

**Office of the Children's Commissioner:**

## **Participation strategy**

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**June 2014 – May 2015**

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If you would like a copy of the children and young people’s version of the participation strategy, you can [download it from our website here](#).

## Introduction

### **Article 12 of the UNCRC:**

**Children have the right to be listened to and to have their views taken seriously in the decisions that affect their lives.**

*This is fundamental not only to what we work on but also to the way we work.*

We are required by law to promote and protect children’s rights. The law also requires us to involve children and young people in our work. This is in accordance with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which sets out children and young people’s right for their views to be listened to and taken seriously in the decisions that affect their lives.

It is therefore vital that we have effective ways of engaging and involving children and young people in our work, to ensure their views and experiences inform and influence what we do and what we say, to help improve their lives. This strategy sets out how we do this.



## Section 1

# About the Office of the Children's Commissioner

The Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) is a national public sector organisation led by the Children's Commissioner for England, Dr Maggie Atkinson. We promote and protect children's rights in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and, as appropriate, other human rights legislation and conventions.

We do this by listening to what children and young people say about things that affect them and encouraging adults making decisions to take their views and interests into account.

We publish evidence, including that which we collect directly from children and young people, bringing matters that affect their rights to the attention of Parliament, the media, children and young people themselves, and society at large. We also provide advice on children's rights to policy-makers, practitioners and others.

The post of Children's Commissioner for England was established by the Children Act 2004. The Act makes us responsible for working on behalf of all children in England and in particular, those whose voices are least likely to be heard. It says we must speak for wider groups of children on the issues that are not-devolved to regional Governments. These include immigration, for the whole of the UK, and youth justice, for England and Wales.

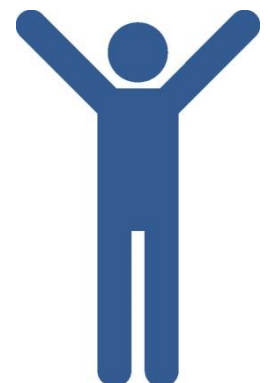
The Children and Families Act 2014 changed the Children's Commissioner's remit and role. It provided the legal mandate for the Commissioner and those who work in support of their remit at the OCC to promote and protect children's rights. It enables us to focus on children who are at particular risk of having their rights infringed. This includes children and young people living away from home or receiving social care which the Children and Families Act 2014 requires us to have particular regard to. The Act allows us to provide advice and assistance to and to represent these children and young people.

### **Our vision**

A society where children and young people's rights are realised, where their views shape decisions made about their lives and they respect the rights of others.

### **Our mission**

We will promote and protect the rights of children in England. We will do this by involving children and young people in our work and ensuring their voices are heard. We will use our statutory powers to undertake inquiries, and our position to engage, advise and influence those making decisions that affect children and young people.





## Section 2

### What do we mean by Participation at the OCC?

It is important to find ways to listen to, understand and learn from children and young people about their experiences and their views. We can listen to and learn from children and young people on all the things that matter to them like being loved and cared for, keeping safe, making friends, playing and learning. We do this so that children and young people can have a say in what happens to them and to other children and because they have a right to be heard on things which are important to them and affect their lives – in line with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

***“It has to be the norm to listen to young people”***

*Boy, aged 14 years involved in OCC project*

Some people worry that children’s right to a voice means adults doing exactly what children and young people ask. This is not the case, rather, it is about adults and children respecting and trying to understand each other’s views so that it makes a difference to both. It is about recognising that children and young people are experts in what they feel and think about their lives. Children and young people do act and think for themselves and care about others. They need support to find ways to act which build their confidence and self-esteem. Children and young people have told us how important it is for them to be understood and valued. So we try to get to know the children and young people we work with or at least work together with people who do know them well and we keep in touch with them regularly.

***“[We] built a relationship and they got to know us and when we felt trust we told them what was going on”***

*Girl, aged 16 years involved in OCC project*

We take notice when they say that they wish to be seen as individuals and not just as a whole group and we find different ways in which they can be involved in our work often using various creative methods such as storytelling, drama and art.

Children and young people have let us know time and again that when adults have listened to them they don’t know if it has made any difference and so have questioned the point of giving their views. We always explain to them how their views and ideas can be understood and listened to and what we will do afterwards. We also explain what is not possible and the reasons why.

***“You need to actually feed back to children about the changes that have or haven’t been made. This reassures them they have been listened to”***

*Girl, aged 14 years involved in OCC project*

When children and young people have a voice or a way of expressing what matters to them, it can help them tell someone (or let someone know) if they are worried or hurt. Children and young people can come up with helpful ways to make their own and other children’s lives happier, healthier and better. It is the job of participation to make sure this happens.

***“Something I can do to help children that aren’t as lucky as others is to introduce them to people we think can become friends with them”***

*Girl, aged 9 years involved in OCC project*

## The OCC Wheel of Participation

There are many different ways children and young people can be involved in influencing thinking, including initiating their own ideas and projects, shaping policies and services, supporting commissioning of work, contributing to specific projects and evaluating and sharing ideas about their own experiences. How children and young people are involved can depend on many factors, such as the stage of a project that their views and experience can inform and influence; and/or the children and young people's readiness and ability to take part; and/or an organisation or adult's preparedness and ability to involve children and young people.

We have developed a 'Wheel of Participation' which is based on Phil Treseder's Degrees of Participation. This Wheel of Participation helps us at the OCC to recognise how children and young people are participating in our work and whether at an inform, consult or involve stage.

# Involving children and young people in decision making...

Based on the 'Degrees of Participation' by Phil Treseder

## INVOLVE

### Children and young people initiated and directed

Children and young people have the initial idea and decide how the project is to be carried out. Adults are available but do not take charge.

### Children and young people initiated shared decisions with adults

Children have the ideas, set up projects and come to adults for advice, discussion and support. The adults do not direct, but offer their expertise for young people to consider.

### Assigned but informed

Adults decide on the project and young people volunteer for it. The young people understand the project, they know who decided to involve them and why. Adults respect young people's views.

### Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children and young people

Adults have the initial idea, but young people are involved in every step of the planning and implementation. Not only are their views considered, but children are also involved in making the decisions.

## INFORM

### Consulted and informed

The project is designed and run by adults, but children and young people are consulted. They have a full understanding of the process and their opinions are taken seriously.

## CONSULT



## Section 3

### Ethics, safeguarding and children's rights

The safety and wellbeing of the children and young people who engage and work with us is paramount. We take the utmost care to ensure that children and young people feel protected and supported when they are engaged with us. We recognise the potential for risk or harm arising from our participation work and strive to prevent this from occurring. This applies to children and young people getting in touch with us and engaging with us at any level and includes contact through social media, direct work or commissioning arrangements.

*Please refer to our [Safeguarding information for children and young people](#), Annex 1.*

All participation work with children and young people will adhere to the highest ethical principles. These **ethical principles** inform all our work across the OCC, including commissioned participation work and our research.

*Please refer to our [Research strategy 2014–2015](#), available on our website.*

These **ethical principles** are summarised below under the relevant articles in the UNCRC:

#### **Promoting and protecting Article 3: Best interests of the child**

- Engaging and involving children and young people will be of benefit to them
- Respecting the rights of children and young people
- Adopting reflective and reflexive practice and quality assurance
- Ensuring the reliability and validity of work

#### **Promoting and protecting Article 12: Respect for views of the children**

- Ensuring children and young people will be heard and taken seriously
- Enabling informed consent, voluntary participation and feedback
- Ensuring children and young people's voices and views are evident in our research methods and findings, and are disseminated effectively

#### **Promoting and protecting Article 19: Protection from harm**

- Promoting wellbeing, ensuring safety and avoiding harm

#### **Promoting and protecting Article 16: Right to privacy**

- Explaining and ensuring confidentiality and effective data storage and handling

#### **Promoting and Protecting Article 2: Without discrimination**

- Recognising and understanding diversity and promoting accessibility and equality

### **Guidance for working with children and young people**

We have developed specific guidance for adults and young people working for and on behalf of the OCC. It will help them to work with children and other young people in a safe, respectful and supportive way. It provides advice which helps to protect children, and also identifies any practices which could be mistakenly interpreted. It also sets standards which help us all to monitor our own conduct and to identify inappropriate conduct by others which might raise safeguarding concerns.

*Please refer to our [Safeguarding guidance for working with children and young people](#), available from our website.*



## Section 4

### Recognition, feedback and reward

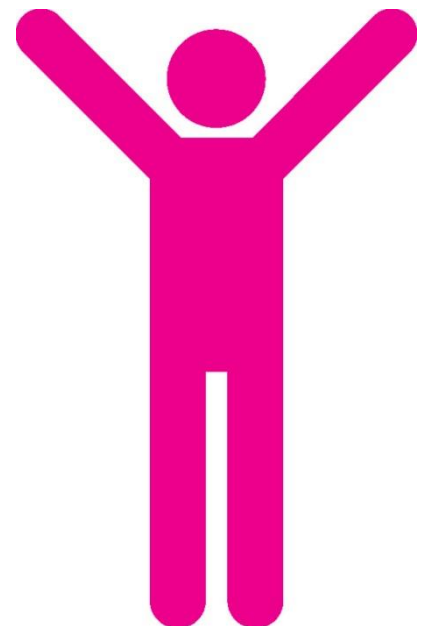
To help us engage and involve children and young people in our work and promote Article 12 we have produced **guidance for the recognition and reward of participation activities**. It sets out the principles for recognising and rewarding children and young people, ensuring that all our projects and staff recognise and reward participation fairly whilst understanding that participation is a voluntary activity.

The Rewards and recognition policy recognises that participation can help children and young people understand and value having their voice heard and taken seriously. It also supports children and young people to develop their abilities and skills, and act for themselves.

All contributions from children and young people will be acknowledged and valued in some way. This may be through offering certification or reward and most importantly by feeding back how their contributions have influenced our work and decisions. Some or all of these approaches may be viewed by young people as a thank you and/or an encouragement for them to participate.

It is important that any recognition, certification or reward is discussed and agreed with organisations supporting the engagement of children and young people and also with the children and young people taking part. Our approach is not to pay for children and young people to take part (apart from the reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses) – instead shopping vouchers may be used to thank individuals for their contribution to our work. Organisations working with us (by negotiation) can invoice us to cover their costs, including staff time to support children and young people to take part and the resources required to recognise and reward in line with their own policies.

***Please refer to our [Reward and recognition guidance](#), available from our website.***





## Section 5 OCC priorities and actions

The Children Act 2004 and the Children and Families Act 2014 require us to involve children and young people in our work, and our vision, mission and values state our commitment to doing so.

**Article 12 of the UNCRC – the right for children to be listened to and to have their views taken seriously** – is fundamental not only to what we work on but also to the way we work.

Article 12 is strengthened by the inter-related Articles on best interests, access to information, freedom of association and expression, respect for developing capacity, non-discrimination and safety – many of which are outlined in this strategy. They enable the OCC to ensure the views and experiences of children and young people inform, influence and challenge our work and are essential to achieving our vision and mission.

This is evidenced through the views and experiences of children and young people informing and influencing the **OCC Business Plan 2014–2015** and this Participation strategy.

**The reflections and learning that have contributed to the review and update of this strategy within the OCC, from organisations, and from children and young people are summarised below:**

- Working to principles, policies and guidelines as exemplified by last year's Participation strategy, Safeguarding policy and Ethical principles ensured the OCC's engagement and involvement of children and young people kept them safe and enabled them to effectively share their views and experiences across our work last year and achieve all the objectives as set in the Participation Strategy 2013–2014.
- The OCC approach of working through relevant organisations to engage and involve children and young people in their work is recognised and valued. This approach supports the communication of our role and projects; relationship building with the organisations; and support before, during and after sessions with children and young people.
- We need to continue to build on our engagement with children and young people living away from home and receiving social care; children under 11 years of age; children and young people who fall within the protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010; and children and young people whose rights are least recognised and realised, and who are identified as the least heard.

**In taking forward the above, evaluation revealed:**

- We should continue to understand that not all children and young people are or want to be a part of 'formal' participation or 'voice' group but their views and experiences should be sought and listened to in other ways in line with Article 12. This may be through one to one conversations, creative projects, or research projects that use a multi method approach. The latter might include engaging with parent/carers and support workers and ethnological or observational work.
- We should value and work with children in care councils but recognise engagement in them across the country is variable. We need to think about how the OCC can engage with these councils but also recognise they will not be a sufficient mechanism for engaging with all children living away from home and receiving social care services.
- To achieve many of the ideas above requires that the OCC visit settings and groups across the country, rather than relying on children and organisations coming to us.

## Our strategic priorities

Article 12 is highlighted in priority 4 of the OCC Business Plan 2014-2015 but is essential to achieving all five priorities.

1. We will promote and protect all children and young people's rights in England. We will have particular regard to children who live away from home or who receive social care, or who are at risk of having their rights infringed for another reason. We will provide advice and assistance to and also represent children and young people within the new section 8A of the Children Act 2004, as inserted by the Children and Families Act 2014.
2. We will promote and protect children and young people's rights to access services and support that enable them to develop, flourish and realise their potential.
3. We will promote and protect children and young people's right to protection from violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation, with particular regard to the most vulnerable groups who are afforded special protection under the UNCRC.
4. We will promote and protect children and young people's rights to participation, and have their views respected, and their interests taken seriously, in matters and decisions that affect their lives.
5. We will promote and protect children's and young people rights through the way we work, and by being an efficient organisation that is flexible and capable of responding with authority and expertise.

The role of the Participation team at OCC is to establish the structures and mechanisms in order to achieve priority 4. The specific actions required by the participation team to provide advice and support on each priority are outlined in **the action plan** overleaf.

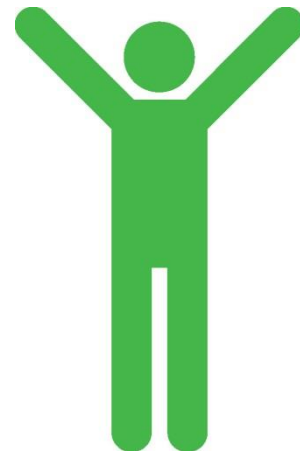


## Section 6

### Action plan 2014–2015

OCC priorities in Business Plan 2014–2015	Actions required in relation to participation The actions cited under priority 4 (below) will be essential to support participation across all the OCC priorities, and in addition we will:	Success indicators These success indicators are applicable across our Business Plan priorities:
<p>1. We will promote and protect all children's and young people's rights in England. We will have particular regard to children who live away from home or who receive social care, or who are at risk of having their rights infringed for another reason.</p> <p>We will provide advice and assistance to and also represent children and young people within the new section 8A of the Children Act 2004, as inserted by the Children and Families Act 2014.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify, plan, support and deliver the engagement and involvement of children living away from home and receiving social care across all the work of the OCC. This will include convening and supporting children and young people meeting with Government Ministers.</li> <li>• Develop and support a programme of visits to children in care and different care settings across England and involve young people in helping to plan and support these visits.</li> <li>• Research and identify how children in care councils are working across England in order to best work with them or the organisations who support them in our work.</li> <li>• Promote advice, assistance (including access to advocacy) and representation function when engaging and involving children living away from home and receiving social care.</li> </ul>	<p>All Project Initiation Documents have considered, identified and addressed the engagement and involvement of children and young people.</p> <p>All commissioned research and participation work has considered, identified and addressed the engagement and involvement of children and young people.</p> <p>Amplify own project on children and young people's mental health is completed and the findings collated by March 2015. Report launched and disseminated May 2015.</p> <p>Children and young people have been involved in 70% of relevant procurement and recruitment activities.</p>
<p>2. We will promote and protect children and young people's rights to access services and support that enable them to develop, flourish and realise their potential.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide advice and support on all OCC projects on how children and young people can inform and influence projects focused at achieving this priority (refer to Business Plan 2014–2015).</li> <li>• Support a project conceived and led by our young people's advisory group, Amplify, on children and young people's mental health.</li> </ul>	<p>Children and young people's evaluation and feedback on participation work they have taken part in, is 85% positive.</p>

<p>3. We will promote and protect children and young people's right to protection from violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation, with particular regard to the most vulnerable groups who are afforded special protection under the UNCRC.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that the Child Sexual Abuse Inquiry has identified, planned and supported the engagement and involvement of children and young people in line with our Ethical principles and Safeguarding policy. This will include any commissioned work.</li> <li>• To ensure that our National Preventive Mechanism work that draws upon our powers of entry has identified, planned and supported an engagement and involvement of children and young people in line with our Ethical principles and safeguarding policy.</li> </ul>	<p>Feedback and evaluation from organisations within the participation network who have worked with us is 85% positive.</p> <p>Children and young people from Amplify, Young Amplify and our participation network take part in Children's Commissioner Takeover Day 2014 and feedback on this experience 90% positive.</p>
<p><b>4. We will promote and protect children's and young people's rights to participating, having their views respected, and interests taken seriously, in matters and decisions that affect their lives.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure we have the structures and mechanism in place to engage and involve children and young people across areas of the OCC Wheel of Participation.  This will include coordinating and supporting Amplify and Young Amplify: setting-up and supporting specific working, advisory and expert groups of children and young people.</li> <li>• Develop and support OCC participation network of organisations that help and enable us to engage and involve children and young people in line with our Ethical principles and Safeguarding policy.</li> <li>• Support and chair the National Participation Forum, which helps to network and supports national organisations to promote and protect Article 12.</li> <li>• Identify, plan, support and deliver ways for children and young people to be engaged and involved in our policy work across OCC (children in care and care leavers, health, education, safeguarding, youth justice, asylum and immigration, and child poverty).  This will include for our Inquiries, Child's Rights Impact Assessments, Government consultations and projects.</li> </ul>	<p>The new OCC website, including materials on UNCRC reflects the involvement of children and young people.</p> <p>Children and young people's version of OCC work, including our reports are produced as required.</p> <p>Equality monitoring data and additional information is collated and analysed to contribute to performance measurement.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help identify and support recruitment and procurement processes to ensure children and young people can be involved in our commissioned research and participation work and the appointment of staff.</li> <li>• Ensure we create and support a reflective, reflexive and learning environment that means we continuously (and with children and young people) listen, learn and develop our participation work including through all our research activities (refer to OCC Research strategy 2014–2015).</li> <li>• Report the views and experiences, concerns and positive contributions of children and young people, through highlighting their voices in our publications and other materials.</li> <li>• Help promote and support Children’s Commissioner Takeover Day 2014 and plan and support the involvement of children and young people for our office.</li> <li>• Plan and support children and young people to be involved in the development of UNCRC materials for the new OCC website.</li> </ul>	
<p>5. We will promote and protect children and young people’s rights through the way we work, and by being an efficient organisation that is flexible and capable of responding with authority and expertise.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support children and young people from Amplify, Young Amplify or the participation networks are supported to take part in commissioning and recruitment processes of OCC.</li> <li>• Identify and develop child and young person friendly methods of communication (including the OCC website) that include feedback and reporting on OCC work.</li> <li>• Produce, analyse and report information to help the monitoring and evaluation of participation.</li> </ul>	



## Section 7

### Monitoring and review

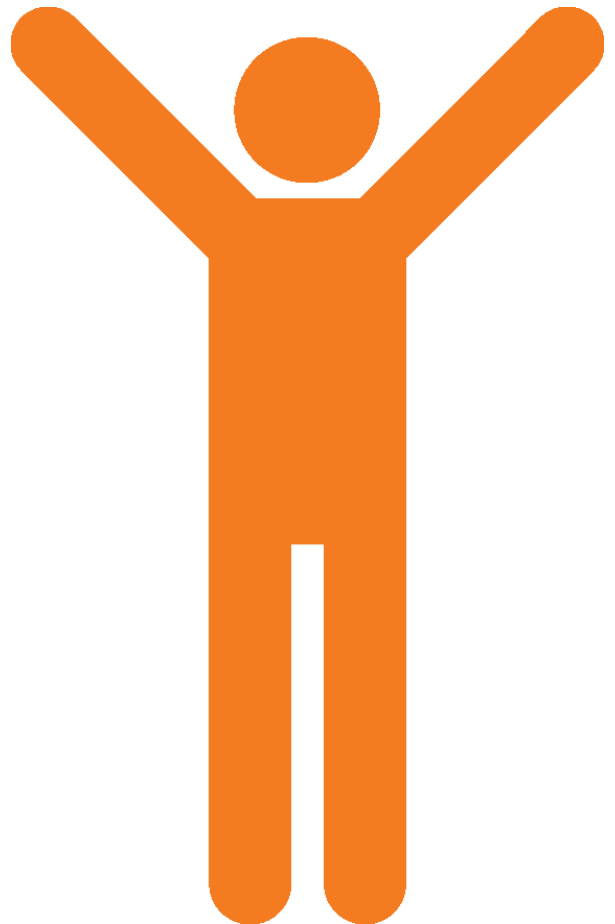
This strategy specifically informs the work of the Participation team at the OCC and addresses participation work across the office. The individual objectives of the team are aligned to ensuring the action plan is delivered.

The Head of Participation will have the responsibility for developing, implementing, monitoring and reviewing this strategy and directly reports to the Director of Communications and Participation. The strategy will be signed off by Commissioner's Board.

Through the process of quarterly monitoring of the OCC Business Plan the Leadership team at the OCC will be able to measure performance against the action plan. This will involve engaging and evaluating impact with children and young people, OCC staff and partner organisations who help us deliver this work.

A summary report on performance of this strategy will be submitted to the Audit and Risk Committee as required.

**For further information on the participation work at OCC please contact the Participation team at [occ.participation@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:occ.participation@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk)**





## Annex 1







### Safeguarding information for children and young people

#### What we do at the Office of the Children's Commissioner to keep you safe



When the Children's Commissioner, and those in her team (OCC), meet with children and young people, we do everything possible to make sure everyone is safe.

This means that we have:

-  done all we can to spot any risks, reduced them as much as we can and planned for managing things which may go wrong
-  people on our staff team who can give advice to all of us on what to do if we have concerns about a child or young person
-  worked hard to make sure that any other organisation we work with has been equally careful and taken the same steps
-  trained all of us on what to look out for and what to do if we become concerned about a child or about a risk from an adult to a child (more about that later)
-  worked hard to make sure that you will be safe when using our web site and online forums and that there is advice there for you about keeping safe on-line
-  been careful in deciding who works for and with us by checking their backgrounds and having strict rules for how all adults can behave when with children and young people.



If you are worried about something, or someone is harming you, you can always tell us.

We will try to give you some advice or tell you who the best person to speak to is but, if we are really worried about you, we are not allowed to keep what you tell us to ourselves and we will have to tell other adults whose job it is to keep children and young people safe.

We will tell you when we do this and what will happen next. We will always try to do the right thing to keep you safe!

Lots more information overleaf...

## What happens if a member of staff becomes worried that a child might be being harmed or that someone poses a risk to children?

Everyone working for the Office of the Children's Commissioner has been given clear advice on what they must do if they think a child is at risk of harm or that someone poses a risk to children. Just like everyone else who works with children and young people (e.g. teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, youth workers) they have been told they are not allowed to keep that information to themselves but have to share it with others in order to keep those children safe. From past experience we know that this is the best way to make you safe.

**This means that should they be told, or even suspect, that a child or young person is being harmed or that someone might harm a child, they will discuss that with the person in our office who can help them to decide what to do next.**

If they believe that the risk of harm might be serious, they will contact the Local Authority where you live and ask them to look into it. They have to do this as there are only some organisations, like children's services, the police and NSPCC, who are allowed by the law to look into things like this. While this is going on, they will try to find the best support to help you through it as we know it can be scary and hard to understand who is doing what, why and when.

**If you are ever being harmed, or another young person or adult tries to harm you, you should always tell someone. Either tell your parent or carer, one of the staff here, or a teacher or any adult you know and trust. The other thing you can do is ring Childline on 0800 1111 – but please make sure you tell someone. You don't have to suffer and there is someone who can protect you.**



This is available to [download from our website](#).

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