REVIEW OF APPROACH TO PUBLIC QUESTIONS AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

Report of findings and recommendation – Working Draft

February 2024

1   Background and introduction

1.1   This review of our approach to public questions at Council meetings is a response to recommendation of the six-month Governance review.

1.2   As part of the Transition to Committees, we worked with citizens and stakeholders to agree a short set of Design Principles which captured how Members and citizens wanted to see decision making happen in Sheffield through the Committee System. These Principles set out that in making decisions, SCC would aim to be:

…be democratic. Sheffield City Council is committed to local democracy. **…be open and trustworthy**. Make decisions publicly, so people can tell who is responsible for what.
 …include all Councillors. Show what decisions everyone's local councillors are involved in.
…listen to everyone. Have the voice of residents at the heart of our decisions.
…be cutting edge and keep improving. Respond to the fast-changing world by trying new things and checking often whether it's working.

1.3   As part of our commitment to continuously improve our governance, we undertook a Six-month Review of the new Committee System in 2022/23 to look at early learning and development opportunities during which Governance Committee heard a clear message from stakeholders, Members and officers that the current approach to public questions is not meeting expectations and needs to be reviewed if it is to be an effective route for citizen voice and democratic accountability. In particular, the Committee heard:

- **Citizens are dissatisfied with the speed and manner of responses received to public questions** – albeit with relatively small numbers, 44% of citizens who have asked questions and responded to the Review survey said that they were either dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with speed of their response to a public question; and 56% were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the manner of the response received.

- **Confusion and duplication** – there is a sense that public questions are not always directed to the most appropriate forum, there is duplication of questions at Policy Committees, Full Council and LACs, and sometimes questions are 'bounced' between committees – causing confusion and delays to responses. There is also a potential issue of duplication and inconsistency with answers to questions on the same issue asked at LAC and city-level committee level.

- **Who responds** – some Members feel that the current approach, whereby responses are formulated by officers and the Chair of a committee, is not appropriate in the new system, where the question is addressed to the whole Committee.

- **Time and value** – some citizens felt that 30 minutes is inadequate for dealing with public questions when significant decisions are being made; some felt the process is too formal and rigid with no scope for asking supplementary questions; and some argued that it isn't a meaningful tool for engagement and influencing decision making.

- **Accessibility and visibility** – some citizens would like to be able to submit questions anonymously or attend the meeting virtually to ask a question. Some citizens were concerned that where written responses are provided, they are not published with the minutes, so they are not on the public record.

2   The review process

2.1   Scope

2.1.1 In July 2023 the Governance Committee set out its review of approach to public questions at Council meetings. The proposed purpose of the review was to:

1. Ensure the process for citizens to ask public questions is clear, that public questions are triaged in a way that directs them to the most appropriate forum and that those forums are easy to access.

2. Consider processes for responding to public questions and the interplay between timescales and quality of responses so that we can best achieve a consistent approach that is fit for purpose in the Committee System.

3. To undertake the review creatively with citizens and stakeholders, developing proposals which learn from the experiences of those involved within resource and capacity constraints.

2.1.2 Specific areas of focus were to actively seek feedback from, and test proposals with, citizens and stakeholders; and report into the Governance Committee. Also that the work on public questions clarify the process for members of the public submitting a question to the Full Council that had not been adequately dealt with by a Policy Committee.

2.1.3 A cross-party task and finish group of members from Governance Committee was set up. He membership is Councillors Fran Belbin (task and finish group Chair), Sue Alston, Mike Levery, Sioned-Mair Richards, Paul Turpin. They have been working with citizens and stakeholders, to a scope focused on improving the awareness, process, quality, and experience of public questions.

2.2 Engagement activity

2.2.1 An online survey open to all was available on our Have Your Say Sheffield site September 2023, it was publicised in our citizen newsletter, there were two separate surveys to gather information about people's experience of either asking a public question or presenting a petition at Council meetings, the Governance Committee particularly wanted to hear from people who had never asked a question or presented a petition to find out why they haven't and if we could do anything to encourage in the future.

2.2.2 Members of the Governance Committee held an in person public input workshop on 14th September 2023, which was for the Committee to listen to people's experiences of asking or not asking a public question or presenting a petition in Sheffield. This complemented the approach taken in the online surveys.

2.2.3 The Governance Committee also received a submission of a report[1] a citizen network known as Sheffield Oversight and Scrutiny (S.O.S.) which captures perspectives and recommendations from an independently organised online public event.

2.2.4 In November 2023, we also asked officers from across the City Council to share their views on their experience of managing and responding to public questions. This included officers who manage the receipt of public questions and those who assist with responding.

2.2.5 Also in November 2023, the Committee's task and finish group held a solutions workshop with citizens. Attendees were people who responded to the survey and had asked to be kept involved. The workshop was hybrid (in person and online) and worked through the packages of key issues that had been identified in the initial evidence gathering.

3 The purpose of public questions

3.1.1 Whilst it is recognised that our existing approach to public questions and petitions has some strengths (eg. relatively flexible and compared to some local authorities), there are definitely improvements that can be made to enhance the quality and experience of public questions and petitions for all involved but particularly for citizens.

3.1.2 The Governance Committee has heard what our stakeholders said and seek to create a clearer statement of why public questions matter.

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[1] The SOS Public Questions and Petitions Report is available to download online here: https://www.sos-sheffield.org.uk/

3.1.3 Already [our Constitution](#) in Part 2c sets out the rights that citizens have to participate in meetings of Sheffield City Council. To enhance this, Governance Committee have suggested the following statement, to set out our view of the purpose of PQs:

> "The citizens of Sheffield have a right to participate in the meetings of Sheffield City Council, our Committees and other Council bodies.
>
> Public Questions are one of the means of holding the Council to account, of getting items on public record, to raise public attention to an opportunity or issue.
>
> We welcome and want to encourage and enable greater citizen involvement in our city's democracy and are committed to ensuring that any citizen can raise a public question (or petition) and should expect an accurate and timely response that answers the question or issue raised.
>
> Public questions are one way in which citizens can engage. They are a mechanism for engaging in the agenda of a meeting, not a mechanism for engaging in detail or individual complaints or issues, they are not intended for engaging in debate or conversation."

4 Findings, solutions development, and test

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 A summary of the findings from the evidence gathering is available here: https://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/s63615/Approach%20to%20PQ%20interim%20findings%20slidepack%20for%2012.10.2023.pdf

4.1.2 Key findings / issues that Governance Committee heard from citizens:

1. **Quality of response and experience** – most people who have asked a public question feel they have not been listened to and that the quality of response they received did not meet their expectations. Citizens said that they want more political/democratic accountability for responses (ie. Members responding to questions in public meetings even if content is officer-prepared).

2. **Barriers to asking questions** – citizens cited significant barriers which prevent them asking PQs. This includes physical and EDI barriers (physically attending a meeting at a set time during work hours; barriers due to protected

characteristics eg. caring responsibilities, disabilities) and mental barriers (needing confidence to speak in public meetings).

3. **Complex process** – people find our current process for PQs complicated and unclear. There were concerns about the time taken to receive a response, hard to get updates on progress and hard to find evidence of any impact that a PQ has had. People who submitted petitions were more positive about the process.

4. **Awareness** – there is a lack of awareness about the ability to ask PQs and raise petitions beyond a core group of citizens. People feel that the information, guidance, and advice that we currently provide is unclear and inaccessible. It does not give people the tools they need to participate.

4.1.3 The views on petitions were less critical than for Public Questions but clearly, the user experience is different and of a smaller scale for petitions.

4.2 Solutions development, and test

4.2.1 All of the responses to surveys, output from workshops, the submission from S.O.S, and insight from officers informed an initial long list of solutions. These covered five themes:

1. Public awareness;
2. Triage and track;
3. How question is asked;
4. Quality of response;
5. Influence and impact.

The full initial long list of solutions is included in the report at Appendix 1. The Committee's task and finish group tested and explored this initial long list of solutions at a workshop with citizens involving people who had responded to the surveys and had indicated that they would like to stay involved in the review. We also brought insight from officers into the workshop.

4.2.2 Following the develop and test stage, Members of the Committee met in December 2023 to look at all the insight and proposed solutions to consider in detail, what they might mean in practice, their deliverability and priorities for action and implementation.

4.2.3 The changes that have been proposed by citizens, Members and officers fall into three broad categories:

- **those that are quicker to implement** - as they are about improving our process or action within existing ways of operating, including improving information and guidance and boosting awareness and accessibility through communications.

- **actions that require approval (consensus beyond Governance Committee)** - including those that likely require a change in the constitution; and

- **improvements that require a system change or a technical solution** - these are likely to carry a greater resource input (time and priority) and possibly budget and cost pressure, including a publicly accessible system to track the journey of a question through to a response.

4.2.4   The proposals on public questions and petitions form part of the continuous improvement of our governance model in Sheffield City Council and will complement the planned work in 2024, including on the remits of policy committees, reviewing and enhancing the role of LACs and transforming our approach to citizen involvement and participation.

5   Recommendations

5.1   Overarching proposals

5.1.1   There are 5 overarching proposals responding to what we heard, within each there are recommendations which provide more specifics on the steps we could take for Members to consider.

1. Improving the quality and overall experience of public questions
2. Making public questions modern and accessible for all citizens
3. Creating a clear, open, and transparent process so that citizens can track the journey of a question from submission to response and action
4. Improving advice and guidance for citizens to improve
5. Purpose of public questions – a statement of principle, and ongoing review

Proposal 1: Improving the quality and overall experience of public questions

What we've heard	• Of those that had experience of asking public questions, the overwhelming majority were dissatisfied with the response they received. • People who have asked questions said that they didn't feel listened to, that responses from Members and officers could be abrupt, and that the visible impact or change from their question was negligible. • There should be clear accountability for responses – distinction between officers providing detail and substance in response to questions and politicians answering in public meetings. • There are a range of views on timeliness of responses – some are prepared to wait longer for quality answer, and some prefer an on-the-spot answer.
Recommendations	The proposition is to undertake a twelve-month trial in the 2024/25 municipal year of a renewed approach to public questions. The trial will apply to Full Council and all Policy Committees and the changes are set out below in recommendations 1.1 - 1.9. For Local Area Committees, the approach to public questions will remain unchanged (see 1.10). We will undertake a full evaluation of the trial after 12 months to inform, give insight to the refinement or continuation of these approaches for future years (see 1.11). **Recommended specific changes:** 1.1 Any question can be submitted 6 working days before a meeting, the question and response will be published as a written answer before the relevant meeting (i.e. Day before / morning of the meeting). 1.2 Urgent questions (i.e. those that couldn't reasonably have been anticipated at the time the written question deadline) and those relating to specific agenda items to be submitted 3 working days in advance of meeting and a verbal response will be provided at the meeting. 1.3 In relation to the content or topic of a question please note for Full Council the question can only be on an issue for which the Council has responsibility, or which directly affects the City; for Policy Committees it must be about a matter for which the Committee has responsibility.

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	1.4 After viewing a written response, questioners may still opt to attend the meeting (in person/virtually) and will be able to ask a supplementary question that is related to the initial question, subject to time allowing.
	1.5 Introduce a word limit on all public questions.

	1.6 Introduce the ability to make statements – these must be submitted 2 days in advance (5 days for Policy Committees) with 1 minute time limit to speak with guidance on an approximate word limit.
	
	   a. A citizen may opt to read out their statement in the meeting; or
	
	   b. A citizen may choose to submit a statement in writing.
	
	   c. In either format, statements will not be responded to in the meetings, but all statements will be on the public record.
	
	   d. A written reply will be provided within 10 working days.
	
	   e. For Policy Committees the statement must be about an agenda item.

	1.7 Members to receive draft responses at least 1 day before a meeting to consider responses.
	1.8 Subject to the Chair's discretion, the time for public questions, petitions and statements at meetings will remain at 30 minutes.
	1.9 New advice, guidance, and a consistent response format for officers to improve consistency and quality of responses.
	1.10 The approach to PQs at Local Area Committees (LACs) will remain unchanged and people will continue to be able to ask questions from the floor at LAC meetings.
	1.11 Citizen evaluation and review at end of trial.
Why we are proposing this	The current system is flexible but: • can cause pressure point for those supplying the response, especially for example turnaround on questions for Full Council or a Policy Committee;

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	• there is a narrow time between agenda publishing and deadline for acceptance of a public question; • there is often a poorer quality of standard of response and/or lack of detail when there is limited response time. The Committee are considering for example a principle that if you ask a question more days in advance of a meeting you will get a written response and it will be in the meeting record, if less days in advance, you should get an initial verbal response at the meeting with written follow up, if asked on the day you will get written response within 10 working days, not an answer on the day.
Timescale	Start of Municipal year 2024/25 subject to Full Council approval

Proposal 2: Making public questions modern and accessible for all citizens

What we've heard	• People recognise the ability to ask public questions and raise petitions is an important part of our democracy. • Many who have asked questions have had negative experiences • There are equality and diversity barriers to asking questions in a meeting in a physical place at a specific time which impacts on a number of protected characteristics. • People can feel intimated by the context in which Committee meetings take place – large, formal, public spaces in the town hall – and this is an important barrier to engagement. • Some identification of inconsistency in approach between committees – e.g. Whether submitted questions are read out if a citizen cannot attend in person. • People want the opportunity to be anonymous, to not attend but to still have questions read, answered, and publicly logged.

Recommendations	2.1 Enable public questions or petitions to be presented on-screen, such as Teams or equivalent (or recorded videos). If not possible for technical reasons, ask for submission in writing which will then be read out.
	2.2 Enable a questioner to request that a question is read out on their behalf. This would also be an alternative if virtual route is not available.
	2.3 Enable citizens to submit a written question and request a written response without needing to attend a meeting, and the question and response go on the public record.
	2.4 Enable for anonymity in the public forum, but not in submission (i.e. submission must include name and contacts).
Why we are proposing this	Introducing these improvements to how questions are asked responds directly to the issues raised by citizens. The steps should increase flexibility, enable greater participation, and increase accessibility for all, removing the barrier of having to physically attend a meeting to ask. To make this work there will need to be clear expectation of timelines for submission, and when questioner can expect a response, and in what format the response will be on the record – these aspects will be a critical element of how the tacker will operate and the content of the guidance to explain lead in times and what form of response you can expect.
Timescale	Start of Municipal Year 2024/25 with 2.1, subject to availability of tech solution in all meetings

Proposal 3: Creating a clear, open and transparent process so that citizens (and officers and Members) can track the journey of a question from submission to response and action

What we've heard	• People felt strongly that the existing process was complicated, unclear, and hard to access.
	• Respondents felt that all questions and answers should be published for all Committees; that they should be able to be tracked through the process, and that there should be a clear log of the question, the response and action that can be publicly accessed.

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	• There were clear concerns about the time taken to receive a response, that reasons for delays are unclear, and in some cases, people said responses were not provided at all or the quality of response did not meet citizen expectations. • People want to see the impact of their questions or petitions and whether their voice influenced change in the decision or approach. • Those that have raised petitions were more positive about the system of submission but less so about how they could find out about the impact and response
Recommendations	3.1 Develop a portal, to submit a public question – simple online form to make it easy for anyone to submit a question and indicate where they would like to have their question heard.
	3.2 Introduce an online tracker – simple system to track petitions and questions so that anyone can see the progress and status of a public question, find answer provided, and find what has changed as a result. This will be an open online system, navigable and searchable.
Why we are proposing this	To improve the clarity and consistency of the PQs approach, we need to better manage the 'journey' of questions so that citizens are easily able to find the latest information about their questions and answers. Having a single system and approach will also help officers and Members in the Council ensure that responses are in a consistent form and make it easier to provide citizens with updates on the progress of questions and answers. The approach should not constrain or gatekeep but rather improve accessibility, consistency, and timeliness of response. An open and transparent system will also bring benefits to petitions too. The intention is it will include all Committees.
Timescale	First iteration to be developed for implementation during 2024/25

Proposal 4: Improving advice and guidance for citizens to ask public questions and raise petitions

What we've heard	• Most respondents said that they hadn't asked a public question and didn't know they could. • Citizens want simple and clear information about the process, how it works, what happens, what the impact would be and about the committees themselves. • The information that was available wasn't very clear, accessible, or easy to find. • The timescales involved in submitting and receiving answers to public questions need to be clearer. There is an interconnected association between timescale and the quality of response.
Recommendation	4.1 A 'get involved' information and guidance source, that works as a webpage, and is printable. 4.2 This would include information on how to be involved, to ask a question, submit a petition, what can be expected if you do any of these things. 4.3 Seek advice from our communication professionals and stakeholders for the best way to promote public questions and the new guidance.
Why we are proposing this	Contribute to raising public awareness, capturing interest from our landing page, with communications and campaigns that signpost this. It would be a simplification of our information, to make it easier for citizens to access and participate. It will be clear about options available, including accessing individual Councillors. We explored the option of a triage system that helped citizens navigate to where they should ask their question. Citizens told us that that they were concerned that this would result in gatekeeping or taking away informed choice of where to ask. Providing better information and guidance therefore puts the decision of where and what to ask into the hands of citizens and reduces the organisations input to 'oversee' and manage the detail of participation.

	Members are keen that the versed still have the right to go where they want to ask a question, and there are those who want guidance. The guidance will also function to manage expectations for participation, outcomes.
Timescale	Municipal Year 2024/25

Proposal 5: Purpose of public questions – a statement of principle, and ongoing review

What we've heard	• People ask a question to publicise an issue, to put on record a citizen or community view on an issue or consequence of an action of the Council. Often as a last resort or in frustration with response so far. People ask to be involved in developing our democratic systems.
Recommendations	5.1 Adopt statement of principle around our approach to public questions in paragraph 3.1.2 of this report 5.2 To drive improvement carry out regular experience survey of those asking public questions. 5.3 Ensure future opportunities for citizens to feedback and be involved in ongoing review of this trial approach to public questions.
Why we are proposing this	We want to make clear what we see as the purpose of public questions, and we welcome citizen involvement in democratic process. We want to continue to find out why people ask questions, and to drive improvement. To find out if you feel like your question was answered, were you happy with it, was it the answer you wanted, was it understandable if not the answer you wanted, are there further improvements to asking public questions or petitions you would like to suggest, as well as finding out why you asked a question. We want to keep listening, to keep citizens involved in how we improve our approach to public questions.
Timescale	Start of Municipal Year 2024/25

6. Future consideration and exploration

6.1 There are matters that have been given initial consideration, but judgement reserved for time being whilst the above recommendations are implemented,

6.2 Some may come into their own once the priority elements are underway, so they are not discounted, but on the watch list as the new approach to public questions at Council meetings takes shape, these include:

- o Introduce a right of reply.
- o Keep public question to an agenda topic.
- o Public questions be taken at end of a meeting.

7. Monitoring and Citizen Involvement

7.1 The changes are an ongoing constant opportunity for citizen involvement in our democratic process. We see the review and recommendations as you said, we did, expanded to we will test and review, and you will be part of that, we will keep listening, there will be future opportunities to feedback as we trial and use this approach to public questions, we will be keeping you informed, and finding out why people ask questions and what people want to see, to drive improvement in our approach. There is also more work underway in the Council on Citizen Participation and Community Involvement.

7.2 At the outset we set out there will be a review of the trial in recommendation 1 that will involve citizen and stakeholder reflection and experience, at the end of the trial, and during if necessary. During the trial we will keep the new model under constant review and reserve the right to amend and update if any unforeseen issues occur.

7.3 Recommendations include additional monitoring of how the new approach is being received by gathering qualitative data from those asking questions on perception of response received. Over the period of the trial we can further monitor how the new approach is being received by gathering qualitative data from those asking questions on perception of response received. We propose to use our Have Your Say Sheffield platform.[2]

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[2] You can visit, register and sign in to Have Your Say Sheffield on this link - Have Your Say Sheffield

APPENDIX 1 – The full initial long list of solutions

THEME ONE – PUBLIC AWARENESS

What is this: Information available to all and 'not scary' or reading like set of 'terms & Conditions'; raise awareness of this information and how to ask a question or submit a petition.

Broad solutions:
- **Develop a 'Get Involved' information and guidance source, that works as a web page, a PDF document (see Bristol's How to have your say public forum guide)**
- **Develop a communication and campaign plan to raise awareness.**

Detail suggestions
- **Single button on front web page on how to be involved, to ask a question, submit a petition) – 5 points that make it accessible.**
- **Support and enable more use of petition.**
- **Use multi ways to provide information, for example our bulletin/newsletter; use known groups to feed information to.**
- **Raise awareness with presentation at each LAC; promote on social media, enlist external media (e.g. The Tribune;).**
- **Ticker tape banner on website of upcoming meetings.**

THEME TWO- TRIAGE AND TRACK

What is this: Essentially the system around and journey of asking a public question.

Broad solutions:
- **Develop a 'Get Involved' page with information and guidance.**
- **Develop a portal to submit a public question and a template to guide, what and where – it was emphasised that this should not result in gatekeeping or restrict what can be asked to prejudged topics and content.**
- **Develop a tracker of questions and petitions, that is a public record of Q&A, and influence; and is an internal data and process management tool.**

Detail suggestions

- **Guidance: Information to guide and steer on whether question, petition, or statement (new option), and where to send or present – for example, which Committee**.
- **Triage: A framework that assists us and submitters in determining if it is a question, a petition, a complaint or a constituent query – open and transparent, and be a part of guidance.**
- **Tracker: A single place to see questions, responses, action, influence and impact, a public record of Q&A, and influence**.
- **How: Portal to submit, with a template to help steer and guide content**
- **New for consideration:**
  a) **Introduce making statement as an option.**
  b) **Introduce option to ask a supplementary.**
  c) **Introduce a right of reply.**
  d) **Keep public question to an agenda topic.**

THEME THREE – HOW QUESTION IS ASKED

What is this: It is about the way we allow or support people to ask a question at our meetings.

Broad solutions:
- **Develop a consistent option for asking, reporting, recording questions without the current perceived requirement to attend the meeting in person – currently ad hoc across all meetings, sometimes Chair discretion.**

Detail suggestions
- **Allow public questions or petitions to be presented hybrid if requested (online, not in person) at all meetings – if not possible for technical reasons, consider options such as submission in writing and read out.**
- **Allow for anonymity in the public forum, but not in submission, can be anonymous in asking question on day if requested, introduce criteria-based rule for anonymity, to stop blanket submit a question anonymously, enable anonymity in public meeting and record.**
- **To be able to request that question is read out on behalf – also a solution if tech prevents hybrid option.**

THEME FOUR – QUALITY OF RESPONSE

What is this: It is about how we can improve quality of response, reflect on some of the criticism of the timing and quality of responses, some of the above solutions and suggestions may help by changing experience and expectations, for example clear guidance, a tracker of questions and responses publicly available, introducing right of reply.

Broad solutions
- **Develop a 'Get Involved' page with information and guidance.**
- **Mange expectations with guidance that includes when can expect a response, how will receive a response, how can chase a follow-up.**

Detail suggestions
- **We can gather qualitative data on perception of response via a survey link sent with response – that asks do you feel like your question was answered, were you happy with it, was it answer you wanted, was it understandable if not answer you wanted?**
- **Introduce a new / reformed submission and response time standard… (see Bristol's How to have your say public forum guide). For example it could be if you ask a question more days in advance of a meeting, you will get a written response and it will be in the meeting record, if less days in advance, you should get an initial verbal response at the meeting with written follow up, if asked on the day you will get written response within 10 working days, not an answer on the day. Some citizens advocate being prepared to wait longer for quality answer. Though some prefer an on-the-spot answer, supposedly more honest. Suggest parity with public and member questions timeline for questions.**

THEME FIVE – INFLUENCE AND IMPACT OF ASKING

What is this: Citizens want to know how what they have asked has influenced or changed what we did.

Broad solutions:
- **Online open tracking system to include how it influenced/changed what we did**
- **Publish a "you said, we did" annually, ideally every 6 months**

Detail suggestion:
- **A future option to consider is uncouple public questions from Council or Committees, for example a regular, probably online, meeting that hears public questions, and is a public record? This was met with mixed response**

from citizens – they want to be able to ask question to the right Committee and expertise – solution detail to consider how to make this work, and/or a new form of involvement for citizen participation.

WORKING DRAFT

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