



BUILDING BELFAST BACK BETTER

BELFAST CHAMBER'S 15 POINT PLAN
TO REBUILD OUR CITY

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BUILDING BELFAST BACK BETTER

Belfast – like cities, regions and entire states across the world – has experienced the full range of negative effects brought by the coronavirus pandemic. People have sadly passed away. Many more have fallen ill. Businesses that were trading well have suddenly had to cease and seen their income disappear almost overnight. Virtually no aspect of our society has gone untouched with our economy especially impacted.

- Surveys conducted by Belfast Chamber showed that, at the height of the pandemic, only 6% of businesses in Belfast were physically open and trading with 80% of firms furloughing staff
- Unemployment in the region almost doubled inside a month
- Footfall in Belfast city centre fell by more than 90%
- Data from Google showed a decrease of 74% in retail and recreation activity in Belfast between early April and mid-May

So profound has been the impact that restrictions imposed on businesses to help stop the spread of COVID-19 that unprecedented levels of Government support have been needed. Belfast Chamber, as the voice of business in the city, has endeavoured to ensure that Belfast's needs have been to the fore and we have worked hard alongside other business organisations and local chambers of commerce to secure support such as the extended rates holiday for retail and hospitality businesses and the creation of the hardship fund along with the earlier than anticipated reopening of customer facing sectors. Yet, in spite of all the support that has been offered, the road to recovery is going to be a bumpy one. Some businesses will not survive. Jobs will go.

But as bleak as things sound, Belfast Chamber still believes that Belfast can and will rise again. Business in the city has endured much down through the years and always exhibited a tremendous resilience and ability to bounce back. We have all the assets we need to succeed – the talent; the great companies; the entrepreneurial spirit; the world leading sectors and universities; the retail, hospitality, leisure and cultural offering. The ingredients for not just recovery but long term success are there but after such a sharp decline in our economy, we all need to work together to nurture our city's economy through these tough times and put in place the foundations for a far better future.



BELFAST CHAMBER'S PRIORITIES FOR A BETTER BELFAST

In our Belfast Manifesto, Belfast Chamber set out its '7 Priorities for a Better Belfast'. They were:

- An Economically Empowered City
- A Vibrant Central Belfast
- A City That Can Deliver
- An Accessible City
- A Clean and Safe City
- An International and Diverse City
- A Tech City

Whilst COVID-19 has brought about much change, Belfast Chamber still believes that those 7 principles remain hugely relevant and concentrating on each will be key to our city's economic recovery. It would be easy to look at the grim situation we face, with the UK economy shrinking by 20.4% in just one month and this crisis coming so soon after the financial crash of a decade ago and be pessimistic. But Belfast Chamber believes in our city, its people and the businesses we represent. In mapping out a route to recovery, Belfast Chamber encourages our decision makers at Westminster, at Stormont and in City Hall to be bold and seize this opportunity to build Belfast back better.



Belfast Chamber believes that we can, with common cause, joined up action, strategic investments and a focus on social and urban regeneration as well as economic renewal, build Belfast back better by:

- Building an economy on the bedrock of sectors like fintech, cyber security and medical technology that our city so excels at and for which future demand will be high;
- Stimulating more city centre living as the most sustainable way to achieve the Belfast Agenda target of growing the city's population by 66,000 by 2035 and provide a boost for our retail and hospitality sectors;
- Reshaping the city to create and connect to open and green space, making the city less reliant on the private car and more pedestrian and cyclist friendly whilst maintaining maximum permeability by public transport and necessary vehicles;
- Creating a city that is attractive to residents, visitors from the rest of the region and tourists from farther afield, with an emphasis on making Belfast a place for everyone and especially for families to spend time;
- Identifying, accelerating and investing in the infrastructure projects that will enable greater growth; and
- Ensuring that growth is inclusive and sustainable with an emphasis on developing next generation skills and getting the economically inactive into work and making our economy resilient in the face of climate change.

In this, our vision of how to *Build Belfast Back Better*, Belfast Chamber sets out 15 proposals - separated into short and long term steps - which our public and private sectors can deliver together to help our city to rebound from the effects of the pandemic and be stronger and better placed for the future.



15 STEPS TO HELP BELFAST BUILD BACK BETTER

Rebuilding our city's economy is likely to be a task that won't be concluded in a few months or even a few years. Undoing the damage of COVID-19 will be a huge task and take years of effort. But there are undoubtedly steps that can be taken now and in the immediate period ahead which will have a beneficial impact on Belfast's economy in the short term and prepare and position our city for longer term recovery. We can learn lessons from cities across the world who have already reopened and have utilised innovative ideas to boost business and seek to replicate them in Belfast. We can also push forward with plans to transform our economy and make it fit for the challenges that will lie ahead. These are Belfast Chamber's 15 Steps to help Build Back Belfast Better.

SHORT TERM STEPS

1.

A CLEAN AND SAFE CITY

As both people and businesses emerge from 3 months of lockdown, Belfast Chamber understands that maintaining a clean and safe city will be of paramount importance to our recovery. Belfast Chamber worked closely with Belfast City Council and other city partners to develop the city's 'confidence mark' to illustrate to people that businesses have taken all necessary steps to help customers feel at ease, feel safe, and above all have an enjoyable experience when shopping and going about their daily business. Continuing in that vein in the streets around our city is just as vital.

Belfast Chamber will work with Belfast City Council and other stakeholders to ensure our city is kept clean with special provision made for hand sanitising and additional public conveniences.

2.

CREATING THE SPACE TO DO BUSINESS

With social distancing measures likely to remain in place for some time to come, this will undoubtedly make it difficult for many businesses, especially those in hospitality, to serve as many customers as they would ordinarily do. Space will be at a premium and expanding the space available to businesses to trade will be key to their viability. Belfast City Council's progressing of pavement café licensing is a really positive move and will assist hospitality businesses with their viability and also help create a European style café culture in our city.

Belfast Chamber urges the City Council, the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities to work together to:

- Designate areas of open and public space as 'hospitality zones' with cover and seating to create safe areas for people
- Allow cafes, bars and restaurants to temporarily use parking bays in front their establishments as seating and dining areas as is happening in cities like Vancouver, Tel Aviv and Rotterdam.

3.

MAKE BELFAST A CHRISTMAS CAPITAL

This Christmas may be somewhat different to normal, but the festive period will, nonetheless, remain a crucially important time for many Belfast businesses and especially so after such a difficult start to the year. With our Christmas market at its centre and mix of retail and hospitality, Belfast has been developing a reputation as a 'must visit' destination at Christmas.

With the right support and investments, Belfast Chamber believes that our city can become a Christmas Capital. Belfast Chamber encourages Belfast City Council to continue in its development of:

- A unique Belfast Christmas brand
- Improved Christmas lighting including feature pieces
- An expanded Christmas market using other locations around the city centre to help deal with any restrictions social distancing measures might impose on the City Hall grounds.



4.

EXTEND SUNDAY OPENING HOURS

At an early stage during the pandemic, Belfast City Council made the sensible decision to allow bigger stores in the city to open earlier on Sundays to accommodate key workers.

As our city centre reopens again, Belfast Chamber believes that there is considerable merit in maintaining longer opening hours on Sundays in the city centre to both help retailers and hospitality businesses during this difficult recovery period and to better manage the safety of people coming into Belfast at what is ordinarily one of the busiest shopping days of the week.

5.

SUPPORTING BUSINESSES THROUGH THE RECOVERY

The Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic has witnessed an unprecedented intervention with wage support, grants, loans and rates relief. For the many businesses who have benefitted from this support, it has been a lifeline. Belfast Chamber appreciates that the public finances will be under pressure but equally we believe that Government must continue to support sectors of our economy who will struggle because of ongoing restrictions in a strategic and targeted way.

Belfast Chamber supports:

- Keeping the rates holiday for retail and hospitality, leisure and tourism businesses under review whilst restrictions limit trade and footfall
- Programmes to assist businesses across a range of sectors to, for example, improve productivity and enhance their ecommerce presence
- A major 'Marshall Plan' style investment plan to help reactivate our hospitality, leisure and tourism industry
- A promotional and marketing campaign to attract visitors back to Belfast.



6.

MAKING BELFAST MOVE BETTER

With thousands of Belfast office-based staff working from home during the lockdown period, a conversation has been started about how we can improve the ways in which people move into, out of and around our city. Belfast Chamber wants to reimagine our city centre in a way that makes it much more accessible whilst continuing to permit vehicles that are necessary for the proper functioning of the city's economy like deliveries, taxis and people with mobility issues to access the city centre. Furthermore, with limitations on the number of people able to use public transport, getting people into the city will face challenges.

Belfast Chamber supports:

- Hand sanitising facilities on all buses and trains, and a requirement to wear facemasks to enable the maximum number of people to use public transport
- Ensuring that public transport can continue to permeate the city centre's main thoroughfares
- Where space is available, the expansion of footways to give pedestrians more room
- The development of real cycle lanes that enhance safety and improve connectivity for cyclists
- Soften roads like Dunbar Link, Millfield and Oxford Street to make them more attractive, with tree lined 'boulevarding' and the introduction of 'supercrossings'.

7.

REVITALISING OUR CITY CENTRE

Our retail, hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors have been amongst the hardest hit by the restrictions imposed to stop the spread of the coronavirus. COVID-19 has devastated footfall. Before the pandemic struck, Belfast was already competing with other destinations. We must, as a city, enhance our attractiveness to visitors in ways that support traders as they slowly get up and running again. Using this time to improve how our city looks will be a major part of that.

Belfast Chamber calls for the introduction of an NI version of the Future High Streets Fund with the Council working with business in the city to develop a series of public realm works and shopfront revitalisation schemes that could avail of any funding.



LONG TERM STEPS

1.

STIMULATE CITY LIVING

The drop off in footfall in Belfast's otherwise bustling shopping streets graphically exposed the lack of a population residing in its city centre. Whilst nothing could have completely compensated for the damage done by COVID-19 and the restrictions it brought, increasing the population in central Belfast is key to a more sustainable city.

Belfast Chamber calls on the Department for Communities and Belfast City Council to jointly bring forward a plan to stimulate more city centre living in Belfast across all tenure types and set out the steps and incentives that will be used to achieve the Belfast Agenda target of increasing the city's population by 66,000 by 2035.



2.

INVEST IN SKILLS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Belfast Chamber considers ongoing investment in skills and infrastructure as essential enablers of growth in our economy. Belfast has been able to grow in recent years because of our ability to supply firms with highly skilled staff. Equally, upgrading our infrastructure maintains and grows our economic competitiveness as well as providing a boost to business during the construction phase. Now is not the time to stop focusing on these two key areas of investment.

Belfast Chamber supports:

- Bringing forward economically significant infrastructure projects like Streets Ahead, the York Street Interchange, the Transport Hub and the upgrade of the city's water and sewage system
- Continuing to invest in our telecommunications infrastructure which has stood our economy in such good stead during the coronavirus crisis
- Prioritising investment in developing digital skills
- The development of a plan by the Department for Communities in concert with other Stormont Departments, the City Council and Belfast's business community to really address the city's historically high levels of deprivation and economic inactivity
- Lifting the cap on student numbers to allow our pool of graduate talent to grow and retain more young people in the city.

3.

ACCELERATE THE BELFAST REGION CITY DEAL

The £1 billion Belfast Region City Deal is exactly the sort of package of measures our city will need to succeed post-COVID-19. Its mix of innovation, infrastructure and tourism projects have the potential to create 20,000 new jobs and boost our GVA by nearly half a billion pounds a year.

With the Executive match funding the UK Government's financial contribution to the City Deal, Belfast Chamber encourages the acceleration of all remaining approvals and processes for schemes like phase 2 of the Glider, the Belfast Story Destination Hub, innovation centres, Smart District and new Lagan pedestrian and cycle bridge can begin to benefit the Belfast economy as quickly as possible.

4.

IMPROVING OUR CONNECTIVITY

Prior to the pandemic, Belfast experienced the devastating blow of the collapse of airline FlyBe which shattered our all-important connectivity to Great Britain. That retrograde step was then exacerbated by COVID-19 which has really ravaged the aviation industry. Whilst our airports have been doing an excellent job in attracting new airlines to these routes, we must ensure that we are never again left in a situation where so much of our connectivity is vulnerable. Similarly, Belfast Chamber wants to see our connectivity with our nearest neighbours in the Irish Republic drastically improved.

Belfast Chamber calls for:

- the development of an aviation strategy for Northern Ireland that ensures long term connectivity to Great Britain and especially London and also to key hubs in Europe like Frankfurt and Paris
- the Infrastructure Minister to work with her colleague in the Republic to increase the Enterprise to an hourly service, to invest in modernising the rolling stock and to commission a feasibility study into a high speed rail link between Belfast and Dublin.



5.

DEVELOP AN INNOVATION AND REGENERATION LED 'FREEPORT' BID

HM Government's consultation on the creation of 'Freeports' presents Belfast with a once in a generation opportunity to develop an economic, social and urban regeneration plan that could genuinely change the city and the wider region it serves for the better. The tax and fiscal incentives that freeport status could provide, coupled with the realisation of regeneration not just along the Lagan but across central Belfast has the potential to create thousands of jobs, build new housing, create an iconic waterfront and truly transform the city's economy. After enduring years of falling further behind the rest of the UK in terms of output and productivity, Belfast Chamber believes that achieving Freeport status for Belfast can help us to close the gap and, over time, end our reliance on subsidies.

Belfast Chamber will support our city partners in the Council, Belfast Harbour, the universities and Catalyst in developing an innovation and regeneration led bid for Freeport status for Belfast.

6.

EMPOWER BELFAST

Whilst Belfast Chamber has been impressed and grateful for the huge effort put in by those in government whether that be in Westminster or at Stormont or in City Hall in response to the coronavirus pandemic, just as this crisis presents us with an opportunity to re-examine a wide range of issues, we believe that is also right to consider the ability of Belfast to respond to situations such as this in the optimum way. In general terms, Belfast, for a city of its size and regional importance, possesses far less power and responsibility than its competitors elsewhere on the island and in Great Britain. While we are thankful for the many steps to support business, it is undoubtedly the case that our capacity to implement measures that have been rolled out in other city's has been inhibited by the responsibility for different levers being in the hands of the Council, the Department for Communities or the Department for Infrastructure. Being swift to respond is key in any crisis.

Belfast Chamber calls for the commissioning of a study into the devolution of additional powers that are essential to urban life including regeneration, housing, transport and local roads to Belfast.



BUILDING BELFAST BACK BETTER TOGETHER

Belfast Chamber does not underestimate the scale of the challenge that lies ahead in rebuilding our city's economy. Belfast has faced innumerable challenges in the past – the Troubles, the financial crash and, in more recent times, the Bank Buildings fire. Our city will need every ounce of the resilience exhibited on each of those occasions to overcome the impact of COVID-19. It will also require our city's business community across every sector of

our economy to work hand in hand with every arm of government to develop and deliver a recovery plan. Belfast Chamber believes that a partnership approach with government utilising the strength, diversity and experience of the Belfast business community will be the key to building Belfast back better and propose that suitable structures are put in place to maximise collaboration through the challenging time that will lie ahead.

7.

DIGITALISING GOVERNMENT

Belfast Chamber understands that COVID-19 has created huge challenges for our public sector just as it has for the private sector. However, the inability to deliver certain key public services has had a detrimental impact on important parts of our economy. In some cases, the lack of digitalised services or capacity for staff to work from home has impinged negatively on business at a crucial time. Belfast Chamber was pleased to work on behalf of our members with the Department for Infrastructure to temporarily amend planning regulations to negate the need for public consultation meetings when these were not possible. Whilst this sort of flexibility is very welcome, we must ensure that we not only prepare for the possibility of a similar eventuality in the future, but also simply enhance service delivery regardless of what may lie ahead.

Belfast Chamber urges the Northern Ireland Executive to:

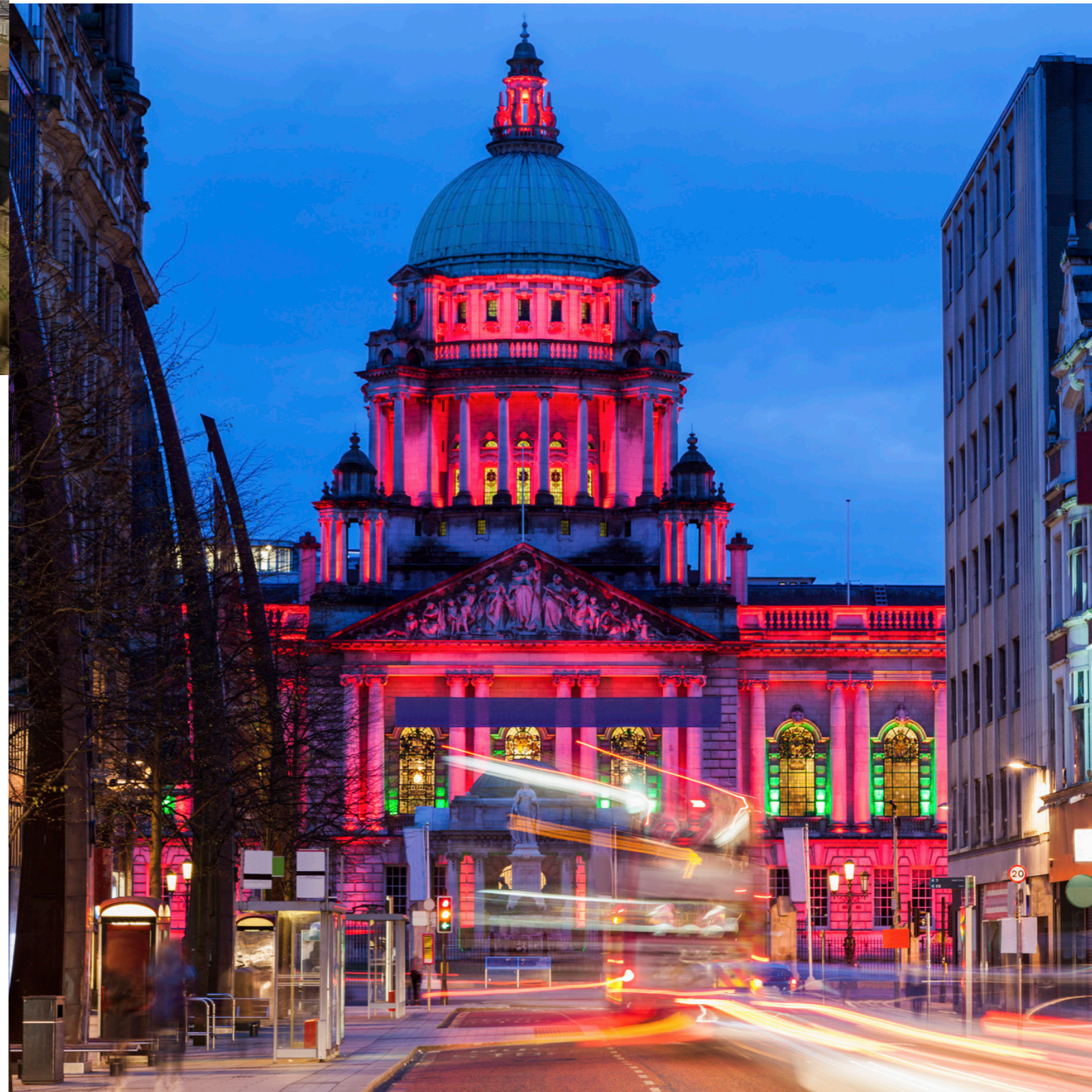
- invest in the further digitalisation of government services to make it easier for businesses to interact with government and avoid future disruption
- improve the ability of public servants to work remotely.

8.

INCREASING CHILDCARE PROVISION

The crisis created by COVID-19 has starkly highlighted the centrality of childcare to the proper functioning of our economy. With many staff working from home whilst caring for young children with the support usually provided by childcare providers, the education system or family members, balancing responsibilities has proven difficult for many. With businesses trying to get back to normal, this gap in childcare provision is proving problematic for some highlighting how crucial childcare is to businesses and their staff especially in sectors like retail.

Belfast Chamber implores the Executive to bring forward a plan to radically increase childcare provision in Northern Ireland as an essential aid to rebuilding our economy.



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