



Building a sense of community: Including older LGBT in the way we develop and deliver housing with care

This viewpoint sets out a variety of ways in which the voices and needs of the older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) communities can be included in the development and provision of inclusive housing with care.

Written for the Housing Learning & Improvement Network by
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Background

Stonewall Housing has been providing services to the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans) community of all ages since 1983 and in the last two years has seen a marked increase in the number of older LGBT people requiring housing/care advice.

We believe that the needs of the older LGBT communities are often overlooked in housing and care planning and consequently many older LGBT people feel they have limited choice in the care options that are available.

Reflecting on some of the current legislative framework and the Government's recent housing strategy, '*Laying the Foundations: a national housing strategy for England*',¹ whose fundamental premise is one of personalisation, choice and control, we feel it's important to develop inclusive models of housing with care and support provision where older LGBT communities can feel secure enough to be open about their life stories.

Stonewall's research into the experiences and expectations of older LGBT people found that three in five respondents were not confident that social care and support services, like paid carers or housing services, would understand or be sensitive to their needs. Half said they would be uncomfortable coming out to care home staff and one third said they would be uncomfortable being out to a housing provider.

Introduction

*"It is a matter for celebration that people are living longer. Caring for and supporting each other should be something to celebrate."*²

Andrew Dilnot

Set against a backdrop of an increasingly ageing population and a time of growing awareness of the housing with care needs of an older population, we set out to provide a viewpoint reflecting the needs and wants of the marginalised older LGBT community. Little is said of older people's sexual orientation and even less about those older people that are LGBT.

Engaging and involving older LGBT groups in the development of housing, particularly housing with care, has often been on an opportunistic, sometimes ad hoc basis. Much of the current debate about care and housing is centred around the personalisation/commissioning agenda and providers of these services have often been slow to respond or recognise the diverse nature of their client/customer focus. It is therefore no surprise that older LGBT people do not feel considered in the wider housing debate and can feel that they are missing out on choices that are available to other sections of the older population.

In addition to the housing challenges that face us all as we age, there are particular challenges that face older LGBT people, who are more likely to live alone and less likely to have children or extended family networks they can call on for support. Some are reluctant to explore support from formal housing, health or social care providers because of a historic fear of discrimination.

Mindful of the political debate about personalisation and future care funding, we intend this document to provide a viewpoint that will offer a variety of ways in which the voices and needs of the older LGBT communities can be included in the development and provision of inclusive housing with care.

¹ *Laying the Foundations* (Nov 2011), Department for Communities and Local Government

² Dilnot Commission (July 2011), DH Commission on Funding of Care and Support

LGBT specific or LGBT integrated?

Older LGBT people cannot be viewed as a homogenous group (Cronin et al 2011). If you were to ask a group of older LGBT people whether they wanted specific or integrated (integrated in the sense of LGBT aware services that provide generic services that are inclusive of LGBT older people) services, you would get a variety of answers and opinions. For some, the ideal is services that are integrated and aware, and for others LGBT specific services are the way forward.

A recent article commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that *“research shows that the current generation of LGB people have very negative expectations of traditional residential and home care provision and would like the option to choose specialist LGB accommodation”*.³

In recent Manchester and Blackpool workshop events participants were asked questions that included:

“There should be LGBT integrated services because”... and

“There should be LGBT specific services because”...

There were a number of responses including having LGBT specific services to increase positive visibility and model best practice and as a place for signposting to services, and to enable a continuation of a lifestyle and identity. It was also highlighted as potentially a model from which generic services could develop.

They were also asked what, in their ideal world, older LGBT housing would look like. There were a number of answers including wanting mixed or ‘integrated’ opportunities for meeting and socialising, communal areas for activity and conversations, the opportunity for intergenerational socialising and the support to enable ‘continuation of lifestyle and identity’.

People involved, when asked whether there should be LGBT integrated services, also recommended developing supported housing options as ‘centres of excellence but not LGBT ghettos’, emphasising the importance of ‘equality of access to all services but acknowledging LGBT existence and diversity to foster a positive sense of inclusiveness and equality of opportunity’.

It is evident that ‘one size fits all’ is never going to be the option for older LGBT people, and providers require an adaptable and flexible approach to the services they provide. How to create this adaptable service is perhaps core to providing an inclusive successful model of housing for older LGBT people.

In discussion with the 50-65 age group, and those older LGBT people who are not at a point in their lives when they need any type of intervention or care, many of them have definitive ideas about what their housing should look like in the future. This usually takes the form of integrated projects that are LGBT friendly and places where support staff and carers are trained in all aspects of equality and diversity. However, in our experience if you ask the same question to older LGBT people faced with making those immediate decisions about care and those that are in need of care and support they will often say that they want LGBT specific services and that they want them now. Whether this is because the response is based on immediate need and the prospect of waiting for staff to be trained may be untenable for some is difficult to assess.

³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Jan 2013), *Assessing current and future housing and support options for older LGB people*

Housing 21 recently carried out a number of focus groups across the country asking just this question and from this came a letter printed in a daily newspaper that qualifies and illustrated exactly what we have been finding when we talk to different age groups of older LGBT people.

Letter – Reprinted from Daily Mail Friday August 3rd 2012 with permission of author:

“I’d hate to be the only gay in the care home

In my long experience, the saying ‘birds of a feather flock together’ is very relevant where gays are concerned, particularly if the ‘birds’ are getting a bit long in the tooth. Perhaps these sayings aren’t as well known among those half my age i.e. the middle aged.

At the age of 89, my memory is seriously affected and I’m terrible with names, I tell people that I am the luckiest ‘old gay man’ of my age: I’m in a wonderful long-term relationship with my partner who is many years younger than me. I’ve told him if he wants to put me into a home it’s got to be one that has a lot of other old gay men in it.

At a recent meeting of Housing 21 (which provides care, health and housing services for the elderly) I suggested this, but a young man said that wouldn’t be very ‘integrated’. He said he had a lot of straight friends who totally accepted him as a gay man. I had to tell him that most of my contemporaries (those who are still alive) and many others much younger than me aren’t terribly ‘integrated’ where homosexuality is concerned. People are polite to us, but some of those who were very close friends when I was ‘in the closet’ and had no idea I was gay (if I’d told them they wouldn’t have believed me: I had a wife and three children) don’t make a point of talking to me when I turn up at gatherings in my old village. I’m now the oldest gay in the village, but in days gone by I was the only gay in the village, though they didn’t know it I was living a lie.

That’s why I wrote my memoirs, A Gemini and another Gemini, hoping people would understand. But they don’t - and I can’t really be surprised because I don’t understand myself.

So how could I be happy in a ‘home’ where all there is to do is talk to the other inmates, if they’re all straight and don’t talk to me? I’m not going back into the closet again.

One of my greatest pleasures these days is to talk to other ‘old gay men’, though several tell me they’re still hiding the fact. Is it not about time there was somewhere they could go to enjoy their twilight years? There are 200,000 men over 65 living on their own and lonely. Ten to 15 per cent of these would prefer to go into a gay care home, sell up, use their pink pounds, let their hair down and enjoy their remaining years.

I visited a pensioner friend recently who has had a stroke and is in a home where most of the inmates are heterosexual old ladies. Lovely old ladies I’m sure but to be as happy as possible under such difficult circumstances it should be in the company if those with whom you have something in common.

George Montague.”

Polari carried out in 2005 a small scale, significant, ground breaking piece of research called “As we grow older”. They discovered that 91% of the lesbians and 75% of the gay men they surveyed wanted specific LGBT accommodation. There was some concern of creating ‘ghettos’ mainly around worries of harassment but many of the lesbians surveyed said they would feel safer in accommodation that was lesbian specific:

“...because of a belief in and/or acute awareness of the specific discriminatory effects of current mainstream provision, many older lesbians and gay men want their own specific community care and housing services and opportunities for social contacts and maintaining supportive networks with other older lesbians and gay men. They believe that such specific provision will lead to appropriate and non-discriminatory services for them.”⁴

Invisibility breeds contempt?

“The situation is complicated further if the people we are trying to see are not only hidden but hiding”⁵

Traies

There is a risk that a lack of data about the real housing needs of older LGBT people, as a consequence of ignorance, marginalisation and discrimination, could be misinterpreted as evidence of an absence of real needs.

Sensitive, appropriate monitoring can help address this and there are a number of guides available to organisations. It's important with monitoring to be clear about the information you require and what you then intend to do with that information. People are more likely to respond to monitoring that is appropriate, confidential and has a purpose. Monitoring the sexual orientation of your customer base is an ongoing process that will take time to embed itself and become familiar.

It has benefits for organisations:

- Recognising diversity maximises your organisation's investment in the workforce (LGF)

And benefits for individuals:-

- Creating a culture of inclusivity and openness with the customer
- Improving services that are tailored to need (LGF)

We know that representations of older people in daily life are limited and representations of older LGBT people almost non-existent. It is difficult to exactly assess how many LGBT people there are in the UK; it was not on the census and statistics are not always the most accurate. However it is generally believed that 5-7 % of the population identify as LGB or T.

For some people, disclosing their sexual orientation to their housing provider may not be an option they are comfortable with. However, rather than ignoring the issue and believing that 'we don't have people like that here', it's about giving people choice and a safe space in which to come out if they would like to. So, how do you then justify providing services for a community that as Traies says is not only *hidden but in hiding*. If person-centred holistic care with choice is at the core of your business then creating an inclusive equality based environment with safe spaces for your customers is the key.

“It is the organisation that needs to come out as gay or lesbian friendly rather than depending on clients to come out to get their needs met.”⁶

Age UK

⁴ Polari (2005), *As we grow older*

⁵ Traies J (2012), *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Ageing: Biographical Approaches for Inclusive Care and Support*

⁶ Age UK (2008), *The Whole of Me - Meeting the needs of Older Lesbian, Gay Men and Bisexuals living in Care Homes and Extra Care Housing*

There are a number of resources available which provide an excellent starting place. Stonewall Housing's twelve steps to being an LGBT-friendly landlord are also invaluable in helping you reassess your services and create safe spaces (see Appendix).

You may ask, why hide or want to be hidden? Fear of homophobic response, fearful of services being taken away from you and worries about harassment all play a part in the dynamic of disclosure. Historically, many LGBT people, particularly gay men (who were part of a community that was illegal until 1969), were subjected to various aversion therapies and treatments including ECT and chemical castration. They may have experienced criminalisation in law, been stigmatised by society, had condemnation from religious authorities and have been pathologised by medical practitioners.

Put those people into a place where they are faced with an uncertain future, feeling vulnerable making decisions about housing, potentially living with people who also grew up at a time when homosexuality was illegal, and for some returning to the closet may seem the only way. In a recent Stonewall survey, 73% of older LGB people said they wouldn't feel comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation to care staff. Some people may have never come out, some may have always been out and some people may be out to some and not others. Homophobia and harassment, not only from workers but other residents, are all too familiar to older LGBT people.

The coming out process is not a 'one off' event and often an LGBT person makes the decision to tell or not on a daily basis - whether it's the bank, the GP or any number of other organisations or people we come into contact with, we are continually risk assessing who we tell. Often the language used to mask our sexual orientation may not be familiar to organisations; using inclusive language when completing assessments/forms is fundamental. Referring to a contact person rather than 'next of kin' (next of kin being a legal concept in inheritance matters) suggests that your contact person is not necessarily a blood relation. Asking about partners, not husbands and wives, including civil partnership in relationship status - all of these things can help to provide a perception of a safe inclusive environment.

Often concepts of family for LGBT people differ from those of perceived societal norms and may include ex-partners and friends as extended or chosen family. This is relevant when families of origin may have rejected people and relationships may be strained and distant.

For some organisations the stumbling block is often the feeling that sexual orientation is a private matter and the blurring of sexual orientation with the physical act of intimacy creates an environment in which providers feel uncomfortable and unable to respond appropriately. In *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir⁷ reminds us how society tends to attribute non-subject status to older people, among other things, because of their exclusion from erotic possibilities. There is a lesson here for housing. The sector needs to recognise that sexual orientation and gender identity do not disappear on retirement.

Personalisation

“Older people who need ongoing support services want these to be personalised, to respond in a more flexible way to their individual needs and to give the person more control over the services they receive. Services need to be high-quality and reliable, as well as personalised.”⁸

National Housing Federation

⁷ de Beauvoir S (1972), *The Coming of Age*

⁸ National Housing Federation (2011), *Breaking the Mould: Re-visioning older people's housing*

Personalisation, with its promotion of person-centred support and choice and control brings an opportunity for a better way to support older LGBT people. Unlike generic provision, personalisation gives a chance to construct an individual service based on specific need.

The potential collective purchasing of services by a group of LGBT tenants may provide LGBT people with a way forward in terms of service provision. Coupled with a co-production response to commissioning services which would include community members from inception, this potentially changes the way services are provided. The Housing LIN have proposed a number of scenarios of how this could work in extra care housing in their recent viewpoints and case studies.

Best practice

Within housing, care and support providers in the UK there is evidence of a number of organisations that have good practice when it comes to older LGBT tenants. However, these are often based on a local response. This is the case with Blackpool Coastal Housing. They are based in an area with a large percentage of LGBT people and, similarly, Northwards Housing in Manchester also have a large number of older LGBT tenants in a specific sheltered accommodation. Often word of mouth about best practice spreads within the community and older LGBT tenants will apply for housing in these projects because they have a proven record with LGBT customers.

Organisations such as the Housing Diversity Network provide a forum where providers can gain accreditation and awards for their equality and diversity work.

A number of housing providers are on Stonewall's top 100 employers and groups like Berneslai Housing in South Yorkshire and Genesis Housing in London have put time, money and effort into working with LGBT staff and tenants.

Golden Gate housing provider in Warrington, have recently been awarded the Housing Diversity Network's accreditation. They hold specific months such as LGB month and a Trans month. They use these events, where they work with local LGBT organisations (LGBT Warrington and Trans Wirral), to provide awareness raising and training for both staff and customers. They also have a variety of initiatives designed to encourage discussion with their staff and customers about LGBT lives.

Anchor housing provides a LGBT staff and tenants group and is, as far as we are aware, the only provider that combines the two. The case study below illustrated how this group was formed and perhaps highlights the importance of monitoring.

Case Study

A 68 year old lesbian was harassed out of the house she owned in a Derbyshire village by local people who verbally abused her, vandalised her camper van and spread untrue gossip about her. She moved to sheltered accommodation in Hackney and was determined to keep her sexuality under wraps at her new home until she fully trusted people.

She compared her first 12 months in London as *'like having a split personality'* and acknowledges that she was lonely and isolated and felt down quite often; *'I couldn't really tell them anything about myself. I could talk about the past and my children, but I couldn't say anything about the real me. It was almost like speaking a different language.'*

A year into her new life as a tenant of one of England's largest retirement housing providers, she received something through her door which would change things for other LGBT tenants and staff in the organisation. The organisation's marketing department asked residents to specify which magazines they read, and this included the lesbian magazine *Diva*. It turned out the Housing Association was conducting a customer profiling exercise as part of wider work on equalities and not 'fishing' for information as she had first thought. When this was explained to her it gave her an opportunity to tell the marketing team how low and isolated she was feeling, and also a space to disclose her sexual orientation. After this she found herself talking at a tenants' forum about how it felt to live as a lesbian in sheltered housing.

Fast forward four-and-a-half years and she now chairs their LGBT group, which provides support and guidance to tenants and staff and acts as a sounding board on LGBT issues for the organisation.

It has 50 members, around two fifths of whom are staff and has been involved in developing training for employees. She feels that being at the forefront of a growing LGBT forum has transformed her life, giving her a social network of other gay residents with whom she has a 'double affinity'.

It has not been all smooth sailing and she feels there is still an undercurrent of homophobia but she is confident that if she had a problem where she was living it would be dealt with and says that it feels safer now.

Other projects that we are aware of in development include LGBT friendly care agencies and plans by an NHS Foundation Trust in West Sussex for LGBT specific nursing care for older LGBT people with dementia. There are also a number of privately funded housing projects at various stages of development.

The future - Stonewall Housing Older LGBT housing group

Stonewall Housing's Older LGBT housing group provides a national platform for shared dialogue, providing regional groups around the country. The aims of the group are varied and include enabling older LGBT people and housing, care and support providers to share their positive and negative experiences of current housing, care and support services, to create a place to shape policy and practices on a local, regional and national level.

We are in the process of developing best practice guides and National Standards for providers of services aimed at improving housing, care and support services offered to LGBT people. As referenced earlier, Stonewall Housing have also developed twelve steps to becoming a better LGBT landlord (see Appendix).

We believe that the sector needs to gain a better understanding of the challenges that older LGBT people face in relation to housing. Following the Equality Act 2010, The Homes and Communities Agency as a public body has a legal responsibility to take proactive measures to address inequalities. As a response to this it published draft equality and diversity objectives in 2011, followed recently by an equality and diversity strategy.⁹ The HCA is committed to an

⁹ Homes and Communities Agency (2012), *Equality and Diversity Strategy*

evidence-based approach to investment decisions, but it is also clear that there is uneven national and local information about the housing needs of older LGBT people.

A new approach to regulation in the housing sector that emphasises transparency, tenant scrutiny and accountability, offers real opportunities for housing providers to generate evidence about the needs of their customers in their full diversity, and to provide services which are not only sensitive, but appropriate and ultimately good value for money.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this viewpoint, we don't believe that 'one size fits all' is a solution. Whether successful outcomes for housing options include a co-housing project, an LGBT specific accommodation based service, fully integrated services or a training programme for existing housing, care and support providers, ultimately it remains about providing choice and options for a community for whom those choices are limited.

We see the task of the National Older LGBT Housing group to be the environment for all these projects to share best practice and to provide a space for housing, care and support providers, community members and older LGBT organisations to have the much needed dialogue about the future of housing for our community.

At a recent palliative care LGBT conference, one of the speakers, referring to the needs of LGBT people, said "*it's not rocket science*", and in essence she was right.

Talking to customers, providing safe environments for people to come out if they want to, being robust about your policies and complaints procedures are all practices that will enable organisations to engage with the LGBT community. Look at best practice from other organisations and see if there are things you can learn. Make links with LGBT groups in your area. Talk to the older LGBT housing group, especially if there's a regional group in your area. We all know change takes time and organisations can be challenged by it, but with some joined up thinking the lives of your older LGBT tenants and your LGBT staff can be changed.

Increasingly, a generation of older LGBT people who have lived their lives as out and proud citizens, will demand that their wants and needs are seen and provided for by their service providers - and that will be the beginning of a new journey of liberation for us all in housing with care. We invite Housing LIN members to join us on our travels.

Appendix: 12 steps to providing a better service

Strategic thinking

1. **Compliance:** Housing providers need to consider compliance under the Equality Act - how will you aim to eliminate discrimination, advance equality and foster good relations?

Also consider the implications of human rights legislation. You must comply with consumer standards, understand the diverse needs of tenants, and remember to consult other relevant strategies such as the Government Equalities Office LGBT Action Plan and Trans Action Plan.

2. **Leadership:** For some, fostering leadership in this area will only require an evolution of current thinking. For others, however, there will need to be a revolution in the approach to working with LGBT people, who may face harassment or ignorance where they live or work. Organisations will benefit from setting their own objectives and targets that can be monitored or scrutinised by boards, staff and residents.

LGBT people should be represented on boards and resident panels. If an organisation is nervous or ignorant of LGBT issues then staff and clients are more likely to be too.

3. **Internal campaigning:** All staff, board members, volunteers, resident representatives and contractors should undergo training about LGBT issues. This training could be part of a wider company awareness campaign that includes engagement with LGBT staff and clients, and a full review of organisational policies. Guinness South commissioned Stonewall Housing to do just that. Training was built around the issues highlighted in focus groups with staff and clients, and feedback from this training fed into a board report advising how the organisation could improve its work with LGBT people.

Information gathering

4. **Data collection:** Many housing providers may not know how many LGBT people live and work in their organisation. Rather than being unnecessary or intrusive, asking about sexual orientation and gender identity will show organisations who their staff and residents are.

Before gathering this information, landlords should explain the reasoning behind it, agreeing the questions to be asked and how they will be asked. They should also provide guarantees of confidentiality and train staff so that everyone takes the matter seriously.

Data collection should be more than a paper exercise; data should be analysed and used to improve services and standards. Organisations should not be put off by some people preferring not to answer initially, as many may be nervous coming out where they live and work.

5. **Build trust:** As people become more confident in their organisation, they will become more open about their sexual orientation and gender identity. Organisations will be able to ask if staff and residents feel safe to be out where they live and work. They should not wait for staff and residents to come out to them - they should be using various engagement tools to seek out LGBT people's views and monitor how many are or are not responding. Confidence and trust will grow further as LGBT people see positive outcomes following from their engagement.
6. **Understand the issues:** LGBT people share common housing issues with others, but they also have some specific issues. Two thirds of people who contact Stonewall Housing for advice state that their housing problem is directly related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

LGBT people may also be affected by certain welfare reforms differently than others (for example, they may face domestic abuse and harassment, and limiting their affordable housing options may put them in further danger). Stonewall Housing has provided some useful introductory guidance, and we have been involved in research with other organisations, such as National Aids Trust, Refugee Support and Galop.

Practical suggestions

- 7. Policies:** LGBT people need to be confident that organisations have robust policies that show no tolerance or hierarchy of discrimination. Policies should not directly nor indirectly discriminate against LGBT people. They should appreciate the specific needs of LGBT tenants, residents and employees, and be written to recognise these specific needs.

LGBT staff, residents and community organisations should be invited to assist with equality impact assessments of policies. Brighton and Hove council has already developed LGBT-specific housing strategies and policies, and others can follow their lead.

- 8. Partners:** Housing providers should develop close links with other agencies working with LGBT people. Building relationships with LGBT voluntary organisations will improve individual support for residents, while service providers and commissioners can work together to establish local needs and plan services. This is important since LGBT people may not exist in great numbers in some areas, and may need to move to new areas if they are fleeing from abuse or harassment.

Links with community health and mental health services are important – research shows a clear correlation between poor, unsafe housing and poor health outcomes for LGBT people.

- 9. Promotion:** Housing providers need to be seen to welcome LGBT people through their external publicity and internal communications strategies. All promotional material should celebrate diversity, and communications should include plans to reach out to LGBT people through specific venues, groups and websites.

Housing providers should also make plans to celebrate cultural and historical events such as LGBT History Month, Pride and Trans Day of Remembrance, as well as individual events such as civil partnerships. Providers may also want to consider signing up to a recognised charter mark that is audited to show LGBT people that they are proud to welcome LGBT people and working to improve services for them.

Shaping services

- 10. Service design:** Housing providers and commissioners should consider commissioning LGBT-specific services, in partnership with others if that proves most cost-effective.

In London, four boroughs and London councils together commission Stonewall Housing to offer support and advice services specifically to LGBT people. LGBT people access all housing services, but some will prefer to benefit from services provided by and for their own communities.

Public sector cuts should not prevent housing providers developing innovative solutions to meet their housing needs specifically.

11. Shaping care and support: Care and support providers should recognise that LGBT people have similar experiences to others but also specific needs and risks. For example, younger people may lose family support networks when they come out, while older people may feel the need to go back into the closet for fear of a negative reaction from care staff. Rather than be ignored, these issues should be core to any care or support package.

Organisations should also plan support groups for staff and residents - virtual or physical - to allow them the opportunity to share experiences. Anchor Trust's LGBT tenant group has proved very successful, providing support and guidance and becoming a sounding board on LGBT issues.

12. Share your story: Housing providers should celebrate their successes and be honest about their mistakes, so that LGBT people can benefit from better services that recognise their needs and celebrate their diversity.

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit www.housinglin.org.uk

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If you have an example of how your organisation is closely aligned to a 'Living Lab' approach or a subject that you feel we should cover, please contact us.

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