it has undertaken to date on school travel patterns by June 2007.

¹³ *Travelling to school initiative report on the findings of the initial evaluation*, Department for Transport, November 2005 <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/sustainable/schooltravel/research/tsi/?version=1>

(iii) The case for continued funding of School Travel Plan advisers and travel plan initiatives beyond 2009 needs to be made. TfL therefore needs to produce a comprehensive, London wide assessment of their effectiveness.

4. Other Lessons Learned

Case study: Mayflower Primary School, Tower Hamlets

Mayflower Primary School in Tower Hamlets is a non-selective state community school for girls and boys aged from 3 to 11. It is located off the A13 along a narrow, largely residential street on a corner. Parking is restricted in the immediate vicinity. The school has a single gate exit with a rail and 'no parking' zig-zag lines immediately outside.

Five years ago a pupil was knocked down on the A13. This prompted the school to review their safety procedures for pupils leaving the school. The school's office manager leads on road safety and the school travel plan and she is supported by the borough's school travel plan co-ordinator.

Problems:

The zig zag lines outside schools were frequently ignored by parents picking their children up. There are two dedicated school parking wardens for the borough and resources were spread too thinly to enforce traffic rules outside schools on a regular basis.

Parents were reluctant to let their children cycle to school because of the erratic driving in the immediate area. Staff shared these concerns.

It has proved difficult to recruit and retain lollipop wardens.

Borough and school initiatives:

A mother and son volunteer team aid crossing along the A13 at school opening and closing time.

Tower Hamlets has sought to engage children and parents in the issues by, for example, electing two junior traffic wardens. The children hold the post for two years and there is a ceremony to commend their work.

The school travel lead has placed maps around the school outlining safe routes to school. The maps have also been placed in areas used by parents.

Fluorescent clothing strips and pedometers have been provided by the schools to encourage walking.

Neighbouring schools are working together on a co-ordinated approach to school travel, for example, by staggering their opening and closing times. The implementation of breakfast clubs has also had an unintended benefit of staggering arrival times and reducing congestion.

- 4.1 As part of the scrutiny inquiry, the Committee rapporteur visited Mayflower primary school in Tower Hamlets to talk to staff and pupils about the issues surrounding the 'school run' (see case study). We also surveyed a selection of primary schools across London about school travel plans and 183 responded. The Committee received evidence from parents about the problems they faced in getting their children to and from school. The site visits and evidence from schools and parents identified a number of areas where we believe TfL and the boroughs could implement relatively low-cost measures which would support its strategy to discourage single occupancy car journeys to and from schools.
- 4.2 The Committee received some evidence which suggested a lack of effective co-ordination between education and transport areas within boroughs. For example, schools reported seeking engineering solutions to traffic problems outside schools but not being referred to the borough school travel plan adviser. This would have enabled schools to incorporate engineering solutions in a school travel plan thus making the school eligible to apply for funding for the solution from the DfES or TfL.
- 4.3 The benefits of free bus and tram travel for under-16s were widely acknowledged. However, a number of school travel advisers and schools reported that the need for young people to get a form from the post office to obtain an Oyster card, the occasional lack of availability of these forms, and the non-refundable deposit were potential barriers to take-up. We believe there is scope for innovative initiatives to encourage take-up of Oyster cards for under-16s.
- 4.4 Some parents reported that they felt victimised for driving their children to schools when they often had no easy alternative. For example, one mother wrote to the Rapporteur to say that both her children went to schools over five miles from home, cycling would involve travelling on a major A road and public transport would involve 3 changes of buses. It should be acknowledged that the fact that children often no longer attend their nearest school and, indeed, may be educated outside the borough, means that the car remains the most convenient option for some parents.
- 4.5 Feedback from parents suggested that the yellow bus concept was a popular one. However, research by TfL suggests that such support might not be maintained if parents were asked to contribute to the cost.¹⁴ TfL also believes that specific bus routes for schools are not cost effective and may not be practical in densely populated areas like London where parental choice of schools can result in long journeys. The Mayor and TfL have therefore argued against the introduction of yellow bus schemes.¹⁵ In February the Assembly passed a motion calling on the Mayor to conduct a study into the feasibility of a dedicated free school bus service.¹⁶
- 4.6 There is evidence of innovative practice outside London and TfL should, where appropriate, disseminate this to the boroughs. For example, some schools have

¹⁴ Information provided by TfL at UK Transport Practitioners Meeting, July 2005

¹⁵ see, for example, MQT 18 December 2002, question 1052/2002

¹⁶ London Assembly press release 093, 14 February 2007

started to include travel in home-school agreements. These are drawn up by the school governing body and include a list of commitments from the school and parents. One school in Buckinghamshire has a clause in the agreement asking parents to sign up to a driving code of practice.¹⁷ This asks them to remember not to stop on zig zag lines, park within 15 metres of a junction and not to obscure the view of the school crossing patrol.

Recommendations:

(i) Boroughs should ensure co-ordination of work between transport and education departments by, for example, prioritising parking enforcement activity outside schools with implemented school travel plans.

(ii) Transport for London should introduce pilot schemes to encourage take-up of Oyster cards for under-16s in areas of low take-up. Options to be piloted should include making Oyster cards available during school events and examining the effect on take-up of providing free cards.

(iii) As part of its feasibility study on a dedicated free school bus service, Transport for London should examine the reasons for the popularity of the yellow bus concept and consider how the elements of such a scheme could be replicated on the existing network, for example, supervised travel on school routes.

(iv) TfL should use the i-Trace system to submit an annual assessment of whether the parental/school requests for action made through the travel plan system are being progressed and real changes made.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 We undertook this investigation because of the increasing concerns about the effect of the school run on traffic congestion and children's health and development. School travel plans are a key part of the central government response to these concerns. The concept has been championed in London through the provision of TfL resources and the Mayor has set a target that each school should have an approved plan by the end of 2009, a year ahead of the national target.
- 5.2 We found that TfL had been active in promoting travel plans and had been working with borough school travel advisers to encourage schools to implement plans. TfL and the boroughs rely on the good will and engagement of individual schools to meet the target. New strategies will be needed to engage those schools which have to date shown little support for the initiative.
- 5.3 We were disappointed with the quality of the data collected by TfL and provided to the Committee on the number of schools with approved travel plans. We found little evidence to suggest that London was ahead of the rest of the country in implementing school travel plans.

¹⁷ *Achieving safer school travel in the UK*, Sally Cairns, Centre for Transport Studies, University College London, 2005, p 11

- 5.4 There should be more emphasis on monitoring the effectiveness of the individual elements within school travel plans. The aim is that they should contribute to increased modal shift away from car use by those taking children to and from school. However, we were disappointed by the lack of available evidence to support the assumption that travel plans could make a significant contribution towards meeting this aim.
- 5.5 We have suggested a number of approaches to deal with the issues highlighted by our investigations and in doing so we have drawn on the available national research on what works. We believe London should be at the forefront of the work to identify which initiatives encourage modal shift and that the conclusions on this work should inform future policy and allocation of resources.
- 5.6 Parents who currently drive their children to and from school need to be convinced that the alternatives are practical and safe. For some the practical barriers will seem too great; for many others there is the potential for their concerns to be allayed by practical schemes developed in partnership between schools, boroughs and TfL. School travel plans have the potential to provide a structure for this to happen but their implementation should not be an end in itself. Unless policy is informed by robust research on the extent to which the schemes within them are effective, there is a risk that school travel plans will not have the impact on the school run that is expected of them.

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