Help to move on – but to what? Young people with learning difficulties moving on from out-of-area residential schools or colleges

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Accessible summary

Some young people with learning difficulties go to school or college a long way from home. They live at their residential school or college most of the time. They only go home in the holidays.

It can be difficult for young people when they leave these schools or colleges. Pauline Heslop and David Abbott worked on a project called ‘Help To Move On’. They found out what happened when young people move on from their residential school or college.

- Most young people had to go back to their home area when they left school or college.
- Sometimes going back to their home area caused problems. They hadn’t lived there for two or three years. Services weren’t set up for them there. They didn’t have any friends there anymore.
- Some young people didn’t know where they were going next. They had to leave school or college but they didn’t have a place to go to. They didn’t have plans for things to do in the daytime.
- A few young people got good support. Workers listened to what they wanted to do. They visited different places. They moved somewhere they liked. They knew some of the people in their new place. They had lots of things to do in the day.
- The main thing that young people said helped with all the changes was that there were good links between their school/college and the places that they were moving on to.

Plain facts

A summary of the research is available in the Plain Facts series. Plain Facts produce research findings in illustrated plain language formats. For a free Plain Facts summary, please contact Marilyn Baker at the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol, 3 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TX.

Summary

This article describes research undertaken between 2004 and 2006 about the issues faced by 15 young people with a wide range of learning difficulties in out-of-area residential schools and colleges at transition. The process of transition planning was hampered by the distance between the school/college and the ‘home authority’ of
the young person; there was a wide variation in who took the lead on co-ordinating planning for transition; and involvement in decision-making by the young people was often a passive, rather than active process. Four of the fifteen young people left their school/college without knowing where they were going to move on to. None moved into any accommodation other than the family home or residential accommodation. Half moved on to attend a mainstream FE college, with little or no sense of future progression into work for most. The key messages of the article relate to the importance of continuity to young people, the need for more creativity in minimising the effects of distance, and how vital good forward planning is to help young people ‘move on’.

Key words Learning difficulties, out-of-area, residential schools/colleges, transition, young people

Introduction

We make many changes in our lives, and the transition between what we are familiar with and what is to come can be an anxious time. For young people with learning difficulties, a major transition is the move from school or college to the next stage of their lives. The anxiety provoked at this time has the possibility of being well-managed: we all know that moving on from school or college is inevitable and when exactly it is going to take place. Previous research, however, has suggested that in the UK transition planning for young people with learning difficulties moving on from school or college is fraught with difficulties. (Ryan 1997; Morris 1999a; Heslop et al. 2002; Hudson, 2006). Research has also highlighted particular concerns for young disabled people who live away from home in ‘out-of-area’ residential placements (Pinney 2005). They are likely to be at greater risk of poor transition planning and outcomes because of the distance between the ‘home’ local authority that arranges the placement and that which ‘hosts’ the young person. Additional issues include barriers to supporting good, on-going relationships between the young person and their family, and confusion or a lack of knowledge by the agencies involved about their roles and responsibilities (Abbott et al. 2000, 2001; Grove & Giraud-Saunders 2002; McGill et al. 2006).

From 2004 to 2006 the Health Foundation funded the Norah Fry Research Centre (at the University of Bristol) and HFT (the Home Farm Trust) to conduct an Action Research project to improve knowledge of the issues faced by young people with learning difficulties in out-of-area schools and colleges at transition, and to work with five local authorities in the South West of England to try and make a difference to working practice. This article focuses on the research findings that set the scene for the Action Learning phase of the research which followed.

How the research was conducted

A discussion about transition for young people at out-of-area residential schools or colleges was held at a regional forum in South West England. As a result of this, five local authorities agreed to participate in the research. Together, the sites represented a range of characteristics, including a mix of predominantly urban or rural communities, local authorities that were ‘importers’ or ‘exporters’ of young people with learning difficulties for residential education, and an authority with a significant minority ethnic population. The whole research study was guided by a multidisciplinary Research Advisory Group and two Advisors with learning difficulties. Ethical endorsement was obtained from the (then) Association of Directors of Social Services Research Group.

At each of the five sites, the Connexions Service (an advice and support service for young people in the UK) or social services invited all young people with learning difficulties aged between 16 and 25 and thought to be in their last or penultimate year at an out-of-area school or college, to take part in the research. The research team then sent interested young people a DVD and accessibly written materials about what it might be like to take part in a research project. These had been produced in conjunction with the project’s Advisors with learning difficulties. Ethical endorsement was obtained from the (then) Association of Directors of Social Services Research Group.

Placements are those where the person is placed outside their own local authority boundary.
informed consent was given. A further date, or series of dates, was then set for the actual interviews.

The research participants

Fifteen young people from the five local authorities took part in the research. Their age range was from 16 to 22. All had learning difficulties, and thirteen of the fifteen had additional mental, physical or sensory impairment(s). Five of the fifteen had limited verbal communication, but communicated during the interviews using additional Makaton, electronic devices, and gestures relating to pictures and/or symbols. The minimum distance their school/college was from home was 22 miles; the maximum distance was 156 miles. Each of the young people consented to the research team talking to their parents about their experiences and the issues faced by them with regards to transition planning. In addition, each of the young people and their families nominated up to five people they thought helped them most in preparing, or supporting them, through transition (all of these people worked in a professional capacity with the families so are referred to as ‘professionals’ in this report). First stage qualitative interviews were conducted with: 13 of the 15 young people with learning difficulties (one young person was too unwell to be interviewed, one was considered to be too upset to participate); 16 parents/family members; and 29 professionals.

Second stage qualitative interviews were held approximately a year after the first stage interviews. The purpose of the second interviews was largely to determine the process and outcome of the transition of the young people. Second stage qualitative interviews were conducted with: 14 of the young people with learning difficulties (one young person declined to be interviewed herself but consented for interviews to be conducted with her parents and two professionals who she named); 16 parents/family members; and 29 professionals. Of these, 19 had been interviewed during the first stage of the research, and 10 had joined the research project at the second stage only. This article describes findings from both the first and second research interviews.

The context in which the research took place

It is important to recognise from the outset, that the ‘Help to Move On’ research project was taking place during a time in which policies and procedures that had a bearing on transition were evolving and developing. At a national level, the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (Department of Health, 2004) proposed the establishment of multi-agency transition groups, and that agencies develop local strategies to widen the education, training and employment opportunities for disabled young people. The following year, in 2005, one of the central themes of Improving the life chances of disabled people (Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, 2005) was eliminating service gaps and facilitating the transition between childhood and adulthood. More recently, the Learning & Skills Council Funding Guidance: Placement for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities at specialist colleges 2006/7 (Learning & Skills Council, 2006) stipulated the expectation that transition planning would form an integral part of every learner’s individual learning programme, and the Parliamentary Hearings on services for disabled children (Council for Disabled Children, 2006), gave as one of its recommendations to the government, that local agencies should put in place multi-agency protocols and agreements that set out how they would work together to support young people and their families through the transition process.

At a local level, a number of schools and colleges had reported to the research team that they were implementing changes to the curriculum, so enabling young people to spend more time, or focus more deeply, on ‘moving on’. For some, these changes were being driven by Ofsted inspections; for others the main driver was the influence of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) being translated into practice. Changes reported included: creating a stronger structure to transition and covering it throughout the college course; introducing new topics to transition sessions such as leisure, sexuality and work-life balance; and the production of ‘moving on’ folders with the young people. In addition, there was evidence of local action being taken in some of the project sites to improve communication between professionals. This varied from quite simple to considerably more complex interventions. Changes reported included: creating a document on a shared computer drive where staff could record any transition-related information about a student; holding six monthly (rather than annual) transition planning meetings to keep the planning process on track and all the professionals concerned up-to-date; devising a transition protocol so that professionals were working in the same way and parents and young people knew what to expect; and in the case of one local authority, setting up a multi-agency transition service.

The transition planning process: problems identified

Transition plans

The research interviews highlighted that for young people still at school, discussion about the transition onwards was usually discussed at the end of annual reviews, ‘looked after child’ (LAC) reviews, or other assessment meetings. Whilst there is nothing inherently problematic with this, it did mean the level of discussion about action points, plans, and young people’s wishes was often insufficiently detailed.
Several families in the study said they were unaware of there even being a transition plan. It appeared that this was in part because the discussion at the meeting had covered both the annual review element and transition planning. Documentation relating to transition planning was then lost in the minutes of the meeting, despite specific educational guidance in the SEN Code of Practice (Department for Education and Skills 2001a) and SEN Toolkit (Department for Education and Skills 2001b) about the composition and content of transition plans.

For young people attending a Further Education (FE) college, what seemed to be problematic was the apparent lack of responsibility for on-going transition planning and monitoring. The SEN Toolkit (Department for Education and Skills 2001b) is clear that in these cases, the Connexions Service with the young person, the local Learning and Skills Council and appropriate providers and agencies, are responsible for developing an action plan and building on the Transition Plan. Our research, however, found future planning to be very inconsistent across FE colleges.

### Distance

The process of transition planning for young people out-of-area was particularly hampered by distance. Professionals from the ‘home’ area were less likely to be able to take the time to travel and attend transition planning meetings a long way away. One professional said:

I would be more likely to go to Claire’s review than Jonathan’s review and that is an admission that I don’t like to give, but Jonathan’s that is a full day, Claire’s is half a day, you know I can fit that in, but a full day is just hard to do. And you are questioned, not too much but... I do feel at times that I have to justify why I’m going... that it is an efficient use of time.

This distance also meant that some ‘home’ professionals did not feel that they really knew the young person concerned and what their own views or hopes for the future were. A number of professionals in the study relied on visiting the young person when they were home in holidays. However, it was acknowledged that this might not give a wholly accurate picture of how the young person feels about being in the two distinctly different settings - and how they might interact with people at school or college.

The issue of distance also affected families, who struggled to be as involved as they would like in the mechanics of planning, finding that meetings were scheduled to take place in often inconvenient working hours. As one parent commented:

Usually it is around eleven o’clock - then for me I’ve got to have the whole day off and I’m self employed so I’ve got to lose a days pay. So it is difficult.

We also know from previous research (Abbott et al. 2001) that families are not routinely supported with help with travel costs to get to meetings.

With a young person out-of-area the individual and their family often lost local networks and knowledge. One parent mentioned that her daughter had lost touch with all of her local friends since moving out-of-area, which posed difficulties for her when she returned home in the holidays. The parent commented:

Coming back here she’s so isolated, she’s got no friends in the area at all.

Not only might young people be isolated socially when they return home from an out-of-area placement, they could also be out-of-touch with local services. One professional commented:

It’s obviously more difficult because they’re not linked in with local services. They’ve been away for a long time and they’re not linked in.

One of the implications of being out of touch with local services was that families might not be aware of any new developments in those services that might suit the young person in holidays, when they finished at school or college or indeed, instead of the current out-of-area residential placement. Another professional reflected on this commenting:

What’s available locally is much better [now]. We’ve developed our own provision and also we have a strategy to provide locally what we previously would have bought out of the area.

If transition brings young people with learning difficulties back to the home area, which the emphasis seemed to be for the young people in the study, then it would be important for them to continue to be borne in mind as local services change and develop.

### Finding out about possible future options

The research revealed wide variation in who took the lead on finding out about future placements and options for young people. There are a number of issues here. Families are often assumed to be the natural leaders, as they usually know their son or daughter far better than any professional and, by and large, have aspirations and expectations of and for their child which can helpfully shape choices. It is also the case that families and natural networks of support are probably at the forefront of decision-making for...
nondisabled young people. So families need to be equipped and supported to take this role not least because families (with the advent of Individual Budgets) are in effect, the commissioners of the future. Yet families with young people in out-of-area placements were particularly disadvantaged because their son or daughter was only home during holiday periods, reducing the time available to have discussions or visits to potential future options. One professional commented:

Unless you spent a bit of time looking round he’s got no concept of what that is really…it’s been harder to introduce him to different places with him being far away definitely... just the time that that takes.

In addition, few families felt they had enough appropriate information, an issue that has been reported in other studies about the transition of disabled children. One parent in the study commented:

Nobody really tells you anything. You have to find out for yourself...it’s quite a daunting thing and its knowing where to start, who to go to and who to ask.

What compounded the difficulty for parents of young people out-of-area was that many had lost touch with ‘home’ services, and the ‘host’ school or college did not usually have detailed information about possible options in the ‘home’ area.

Including the views of the young people themselves

Despite policy exhortations to include the views of disabled children and young people when planning their care, our research suggests that practice in this area was mixed. There was evidence of some young people working creatively in the classroom, for example by surveying future work options, or discussing their hopes and aspirations. However, such classroom work did not always permeate into the young person’s transition plans, or get fed into reviews or meetings about transition; nor was it always communicated to those who needed to know, such as parents taking the lead in exploring future options. Attempts were sometimes made to include the views of the young person when deciding on their next placement, but this was often a passive rather than an active process i.e. it was the young person’s satisfaction with one option that was gauged, rather than them visiting and actively selecting from a range of choices. One professional was clear that there could have been more input by one of the young people about his future placement:

The actual choices about the place, I would say very, very little input for a young man who was as intelligent as Jonathan was, because he was an intelligent young man. He has a moderate learning disability but you know he was able to make choices. So yes, there could have been more input.

Considering the different options

A clear message from the young people was that it can be difficult to make real choices until you have tried things, seen things, or know about things. Some young people were able to explore future life choices by visiting a range of potential future placements with their school or college peers, but this was not widespread. One college professional commented:

It would be lovely, but because we’re national it’s very difficult to go and do the next step and you have to rely on social workers and family to do that. We tend not to get involved in that particular aspect.

The outcome of transition

Despite the transition planning process, four of the fifteen young people left their out-of-area residential school or college not knowing where they were going to move on to. For these young people, leaving college was especially difficult as all of the security of their ‘home’ for the last three years was being exchanged for an extremely uncertain future. A tutor explained what she had noticed in one of her students:

There was stubborn behaviour, refusal to move, and behaviour that I hadn’t..., I had been teaching him for three years and it was more extreme than I’d seen him the whole three years. He started kicking and screaming and laying on the floor and then he’d end up sobbing. He was sobbing so we had to wait to calm him down, then try to sit with him and talk to him and obviously because he uses a communication aid the best strategy really was to try and get him to use his communication aid to tell you how he felt, and it did always come back to the fact that he didn’t know what was going on in his life really, he couldn’t cope with everything that was happening.

All four of the young people returned to their family homes until arrangements could be made or finalised, although for one young person this was likely to be for a few years.

Eight of the young people moved on to another residential college or a residential care setting. Two of these placements broke down, although the overall assumption for those moving to a residential care setting was that they would remain in that placement for the foreseeable future: five parents hoped that it would be a ‘home for life’. For one
parent, this wasn’t so much a hope as the reality as she saw it:

My main concern of Tammy going to a care home is that when she goes in at 19 she’ll be there indefinitely. And when I said to the social worker, ‘What happens if she doesn’t like it?’ she said, ‘Well the situation is we have to make sure she likes it, because her needs are so complex and there’s so many health issues as well, this is going to be it.

In contrast, the fact that there were ‘move on’ options available for one young person moving into a residential service was influential in the decision for her to go there, as she commented:

I’ll be living there [at the residential home]. That’s my first step. And then my second step is moving somewhere else, and then my third one is getting a house or a flat.

None of the young people moved into supported living arrangements, or any accommodation other than the family home or residential accommodation.

In terms of day-time activities, none of the young people had moved into work, or supported work, although one attended full-time mainstream FE college on a work-related course. One of the key objectives of Valuing People, the Learning Disability White Paper (Department of Health, 2001) is about moving people into work, yet there was little or no sense of future progression into work for the majority of the young people in the research study. There may be a number of factors at play here, including the contradictions of ‘supply’ and ‘demand side’ issues, both of which were in evidence (‘at the moment Heather is not ready for that, we still need to work on her self help skills’ – professional; ‘He went to the pet shop [on a work experience day] but there was no staff to support him that day so that didn’t work out’ – parent).

As Burton & Kagan (2006) suggest, there are a number of ideological contradictions within Valuing People, and the emphasis on moving people into work may be less of a priority than ironing out some of the other tensions that exist.

Seven of the young people moved on to attend a mainstream FE college on a full or part-time basis. In terms of progression through education, there were two predominant views. The first was that education should ultimately lead onto progression to employment; a view promoted by policy, but little in evidence in this research study. The prevailing view in this study was that education could be pursued as an activity in its own right. For some of the young people attending a college course was ‘something to do’; for others it was a chance for social engagement or for a change of scenery, as well as possibly being an interesting or pleasurable activity in its own right. One parent commented:

As to the sort of merits of all the vocational skills course, I’m not entirely convinced that it’s actually useful to her…But she is enjoying it, so I’ll leave it be for the moment.

None of the young people or their families used Direct Payments as a possible way of making more flexible options about services, choices and support. In many ways this was not surprising as most parents and all but one of the young people had never heard about them. Indeed, one professional, a person with a duty to offer Direct Payments if eligibility criteria are met admitted:

We haven’t actually offered anyone Direct Payments.

The relationship between the process of planning for transition and the outcomes of transition were far from clear in this study. Some parents said that planning was poor and late, yet at the last minute an option was settled upon which everybody felt pretty positive about. Conversely, other families had, more or less, followed a traditional 14+ planning path and still came unstuck with a lack of choice and last minute decision making.

What makes a ‘good’ transition

In terms of the respondents views on what made a good transition for young people with learning difficulties at out-of-area schools or colleges, there were a number of clear messages. Families valued many of the same things that those not in out-of-area placements have mentioned, including good information about options, processes and entitlements and less uncertainty and more transparency around funding. They suggested that what helped make a good transition also included: the timely allocation of a good social worker, and families themselves being proactive and taking a lead in the process whilst being well-provided with the information and support they needed to do this.

Forward planning

With respect to the particular needs of young people with learning difficulties in out-of-area placements, families considered three issues to be particularly important at transition. The first of these was the need for good forward planning which led to decisions and arrangements which stayed in place as opposed to being changed or cancelled at the last moment. One parent reflected on the lengthy process the family was going through in order to find a future home for her daughter. In this case, the social worker had taken the lead in investigating possible options, and had been looking for almost two years. During this time, the social worker had also negotiated some arrangements that the family felt would help make the transition of their daughter easier. As the mother explained:
She is, yes, she really is [listening to our wishes], and I think this is why perhaps it’s taking so long to find somewhere.... they said that they would keep Jackie in the school, if, say for instance the social worker found a place now and it wasn’t quite ready by July, they will keep Jackie until it’s ready...then.... they would drive Jackie past so she’d get used to the route first of all. Then they would take her in for tea, and obviously I would go with her, take her in for tea a couple of times so she’d get used to the people and the layout of the place, and then they’d let her stay for a little bit longer, and then she’d stay overnight, and then we would gauge her that way and see if she could do it. So it wouldn’t be done quick; we’re talking a good few weeks, hence if they found her something in July she may not get in until December because it could take that long and I would prefer that.

Other families considered that good forward planning was especially important for those in out-of-area schools or colleges because it would help overcome the problems associated with providers and commissioners agreeing things at the last moment, setbacks which possibly needed even more time to deal with than for those living locally.

**Continuity**

The second key element of a ‘good’ transition for young people in out-of-area residential schools or colleges was the need for continuity. Both parents and young people wanted a cross-over period to be facilitated, so that there is continuity between the existing and next placements. The young people themselves mostly wanted continuity in their friendships: they did not particularly want to go to places where they did not know anyone and wanted more attention paid to where their friends were going. One young person had chosen her next placement because a friend from her past was already there:

> There used to be a student, who left two years ago. I was with him in the first house group and that is where that student is now...I like the idea of going there.

Another young person was being supported through the transition process by a professional who knew that one of the young person’s friends was also moving into the same placement. She commented:

> He’ll probably have contact with Justin who will be there already so that will be a really good thing for him...And maybe we’d encourage that anyway.

The research notes from another interview also echoed this theme:

> Jonathan said that he didn’t keep in contact with anyone from [his out-of-area college] anymore and had lost touch with his friends from there. He took me to his room and showed me a photo of a group of friends at his old college and said that he missed them. He said he missed being at his old college sometimes, not for the work, but for the social life. He also missed some of his teachers and care staff. Jonathan had tears in his eyes when talking about this, and seemed on the verge of crying.

It would be fairly unusual for a nondisabled person in their teens to make their post-school decisions in isolation from their friends and peers so we should not be surprised, and should actively support, young people with learning difficulties making decisions with, and staying close to, the people that are familiar to them if that is what they want, even if it means possibly limiting their choices somewhat.

A further aspect of continuity that was mentioned was the discontinuity between a college environment and the ‘outside world’ at transition. Whilst this may be an issue for all young people with learning difficulties, for those at an out-of-area school or college there was a sense of frustration by some of the interviewees that the young person’s confidence and self-esteem may have increased during their time in education, only for these gains to be jeopardised at the move back home to a different environment. One professional explained:

> She’s going to residential college, and they have developed immense amounts of confidence and skills and it’s just absolutely fantastic within that safe school ground and within that safe college environment. But when that person comes home and they’re back in an urban city where the risks are much higher, where you’re not in this safe little community, it’s very different and it’s very deskilling.

The suggestion here was for residential colleges to develop closer links with the diversity of environments that the young people come from, so that the impact of the move from one environment to another could be reduced.

**Minimising the effects of distance**

The third key element of a ‘good’ transition for young people in out-of-area residential schools or colleges was that of trying to minimise the effects of distance. Here, families mentioned that strong connections with other families in a similar circumstance to themselves could be very helpful. In addition, a professional suggested that to help with the distribution of information across distance, centralised information systems could be a good idea:
We’ve always tried to get information banks together and it’s never quite happened and it would be brilliant. If we could have a sort of central system I’m sure it wouldn’t take that much to organise, plus then if places or agencies had access to that they could then put up when they had vacancies. You’d be able to look and see what type of provision it was, what price it was, all that sort of stuff. If there was a central information bank like that that would be brilliant and if it could be cross counties that would be even better.

Further, with distance and travel sometimes a problem in visiting future options, creative use could be made of newer technologies including telephone and video conferencing, webcams, and digital photographs. A number of families and professionals mentioned the importance of a named worker who could work across geographical boundaries as being important to the success of a transition. One professional explained:

From the student’s point of view, it makes a huge difference if they’ve got, and it doesn’t matter whether it’s Connexions or a social worker - whichever one it is actually. I think it does need to be clear which one’s going to take the lead role, but as long as there’s somebody who is actually really working on behalf of the student and comes to see them here, comes to reviews, arranges things for them in their home area then that’s absolutely crucial, the students appreciate it.

Conclusion

The study collected data over a two-year period from 15 young people with learning difficulties in out-of-area, residential special schools and colleges – as well as from their families and the professionals who supported them. There is now a substantial body of literature and research in the field of transition for young disabled people, including people with learning difficulties. One of the aims of this study was to explore if there were any particular issues for young people living away from home in residential schools and colleges.

The research findings support much of what is already known about the challenges for young disabled people at transition. In addition, the findings suggest that transition planning and outcomes are especially problematic for individuals living away from their families in out-of-area residential schools or colleges. Not having a strong relationship with professionals from the placing authority, distance from home, and difficulties in supporting real choice or meaningful involvement by the young people meant that too many transitions were hurried, subject to last minute decisions by funders and providers, and perhaps most importantly, sources of immense stress and emotional upheaval for the young people and their families.

Harding (2004) suggests that in order for effective change to take place, individuals/organisations need to proceed through the steps of ‘awareness’, ‘interest’, ‘desire’ and ‘action’. At the ‘awareness’ stage there is pressure for change and active commitment towards it. Clearly, there is no shortage of policy documents and practice guidance about transition planning, and there are clear messages from families, young people and professionals about what could make a difference in practice. At the ‘interest’ stage of Harding’s matrix is a clear, shared vision by highly motivated staff working in partnership with each other. From our findings, it seems that this may well be the stumbling block in terms of translating theory into practice at transition: there was rarely a shared vision by those concerned about what a successful transition process and outcome might be like for a young person, nor of each other’s roles in this process. What was more apparent from interviews was a shorter term view of transition which took account of the move from school to college, or from child to adult services, but rarely of a life course transition from childhood to adulthood.

We would suggest that only when there are further real shifts in attitudes that create expectations of productive futures for the young people and support ‘can do’ approaches to the provision of life chances, coupled with engaging openly and creatively with the range of people, both in the ‘home’ and ‘host’ areas, supporting the young people and their families at transition, will effective change in the circumstances of young people with learning difficulties in out-of-area residential schools or colleges begin to take place.

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