

East Cambridgeshire District Council Interim Value for Money Report

Year ended 31 March 2023

8 April 2024

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Audit Committee
East Cambridgeshire District Council
The Grange
Nutholt Lane
Ely
CB7 4EE

Dear Audit Committee Members

2022/23 Interim Value for Money Report

We are pleased to attach our Interim Value for Money (VFM) arrangements commentary report, for East Cambridgeshire District Council. This commentary explains the work we have undertaken during the year and highlights any significant weaknesses identified along with recommendations for improvement. The commentary covers our interim findings for audit year 2022/23.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has worked collaboratively with the FRC, as incoming shadow system leader, and other system partners, to develop measures to address the delay in local audit. The National Audit Office (NAO) issued a consultation on 8 February 2024 seeking views on changes to the Code of Audit Practice (the Code) to support auditors to meet backstop dates and promote more timely reporting of their work on value for money arrangements. The consultation proposes to reduce the scope of the VFM reporting up to and including the 2022/23 financial year. At this stage, we are continuing to report VFM in line with our existing responsibilities as set out in the 2020 Code.

This report is intended solely for the information and use of the Audit Committee and Management. It is not intended to be and should not be used by anyone other than these specified parties.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss the contents of this report with you at the Audit Committee meeting on 16 July 2024.

Yours faithfully

Mark Hodgson

Mark Hodgson

Partner

For and on behalf of Ernst & Young LLP

Encl

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Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA) issued the “Statement of responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies”. It is available from the PSAA website (<https://www.psa.co.uk/auditquality/statement-of-responsibilities/>). The Statement of responsibilities serves as the formal terms of engagement between appointed auditors and audited bodies. It summarises where the different responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies begin and end, and what is to be expected of the audited body in certain areas. The “Terms of Appointment and further guidance (updated July 2021)” issued by the PSAA sets out additional requirements that auditors must comply with, over and above those set out in the National Audit Office Code of Audit Practice (the Code) and in legislation, and covers matters of practice and procedure which are of a recurring nature. This report is made solely to Audit Committee and management of East Cambridgeshire District Council (the Council) in accordance with the statement of responsibilities. Our work has been undertaken so that we might state to the Audit Committee and management of the Council those matters we are required to state to them in this report and for no other purpose. To the fullest extent permitted by law we do not accept or assume responsibility to anyone other than the Audit Committee and management of the Council for this report or for the opinions we have formed. It should not be provided to any third-party without our prior written consent.



01 Executive Summary

Executive Summary

Purpose

Auditors are required to be satisfied that the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. We do not issue a 'conclusion' or 'opinion', but where significant weaknesses are identified we will report by exception in the auditor's opinion on the financial statements. In addition, auditor's provide an annual commentary on arrangements published as part of the Auditor's Annual Report. In doing so, we comply with the requirements of the 2020 Code of Audit Practice (the Code) and Auditor Guidance Note 3 (AGN 03).

The purpose of this interim commentary is to explain the work we have undertaken during the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 and highlight any significant weaknesses identified along with recommendations for improvement. The commentary covers our interim findings for audit year 2022/23.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has worked collaboratively with the Financial Reporting Council (FRC), as incoming shadow system leader, and other system partners, to develop measures to address the delay in local audit. As part of the NAO consultation issued on 8 February 2024, there is a proposal to reduce the scope of the VFM reporting up to and including the 2022/23 financial year. However, the consultation states that where auditors have begun or already undertaken work that no longer falls under the reduced scope (if agreed once the consultation closes), they may still report on it in accordance with Schedule 4. We are continuing to report VFM in line with our existing responsibilities as set out in the 2020 Code to ensure a smooth transition to the 2023/24 audit year when auditors are required to meet the full Code reporting responsibilities.

The report sets out the following areas which have been assessed up to the point of issuing this interim report:

- Any identified risks of significant weakness, having regard to the three specified reporting criteria;
- An explanation of the planned responsive audit procedures to the significant risks identified;
- Findings to date from our planned procedures; and
- Summary of arrangements over the period covered by this report (Appendix A).

We will summarise our final view of the value for money arrangements as part of the Auditor's Annual Report once the audit report has been issued for 2022/23.

Executive Summary (continued)

Risks of Significant Weakness

In undertaking our procedures to understand the body's arrangements against the specified reporting criteria, we identify whether there are risks of significant weakness which require us to complete additional risk-based procedures. AGN 03 sets out considerations for auditors in completing and documenting their work and includes consideration of:

- our cumulative audit knowledge and experience as your auditor;
- reports from internal audit which may provide an indication of arrangements that are not operating effectively;
- our review of Council committee reports;
- meetings with management and key officers;
- information from external sources; and
- evaluation of associated documentation through our regular engagement with Council management and the finance team.

We completed our risk assessment procedures and did not identify any significant weaknesses in the Council's VFM arrangements.

We identified a significant risk related to 'Governance - How the Council ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks' as part of our risk assessment procedures. We set out our planned response to address this risk in the table below.

Description of risk identified

The Council did not publish its Draft Statement of Accounts by the target date outlined in the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 (31 May 2023). The unaudited statements were published 29 September 2023.

The issue above is evidence of a potential weaknesses in proper arrangements for supporting its statutory reporting requirements and effective processes and systems for accurate and timely management and financial information - Governance - How the Council ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks.

Work planned to address the risk of significant weakness

Reviewing the Council's Statement of Accounts publishing arrangements.

Executive Summary (continued)

Reporting

Our interim commentary for 2022/23 is set out over pages 10 to 13. The interim commentary on these pages summarises our understanding of the arrangements at the Council based on our evaluation of the evidence obtained in relation to the three reporting criteria (see table below) throughout 2022/23.

Appendix A includes the detailed arrangements and processes underpinning the reporting criteria. These were reported in our 2021/22 Auditor's Annual Report and have been updated in respect of 2022/23.

In accordance with the NAO's 2020 Code, we are required to report a commentary against the three specified reporting criteria. The table below sets out the three reporting criteria, whether we identified a risk of significant weakness as part of our planning procedures, and whether, at the time of this interim report, we have concluded that there is a significant weakness in the body's arrangements.

Reporting Criteria	Risks of significant weaknesses in arrangements identified?	Actual significant weaknesses in arrangements identified?
Financial sustainability: How the Council plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services	No significant risks identified	No significant weakness identified
Governance: How the Council ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks	Significant risk identified	No significant weakness identified
Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness: How the Council uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services	No significant risks identified	No significant weakness identified

Executive Summary (continued)

Independence

The FRC Ethical Standard requires that we provide details of all relationships between Ernst & Young (EY) and the Council, and its members and senior management and its affiliates, including all services provided by us and our network to the Council, its members and senior management and its affiliates, and other services provided to other known connected parties that we consider may reasonably be thought to bear on the our integrity or objectivity, including those that could compromise independence and the related safeguards that are in place and why they address the threats.

There are no relationships from 1 April 2022 to the date of this report, which we consider may reasonably be thought to bear on our independence and objectivity.

EY Transparency Report 2023

Ernst & Young (EY) has policies and procedures that instil professional values as part of firm culture and ensure that the highest standards of objectivity, independence and integrity are maintained.

Details of the key policies and processes in place within EY for maintaining objectivity and independence can be found in our annual Transparency Report which the firm is required to publish by law. The most recent version of this Report is for the year end 30 June 2023:

[EY UK 2023 Transparency Report | EY UK](#)



02

Value for Money Commentary

Value for Money Commentary

Financial Sustainability: How the Council plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services

No significant weakness identified

The Council is required to have arrangements in place to ensure proper resource management and the primary responsibility for these arrangements and reporting on the design and operation of these arrangements via the Annual Governance Statement, rests with Management. In accordance with the NAO's Code the focus of our work should be on the arrangements that the Council is expected to have in place during the year ended 31 March 2023. Our risk assessment did not identify any risk of significant weakness in arrangements to secure financial sustainability.

The final outturn on the General Fund for the year was a surplus of £1.747 million, compared to the budgeted breakeven position. The underspend predominantly related to additional income receipts from interest and financial transactions and higher than budgeted income from E-space centres and Central Government as part of Business Rates and unbudgeted new burdens grant income from Government.

A total of £1.984 million of planned and approved Capital Spending costs were underspent due to slippages or delays in the Capital Programme, and £1.237 million of these costs will therefore carry forward into future financial years budgets.

During the year, the Council have continued to revisit and monitor financial plans to ensure they have sufficient resources to deliver services. The Council's published financial information shows a balanced budget for the financial years 2023/24 to 2024/25, which utilises the Surplus Savings Reserve to achieve the balanced position. Subsequent to those years, savings of £1.645 million need to be identified in 2025/26 and £4.797 million in 2026/27 to achieve an in year balance budget.

At the 31 March 2023, the Council held a Surplus Savings Reserve balance of £8.6 million, which is in addition to the minimum level of the General Fund balance (set at £1.063 million). Together with further Earmarked General Fund Reserves of £15.636 million, this provides a strong level of resources if future savings are not identified or achieved in each of the 4 financial years of the Medium Term Financial Strategy, allowing the Council to continue to deliver the current level of services.

The Council should continue its scenario assessment of the savings requirement and continue to identify relevant schemes to achieve the annual savings requirements to minimise the use of reserves where possible.

Conclusion: Based on the work performed, the Council had proper arrangements in place in 2022/23 to enable it to plan and manage its resources to ensure that it can continue to deliver its services.

Value for Money Commentary (continued)

Governance: How the Council ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks

No significant weakness identified

The Council is required to have arrangements in place to ensure proper risk management and the primary responsibility for these arrangements and reporting on the design and operation of these arrangements via the annual governance statement, rests with management. In accordance with the NAO's Code the focus of our work should be on the arrangements that the Council is expected to have in place during the year ended 31 March 2023. In 2022/23, we did not identify a risk of significant weakness in arrangements in place to ensure sound governance.

The Council have continued to manage governance considerations in response to the current challenges such as the conflict in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis, including in partnership working and delivery of services with other local authorities. The Council reviewed the Budget Setting Report in February 2022, with the Medium Term Financial Strategy being updated during the year. Both documents were taken to the Finance and Assets Committee before final approval at Full Council, which ensures that all Members are kept well informed of the process.

The Council's Annual Governance Statement sets out the core governance arrangements for the year, including the Council's actions and developments during the year, which demonstrates how the Council's Code of Governance reflects the seven principles of good governance. The Head of Internal Audit concluded that for the 2022/23 financial year, 'Satisfactory Assurance can be given over the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's control environment for 2022/23'.

Updates on the Corporate Risk Register are provided on a six-monthly basis to the Audit Committee meeting to reflect the latest risks for the Council and to ensure that scoring reflects the current impact and likelihood of those risks materialising.

The Council chose not to publish its Statement of Accounts by the target dates outlined in the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 (being the 31 May 2023). The unaudited statements were published on the 29 September 2023. The Council did set out in its statutory notice, published on Council's website, the reasons for not being able to publish the draft Statement of Accounts by the 31 May date. The delay was caused by prioritising the closure of the 2021/22 Statements of Accounts audit, and gaining confirmation of brought forward balances from the 2021/22 audit, that in turn impacted the preparation of the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts.

The Council did properly advertise and held the inspection period for members of the public to inspect the Statement of Accounts in line with Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015. We confirm that the 2022/23 draft Statement of Accounts were arithmetically correct, agreed to the data in the general ledger, and prepared in line with the content required by the CIPFA Code. The Council has also performed bank reconciliations during the 2022/23 financial year.

Whilst we raised the issue above, as a significant risk of weakness (See page 6) we are satisfied that the Council did appropriately set out the reasons for the delay within its Statutory notice, and did subsequently publish the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts as soon as was practicable.

Conclusion: Based on the work performed, the Council had proper arrangements in place in 2022/23 to ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks.

Value for Money Commentary (continued)

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness: How the Council uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services

No significant weakness identified

The Council is required to have arrangements in place to ensure economy, efficiency and effectiveness, and the responsibility for these arrangements and reporting on the design and operation of these arrangements via the annual governance statement, rests with management. In accordance with the NAO's Code the focus of our work should be on the arrangements that the Council is expected to have in place during the year ended 31 March 2023. In 2022/23, we did not identify a risk of significant weakness in arrangements in place to ensure economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

The Corporate Plan sets out the Council's priorities which the Council call 'future promises and commitments'. The Council monitors the provision of services against these commitments, with quarterly budget monitoring reports presented to the Corporate Management Team, and then to the Finance and Assets Committee.

Monitoring of the Corporate Plan and the progress of actions to address the requirements of the plan is through discussion at Corporate Management Team, with subject papers taken to relevant Committees on an ad-hoc basis. The nature of monitoring is therefore dependent on the nature of the service provided and the commitments made.

The Council worked to ensure that there was no requirement for a Council Tax increase in 2022/23 and have also committed to keeping free parking at the Council's city and town centre car parks. Other outcomes against the five priority areas identified by the Council within the Corporate Plan can be seen within the Council's Narrative Report as part of the Statement of Accounts.

Conclusion: Based on the work performed, the Council had proper arrangements in place in 2022/23 to ensure it uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services.



03

Appendices

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Financial Sustainability

We set out below the arrangements for the financial sustainability criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting criteria considerations	Arrangements in place
How the body ensures that it identifies all the significant financial pressures that are relevant to its short and medium-term plans and builds these into them	Each year the Finance team prepares a budget for the budget year, and the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) which sets out indicative budgets for three further years. The MTFS includes assumptions about all known expenditure and income over that period. This is taken to Full Council in February each year for approval. The Council prepares a capital strategy alongside the revenue budget for the same time period, with the revenue implications of the capital strategy included within the revenue budget. The council takes into account all the expected financial pressures based on the available information.
How the body plans to bridge its funding gaps and identifies achievable savings	<p>The Council's published Medium Term Financial Strategy and supporting budgets for the financial years 2023/24 to 2024/25, was balanced via the use of the Surplus Savings Reserve, with savings of £1.6 million to be identified in 2025/26.</p> <p>The 2022/23 budget has also been balanced through the use of the Surplus Savings Reserve. The Council's objective is always to have a balanced budget in each of the next two financial years when the budget is approved in the February of each year, to demonstrate that the Surplus Savings Reserve provides sufficient headroom to manage funding gaps. The 2023/24 budget was approved in February 2023. The options considered by the council to balance the future year budgets to achieve efficiencies in the cost of service delivery, reductions in service level, increase the income from fees and charges and commercialisation via its trading companies.</p>
How the body plans finances to support the sustainable delivery of services in accordance with strategic and statutory priorities	The budget setting process allows for the consideration of budget changes service by service, based on how the changes support the council's priorities and impact service delivery. The production of the Medium Term Financial Strategy is to set a robust financial framework for the Council's medium term plans, to plan sustainable service delivery within a balanced budget and over the next four year life of the MTFS. The Council have recognised challenges in 2022/23 in respect to the "cost of living crisis" linked to inflation. Considerations have been taken and built in the budget to acknowledge this.

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Financial Sustainability (continued)

We set out below the arrangements for the financial sustainability criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting criteria considerations

Arrangements in place

How the body ensures that its financial plan is consistent with other plans such as workforce, capital, investment, and other operational planning which may include working with other local public bodies as part of a wider system

The Council have joint arrangements in place with other local Council's to achieve effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery, including the Anglian Revenues Partnership (ARP) who provide services linked to local taxation collection and administration of housing benefits. Finances are planned through the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and budget setting processes. The Council's Corporate Plan is also presented and approved at Full Council each year. This sets out the wider objectives and key priorities of the Council in respect of service delivery.

How the body identifies and manages risks to financial resilience, e.g. unplanned changes in demand, including challenge of the assumptions underlying its plans

Budgets are produced in line with expected income and expenditure based on the current knowledge of the Finance team. The key assumptions are set out in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). The Council's Chief Finance Officer has set the minimum level of reserves for the General Fund at a level that is equivalent to 10% of the Council's net operating budget. In addition, the Council currently holds a 'Surplus Savings Reserve', derived from planned savings schemes set up as part of the annual budget setting process. Together, these provide Management with confidence that if unavoidable overspends did occur these could be managed through the Council's existing reserves balances. The Medium Term Financial Strategy sets out risks and uncertainties that could impact the Council's financial position.

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Governance

We set out below the arrangements for the governance criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting criteria considerations

Arrangements in place

How the body monitors and assesses risk and how the body gains assurance over the effective operation of internal controls, including arrangements to prevent and detect fraud

The Council maintains a 'Corporate Risk Register' that is reviewed quarterly by the Risk Management Group and is presented to Audit Committee twice a year. The Council's Internal Auditor supports the production of the Council's Annual Governance Statement each year, feeding in their observations on internal control as identified through the audits that they have completed during the year. The Internal Audit Annual Report is presented to the Audit Committee which provides an overall audit opinion, alongside details of the individual audits undertaken during the year to reach the final opinion.

How the body approaches and carries out its annual budget setting process

An updated Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is taken to the Finance and Assets Committee in September each year, providing the initial budget for the following financial year, with forecasts across the remaining 3 years of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) life (i.e. The MTFS is a rolling 4 year strategy). Following this meeting, the draft budget report is developed into a full annual budget, including the impact on Council Tax requirements. This is then re-presented to the Finance and Assets Committee in January, before being presented to Full Council in February for approval ahead of the start of the financial year to which it relates. Budget figures are determined by the Finance Team through discussions with relevant budget holders, and the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is revisited at regular intervals to build in any significant changes.

How the body ensures effective processes and systems are in place to ensure budgetary control; to communicate relevant, accurate and timely management information (including non-financial information where appropriate); supports its statutory financial reporting requirements; and ensures corrective action is taken where needed

The Council operates a financial management system to which budget data is uploaded in line with agreed timescales. This enables budget holders to review their budgets on screen and regularly update their forecast spend. Quarterly budget monitoring reports are presented to the Corporate Management Team, and to relevant Committees. Internal Audit review key aspects of the system of financial control as part of their cyclical audit strategy and report their findings as part of the Internal Audit Annual Report.

The Council chose not to publish its Statement of Accounts by the target dates outlined in the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 (being the 31 May 2023). The unaudited statements were published on the 29 September 2023. The Council did set out in its statutory notice, published on Council's website, the reasons for not being able to publish the draft Statement of Accounts by the 31 May date. The delay was caused by prioritising the closure of the 2021/22 Statements of Accounts audit, and gaining confirmation of brought forward balances from the 2021/22 audit, that in turn impacted the preparation of the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts.

The Council did properly advertise and held the inspection period for members of the public to inspect the Statement of Accounts in line with Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015. We confirm that the 2022/23 draft Statement of Accounts were arithmetically correct, agreed to the data in the general ledger, and prepared in line with the content required by the CIPFA Code. The Council has also performed bank reconciliations during the 2022/23 financial year.

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Governance (continued)

We set out below the arrangements for the governance criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting criteria considerations

How the body ensures it makes properly informed decisions, supported by appropriate evidence and allowing for challenge and transparency. This includes arrangements for effective challenge from those charged with governance/audit committee

How the body monitors and ensures appropriate standards, such as meeting legislative/regulatory requirements and standards in terms of officer or member behaviour (such as gifts and hospitality or declarations/conflicts of interests)

Arrangements in place

Decision making processes and schemes of delegation are set out within the Constitution for all Committees, as well as decision making that is delegated to Council Officers. Where formal decisions are required they are scrutinised by the appropriate committee in advance of presentation to Full Council. This ensures that the necessary information is provided and that recommendations can be challenged before decisions are made.

The Constitution contains policy documents such as the 'Member's Code of Conduct' which defines the rules to be adhered to as part of meeting the relevant requirements and setting appropriate standards. There is a separate 'Employees Code of Conduct' to ensure employees are also meeting the required standards for officers of the Council. Any issues, for example through the Council's whistle-blowing policy or complaints policy, are investigated in accordance with agreed processes and/or referred to Internal Audit or the Monitoring Officer, as appropriate to the issue. Councillors are required to complete and update their 'Declarations of Interest' on an annual basis. Further, every member is required to disclose the existence and nature of the disclosable pecuniary interest in any matter which is discussed at the meeting and such member cannot attend the meeting as well. This is maintained by the monitoring officer.

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

We set out below the arrangements for improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting criteria considerations	Arrangements in place
How financial and performance information has been used to assess performance to identify areas for improvement	Regular reporting of performance and finances is undertaken, with quarterly budget monitoring reports presented to the Corporate Management Team, and then to the Finance and Assets Committee. As part of this, the Council consider the delivery of services and the Council's priorities and previous performance. Service leads are responsible for monitoring the performance of teams, in line with key Council objectives as set out in the Corporate Plan. This is reflected on within the Commentary and Review of 2022/23 section of the Narrative Report within the Statements of Accounts.
How the body evaluates the services it provides to assess performance and identify areas for improvement	The Corporate Plan sets out the Council's priorities which the Council call as 'future promises and commitments'. The Council monitors the provision of services against these commitments, with quarterly budget monitoring reports presented to the Corporate Management Team, and then to the Finance and Assets Committee. Monitoring of the Corporate Plan and the progress of actions to address the plan is through discussion at Corporate Management Team, with subject papers taken to relevant Committees on an ad-hoc basis. The nature of monitoring therefore is dependent on the nature of the service provided and the commitments monitored. The Narrative Report sets out a review of achievements against the Corporate Plan for that year.
How the body ensures it delivers its role within significant partnerships, engages with stakeholders it has identified, monitors performance against expectations, and ensures action is taken where necessary to improve	The Council ensures that it is represented on partnership bodies by relevant officers or members, as required. Key partnerships include the Anglia Revenues Partnership and working arrangements with the two subsidiary companies, East Cambridgeshire Trading Company and East Cambridgeshire Street Scene, for which regular reports are taken to the Finance & Assets Committee and the Operational Services Committee. The Finance and Assets Committee includes Shareholder Committee roles to approve subsidiaries business plan to ensure this is aligned with same standards of Council.

Appendix A - Summary of arrangements

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness (continued)

We set out below the arrangements for improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness criteria covering the year 2022/23.

Reporting criteria considerations	Arrangements in place
<p>How the body ensures that commissioning and procuring services is done in accordance with relevant legislation, professional standards and internal policies, and how the body assesses whether it is realising the expected benefits</p>	<p>The Council has, as part of its Constitution, 'Contract Procedure Rules' which officers are expected to adhere to when procuring on behalf of the Council. The Council also maintain a 'Contract Register'. Internal Audit review procurement activity as part of their cyclical Internal Audit plan, and procurement compliance received 'satisfactory assurance' for 2022/23. The Monitoring Officer has overall responsibility for ensuring the Council complies with relevant laws and regulations.</p>

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UKC-024050 (UK) 07/22. Creative UK.

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