



Newcastle upon Tyne Community First Party

2012 MANIFESTO

OUR PLEDGES FOR OUR CITY

A NEW VISION FOR OUR CITY



Index

1. **Foreword** 2
2. **Chapter 1 - Our Pledges to You** 3
3. **Chapter 2 - A Council We Can Be Proud Of** 5
 - More Attention on Local Services
 - Council Finance and the Economy
 - Neighbourhood and Adult Services
 - Education and Children's Services
 - Transport
 - Environment and Housing
5. **Chapter 3 - A New Kind of Politics** 9
 - We will throw open the corridors of Power
 - Improved Governance for Our City
 - A New Public Right to Challenge the Council
 - A More Powerful Role for the Council Chamber
 - More Involvement in Local Decision Making
 - We will create a new golden age of local councils in Newcastle
 - Delegating More Decisions and Services to Local Councils
 - Funding Local Democracy Without Raising Taxes
 - Creating More Local Councils



FOREWORD



Dear resident,

The politics in our city is broken. Our city is run by politician councillors representing old-fashioned parties who spend too much time squabbling over which of them has let down our city most. Not enough time is spent in the council chamber debating the issues that really matter to local people.

The Newcastle upon Tyne Community First Party is a new citizen-led organisation that wants to change the politics in our city for the better. We stood for election in eight wards in 2011 and are standing in half of the wards in the city in 2012. We make no apology that our 2012 manifesto is very similar to the bold vision for our city that we published in 2011.

As a principle, we believe council tax should be kept as low as possible whilst delivering effective public services. We also believe we need to take action now to improve the education and health outcomes for our residents and to tackle the jobs crisis on the horizon through the squeeze on council and other public sector employment.

This manifesto sets out some of the changes we want to see introduced to give the public a greater say in the way our council is run and for decisions to be taken at the lowest possible level.

Labour has wasted their first year in office. They followed through on the Lib Dem cuts Labour had criticised before the election and have made more of their own, as well as launching a plan to build thousands of houses across the city in places where development was not supported whilst reducing the planned number of houses in areas

Like many people in our city, we are proud to live in Newcastle upon Tyne. Although we will actively promote links with our neighbours and work together when it is in our interests, we do not want to live in a city called NewcastleGateshead and will continue to resist any attempt by the politician councillors to create it.

If you agree it's time to put Newcastle first, I hope you will support us at the coming election.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Jason Smith'.

Jason Smith

Leader, Newcastle upon Tyne Community First Party

1: Our Pledges to You

Ten Key Commitments for Newcastle First Councillors

Our city faces great challenges as a result of Labour's over-spending and Conservative and Lib Dem cuts. Newcastle needs a new approach that is based on a real effort to create the jobs we need, build the homes we need and the education our children deserve.

In this manifesto, we set out our vision for Newcastle and what we stand for. In this summary, we set out the priorities that Newcastle First councillors will fight for if elected in May.

1. Jobs for Geordies

We will fight to create 10,000 new jobs in the next five years by redoubling our efforts to attract new businesses into the city and supporting start-ups.

2. 2,000 Local Homes for Local People

We will fight to build at least 2,000 new homes in the next five years in the areas originally designated as Going for Growth and make sure these are made available to people who already live locally.

3. Education Our Young People Deserve

We will aim for no young person to leave school with no GCSEs. We will also aim to bring attainment of 5 GCSEs A-C including Maths and English to the level of North Yorkshire within five years. Currently, the percentage of young people achieving this level is 49.5% and in North Yorkshire, this is 61.6%.

4. Council Tax Freeze

We will learn from local authorities with lower council tax levels and ensure that council tax is frozen for five years.

5. Defending Our Fields

We will fight to ensure that no green open spaces in the city are built on and will protect every part of the greenbelt.

6. A New Kind of Politics

We will fight to make the council more responsive to the needs of local people and will introduce a new right for citizens of Newcastle to challenge the council. We will campaign for an Elected Mayor for Newcastle in the forthcoming referendum.

7. More Local Councils

We will create more people-run local councils working at street level with the power to force city council action and accountability on local issues. We will encourage the transfer of

services from city to the most local level possible.

8. Supporting Vulnerable Citizens

We will continue to defend the interests of vulnerable citizens who rely heavily on council services.

9. End the Car Parking Stealth Tax

We will cut the Sunday car parking charges and expand the Alive After Five to cover all city centre car parks run by the council. This will create at least 500 jobs by allowing Newcastle to compete on equal terms with the MetroCentre. We will end all lobbying by Newcastle City Council for the MetroCentre to introduce parking charges.

10. Protecting Local Shops

We will protect local shops from big supermarket expansion.

2: A Council We Can Be Proud Of

More attention to local services

There is much to be proud of in our city and Newcastle First will not make changes to council services for the sake of it. In this chapter, we highlight some of the areas where we believe a new approach is needed.

Council Finance and the Economy

Our city faces significant challenges. The public sector makes a larger than average contribution to the economy of our city and the public sector recession is hitting Newcastle hard. Bringing jobs and investment to our city must be our highest priority and we want to see a new requirement for all council policies to be tested against its economic impact.

It is imperative that the city council does everything possible to stimulate economic growth. The biggest concern for many Newcastle residents at the present time is finding employment and the council must work with big and small business, as well as central and local government and other organisations, to create opportunities that will help people secure jobs and break the cycle of poverty and worklessness that too many people find themselves in today.

A Newcastle First administration would:

- Promote schemes that have a track record of getting people into long-term work;
- Promote the benefits of apprenticeships to small and medium-sized businesses;
- Work with landlords and others to make better use of empty commercial property, including temporary use, to support community projects and new businesses.

Many residents believe that Newcastle's council tax is higher than it should be. Although the city has faced significant cuts this year, the council's aim should be to cut council tax by ensuring that not a single penny is wasted. Under pressure from the Government, Newcastle City Council has introduced greater transparency in how it spends money but this does not go far enough to reassure council tax payers. We want to introduce a greater level of transparency in city finances.

In recent years, councillors have found millions of pounds to pay for their pet projects such as the Waygood Gallery, Hotel Monument and the Northern Rock Tower. Meanwhile, they have cut services that ordinary people find essential. We want the council to concentrate on its core functions and stop its property speculation sideline.

Adult and Neighbourhood Services

More than a quarter of our residents live in areas that are among the 10% most deprived in the country. We must speed up action on supporting the most vulnerable by tackling child poverty, obesity and alcohol abuse; providing good quality and affordable housing in safe and revitalised neighbourhoods and improving the quality of life and life changes especially for our young people and our older residents.

Councillors have experimented with Neighbourhood Charters and Neighbourhood Standards but residents want a bigger say over health, housing, employment, education, policing and local facilities. We must ensure that these experiments are replaced with a commitment for real engagement with local communities.

Adult and Neighbourhood Services (continued)

We want to strengthen Neighbourhood Watch and community crime fighting initiatives and ensure more effective action to tackle dog fouling, graffiti and other anti-social behaviour that continues to blight the lives of too many residents.

We want to adapt the City Safe Havens scheme from London. The scheme works with willing local businesses and other organisations that are open to the public by making them a place of safety for people who feel they are in immediate danger. We would develop an agreement with Northumbria Police to ensure that each participating business is given a named officer, regular police visits and a panic button alarm for emergencies.

Education & Children's Services

Newcastle's GCSE results have improved in recent years but it is clear that we need to take action to improve the outcomes for our young people. Labour and Liberal Democrats have shown that they will promote only the successes and do not acknowledge the areas where improvement is required.

According to the 2010 GCSE results, Newcastle is:

- One of the worst performing authorities in the country for the number of pupils leaving school with 5 GCSEs A-G including Maths and English, with just under five young people in every ten leaving school without achieving this. Newcastle is out-performed by every other authority in the North East.
- 11 of 12 authorities in the North East and in the bottom 25 authorities in the country for pupils achieving 5 GCSEs A-C including Maths and English.
- Newcastle does top one league table: it is the best performing authority for the number of pupils leaving school with no GCSEs at all.

We believe that we need to redouble our efforts to ensure that we do not fail our young people. Given the impact of education on wages, employment and health in later life, we cannot afford to accept a single young person being failed by our education system.

We will:

- Establish an education commission for the city made up of education professionals, representatives of the council and parents to develop an Education Strategy for Newcastle in conjunction with schools still under the remit of the Local Education Authority;
- Strengthen the voice of young people in the civic centre by developing a Young Mayor and Youth Council to work alongside the council cabinet on key issues.

Transport

Successive Labour and Lib Dem administrations in Newcastle have failed to show the kind of ambition we need for transport in our city. Newcastle City Council is regarded as being anti-car and relies too heavily on attacking car users rather than improve public transport. We want to see a shift in emphasis to a council that more equally balances the interests of cars, public transport, cyclists and pedestrians.

We want to see more investment in local roads to end the misery of potholes. We also want to increase the number of grit bins across the city so local residents are better able to help

themselves during bad weather. We want to see better signage to explain why the grit has been provided and look at what penalties are available if it is misused. We would also make a saving on salt by ensuring that it is protected from the elements.

We would improve signage for speed limits, providing more electronic speed signs and roundels, to make sure car drivers are reminded of the prevailing speed limit. We believe this preventative measure is more effective than taking action against drivers after they have broken the limit.

We believe Newcastle needs more park and ride facilities linked to significant bus routes and the Metro. The current Metro modernisation falls short of the extension of the service that many communities in Newcastle and beyond are crying out for.

Newcastle First has set itself a long term goal of campaigning for an extension of the Metro to the West of the city, perhaps extending as far as Hexham, and North to Cramlington to significantly cut traffic on our roads. We believe the council should be working with Northumberland and other neighbouring authorities to campaign for future Government funds to invest in the Metro.

A Newcastle First administration would also look at options for enhancing transport in the city including:

- Introduction of free bus travel for people who are actively seeking employment, helping them to get to interviews and return to being part of the economically active population of the city;
- Reduction in travel passes for people on low incomes.

Newcastle is a 24 hour city and it should have a transport system that reflects this fact. A Newcastle First administration would work with bus companies to introduce a later timetable on bus services every Friday and Saturday. We would also look at ways to enhance bus services over Christmas holidays.

As part of a more balanced transport policy, we would also introduce make Newcastle a more cycle-friendly city.

Cycling is better for the environment and an individual's health than any other transport option but we need to make numerous changes to make cycling an option for many people.

We will:

- Provide more safe cycle storage facilities at local shops and other places people visit regularly so they can leave their bicycle safely;
- Ensure that all new road projects have cycling safety in mind;
- Where possible, bikes and other vehicles should be physically separated;
- Work with the police to ensure that dangerous road users - including drivers putting cyclists and others at risk or cyclists failing to stop at junctions and pedestrian crossings - are dealt with appropriately.

Environment and Housing

We were the first party to take a stand against the One Core Strategy and we worked hard to raise the issue with local people. It was an address by the leader of Newcastle First to the city council that prompted councillors to vote to extend the consultation on the draft strategy.

Environment & Housing (continued)

Over many years, Labour and Lib Dem administrations have demolished houses under the guise of regeneration but the replacement houses have failed to materialise. Areas such as Scotswood and Walker have seen old housing stock be demolished and communities dispersed.

We believe it is irresponsible to relocate whole communities and then not deliver speedy regeneration.

While leaving parts of the city without replacement homes, residents in other parts of the city find that local green space under threat from development. Where developments have been proposed, tensions have been created with existing residents as they believe the development is not in keeping with existing housing stock.

It is clear that we need a new approach. We do not support the principle of a development core strategy across Newcastle and Gateshead as they face very different issues and, as it stands, Newcastle is taking more than its share of housing. We want to see a root and branch review of the council's housing and regeneration policy to develop a new approach that local people can have confidence in. We want to strengthen the voice of town and parish councils on the development control committee to recognise the important role they play.

We believe that open space is important and the council has an important role to play in protecting it. Too often, the council puts its agenda of growing the city ahead of the needs of existing residents. People of all ages must have easy access to open space and recreation facilities that are appropriate to the surrounding area.

We want Newcastle to support existing open space and look for more development on brown field sites. Residents submitting village green applications need more support from the council to help them to protect in law the open space that people have enjoyed for decades.

Allotments play an important role for people with limited space for gardening and many current allotments have waiting lists for plots. We believe that Newcastle City Council must look at more opportunities to make land available for allotments in the right locations. A Newcastle First administration would:

- Make it easier to register interest in a plot and be open about the numbers of people on the waiting list;
- Publish details of every allotment plot and current occupation;
- Identify areas that do not have allotment sites within a reasonable travel distance and talk to the community about releasing land for development into allotments;
- Promote the establishment of a garden-share scheme to bring together residents with gardens they can no longer tend with individuals looking for an allotment.

There are many ways in which the council can protect our environment and bad council decisions can result in damage to our environment. We want protect the environment and cut costs of dealing with fly tipping by:

- Reversing the recent increases in charges for removal of bulky waste;
- Removing the new charges for replacing wheelie bins that are lost or stolen through no fault of the householder;
- Reintroducing free garden waste collection and guaranteeing the free collection of blue recycling bins;
- Defending the weekly bin collections.

3a: A New Kind of Politics

We will throw open the corridors of power to the public

The old politics in Newcastle puts power in the hands of an elite group of councillors who make most of the key decisions in our city. However, the council has created rules that limit what local councillors can do to represent their constituents such as:

- There are limits on how long they can speak in the council chamber – approved unanimously by councillors in 2009;
- Decisions are taken by the Cabinet, which is made up of only a handful of senior councillors from the ruling party, or by a single Cabinet member behind closed doors;
- Councillors are subject to a whip which forces them to vote in a particular way regardless of their own views on the issue;
- They also have to be careful that anything they say does not upset their political masters in London.

As a local organisation led by local people, the freedom of speech of Newcastle First's councillors and their actions will be limited only by the council's own rules, some of which we hope to change, and by the law.

Newcastle First believes the public have a right to know what is being done by our council, what is being spent by our council and, more important, they should have the ability to challenge the council when it is making decisions they cannot support.

We will campaign to change the rules so that councillors are able to fully represent their constituents and be held to account for their decisions. Our vision for a new, more open politics can be summarised through:

- Improved governance for our city;
- A more powerful role for the council chamber;
- The introduction of a public right to challenge the council;
- More local involvement in decision-making.

Improved governance of our city

For over a decade, politician councillors in the civic centre have prevented the people from having a say on the way in which our city is run but a referendum will be held alongside the local elections. The current council leader is elected by councillors and the voters in a single ward. A powerful Elected Mayor will revitalise the politics of the city and strengthen democracy with a clear link between the voters and the policies being followed in the civic centre.

Old Politics

The Leader of Council is elected by the majority of members of the ruling group meaning that only a handful of people determine who runs the city and the policies the council will follow.

New Politics

Newcastle First is campaigning for a yes vote in the referendum on a directly elected mayor to run the city.

We want every voter in our city to have an opportunity to vote for the person who will run our city by creating a directly elected mayor. A mayoral election will give a real opportunity to focus on the needs of the city.

A public right to challenge the council

An important right in any democracy is for the public to be able to challenge decisions taken by those who are elected to serve us. Although we may disagree with recent reductions in time available for Public Question Time, the right of any citizen to apply to raise issues in the council chamber should be applauded. Our approach builds on this.

Introducing a public right to challenge the council should run from top to bottom in Newcastle City Council. Citizens should have their voice heard at every stage of the decision-making process to have real influence on the policies the council will follow. There should also be an opportunity for citizens to promote policy to the council by enhancing the opportunity to petition the council for changes in policy.

Old Politics

Public Question Time is limited to 15 minutes regardless of how many people wish to speak.

Councillors cannot debate issues raised at Public Question Time; only a senior councillor can have an opportunity to respond to questions raised.

Members of the public have a right to address some meetings but not others .

Petitions can be presented at full council meetings and, where more than 2,500 have signed, the issue in question can be debated at full council.

Councillors can refer decisions taken by the council's Cabinet to a scrutiny committee, with the support of 6 other councillors. Under the call-in procedure, scrutiny committees can refer it back or ask City Council to consider referring it back to the decision maker for reconsideration.

New Politics

We want to increase the time available for Public Question Time to 30 minutes. All requests to address council that are turned down should be published, together with reasons for refusal, with the agenda.

We want to introduce a new mechanism for councillors to debate issues brought before them in a public address.

The person addressing the council would need to make this request and it would need to be supported by at least 10 councillors.

We want to introduce a new right for the press and members of the public to address, or ask questions of, the Cabinet on items being discussed at the meeting. There would need to be a time limit that would apply to each item.

We want to make it easier for members of the public to bring issues to the attention of the council. We want to lower the threshold to 1,250 to make it easier for the public to raise issues that councillors have to debate.

We want to make it easier for decisions to be called-in for review by a scrutiny committee by cutting the number of councillors required to sign from 7 to 5. We also want to introduce a new right for a single councillor or a member of the public to call-in decisions with the support of 9 other people living in the city.

A more powerful role for the council chamber

When they cast their vote in an election, most voters assume they are sending a councillor to represent their ward in the council chamber. However, they would be surprised to find that most councillors rarely even refer to their ward in council discussions let alone raise issues of concern to local people.

Full meetings of the city council have been undermined for some years, with meeting times reduced, limits placed on the number of councillors who can speak in the chamber and the amount of time they can speak for.

It is little wonder that some councillors do not even bother to attend. Every Newcastle First candidate will, if elected, publish locally how they voted in the council chamber and, if they cannot attend, make sure local people understand why they were not able to attend.

Old Politics

Most full council meetings are limited to end at 8.30pm regardless of what business has not been covered.

The number of councillors permitted to speak is, in most cases, limited to 3 minutes and names are notified in advance.

How a councillor votes in the council chamber is not published unless a named vote is requested by councillors.

New Politics

We believe that, where there is business to be discussed, it is reasonable for full council meetings to finish at 9.30pm and there should be no limit for the budget meeting.

We want to end stage-managed council meetings by enabling any councillor to speak in a debate and raise the limit from three minutes to six, doubling the time available to raise important issues.

We want the public to be able to make a judgement on the decisions made by their local councillor and all votes in the council chamber should be named votes.

More local involvement in decision-making

Politician councillors talk about the importance of community engagement but many local residents have complained of “sham” consultations and the council itself seems to ignore consultations that do not produce the responses they seemed to be hoping for.

Real community engagement comes from decisions being taken at the lowest possible level, which discredited ward charters simply cannot produce. Where there is support from local people, fully resourced local councils should be created to strengthen democracy and, where local councils are not created, the role and function of ward committees should be reviewed and strengthened.

Old Politics

Ward committees are given delegated authority for specific council budgets to be used for the benefit of local community groups and for local environmental projects.

New Politics

We want to transfer ward funding to parish councils where they exist and delegate other funding maintained at city level to ward committees and / or parish councils.

More Involvement in Local Decision-Making (continued)

Old Politics

There are only six local councils in Newcastle, all but one of which were inherited from Northumberland in the boundary changes of 1974.

Across the city, ward committees take different approaches regarding participation from the public. In some ward committee meetings, members of the public are invited to be involved in decisions and in others they are not, which causes confusion.

Petitions presented to the council are not routinely discussed at ward committee meetings.

Ward Committee meetings are not routinely informed of decisions that are to be taken by the Cabinet.

There is insufficient discussion about ward level issues in the council chamber.

*** Council consultations are currently limited to six weeks for many issues.

New Politics

We want to create more local councils across the city and enhance their powers. This is set out in more detail in chapter 3.

We want to ensure that all ward committee meetings operate in the same way with the chair of the ward committee nominated by the councillors but voted on by all those present at the first meeting of the municipal year.

Residents who have gone to the trouble of attending the meeting should have an opportunity to express a view on each agenda item that requires a decision by the ward committee.

Councillors would not be bound by a vote of this kind but would understand the views of those present.

We want to see updates for ward committees about the progress made with petitions presented to the council that deal with local issues in one or more named wards.

We think ward committees should be informed in advance of issues that are likely to be brought to the Cabinet and its sub-committees that is likely to be of interest to people attending ward committee meetings.

We want to introduce a new opportunity for ward councillors to highlight issues in their wards to the full council.

*** We want to extend all pre-planned consultations to three months, with shorter consultation periods only permitted when three months is not practical (such as the budget consultation).

3b: A New Kind of Politics

We will create a new golden age for local councils in Newcastle

Newcastle First believes in putting people before politics so it stands to reason that we want to see the creation of more local councils in Newcastle that put local people in the driving seat.

Local councils (which can be known as parish, community, neighbourhood or town councils) are the tier of local government that is closest to the community. There are around 10,000 local councils in England and Wales, made up of nearly 100,000 councillors. They deliver a range of services at a community level and their role is to represent the local community, provide services to meet local needs and improve quality of life and community well being.

There are six parish councils in Newcastle covering the following areas:

- Blakelaw & North Fenham - covering Blakelaw Ward;
- Brunswick - covering part of Castle Ward;
- Dinnington - covering part of Castle Ward;
- Hazlerigg - covering part of Castle Ward;
- North Gosforth - covering part of Parklands Ward;
- Woolsington - covering Woolsington Ward;

All but one of the parish councils originated within the Castle Ward Rural District Council and joined Newcastle City Council in the Local Government reorganisation of 1974.

Newcastle City Council has never encouraged nor discouraged the creation of new local councils but the only example of a new local council being created in Newcastle was Blakelaw and North Fenham in 2001.

The most significant factors stopping communities from campaigning for a local council is a lack of clarity about their powers and a fear that a local council will raise the overall level of council tax. We believe that the new golden age for local councils will be created when we address these two issues.

Delegating more decisions and services to local councils

Legislation under the current and previous Governments have enhanced the potential role of local councils. They can take over the provision of services from Newcastle City Council, such as the running of community centres and village green but usually they are prevented by a lack of resources.

Newcastle First believes that money should follow the service and there are services that are currently provided by Newcastle City Council that may be more appropriately provided directly by the parish council, either alone or in partnership with a neighbouring parish council, if the resources were made available. This would need to be considered in a review of neighbourhood services but could include elements of the ward co-ordinator and neighbourhood response manager roles.

We also want to see more decisions taken by the parish councils. Ward Committees have delegated budgets to support local community groups and to fund road and pavement repairs and grit bins. These are decisions that may be more appropriately taken by parish councillors and we propose that, where parish councils exist, they should have the option of taking over decision-making on these matters.

Delegating more decisions & services to local councils (continued)

By strengthening the authority of the parish councils and giving them the opportunity to take over decision-making in some areas that are currently the responsibility of Newcastle City Council, we believe more people would come forward to serve their community at future elections.

Old Politics	New Politics
All services delivered through Newcastle City Council and most of the key decisions impacting on individual communities are taken by the ward committee.	We want to empower parish councils to be able to take over some city council services that could be delivered at a more local level with the required resources made available from the council. We also want to enable parish councils to take over some decision-making currently the responsibility of ward committees.

Funding local democracy without raising taxes

Local councils are able to levy a charge against council tax to fund their activities. In 2010/11, the parish precepts in Newcastle ranged from zero in Blakelaw & North Fenham to £26.75 in Hazlerigg. It appears from our research that larger parish councils levy a smaller charge and, where a precept above £0 has been charged, the average is £14.79 per year or 28p per week.

Given the important role for local councils in bringing power to the people, Newcastle First believes that the core running costs of a local council should be funded from existing council tax, with a precept levied where the standard tariff is insufficient to cover the activities that the local council wishes to fund. This tariff would be set at the current average of £14.79.

For those living in areas that are currently parished, this would represent a cut in council tax or an increase in the funding available to the parish council to deliver improved services.

Old Politics	New Politics
All parish councils have to fund their activities by adding a precept to council tax charges.	We want to create a new tariff, funded from existing council tax, to provide £14.79 per household for the core running costs of all local councils.

Creating more local councils

By addressing the primary reason for communities not being keen on local councils, namely concerns about additional cost to hard pressed council tax payers, Newcastle First believes it is possible to begin a wider discussion about creating more parish councils.

We believe the city council should change its position to advocate the creation of a new generation of local councils. A widespread consultation should be undertaken as part of a citywide governance review.

Creating more local councils

In the unlikely event that every part of the city wanted to create its own local council, our proposal for a parish tariff would cost less than £1.16million. In the current climate, this would need some reprioritisation within the council budget. However, given that the creation of local councils would reduce the workload for city councillors, the cost may be met from substantial reductions in councillor allowances or the reduction in the overall number of councillors.

Old Politics

Most parts of Newcastle have no parish councils.

New Politics

We want to create a new generation of parish councils that can deliver better services for their communities without costing more in council tax.



Newcastle upon Tyne Community First Party



**LET'S GIVE THE OLD POLITICS THE
BIRD AND BUILD A BETTER FUTURE
FOR OUR CITY TOGETHER**

**IT'S TIME TO PUT
NEWCASTLE FIRST**

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