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Scottish Welfare Fund

5 September 2013

13/54

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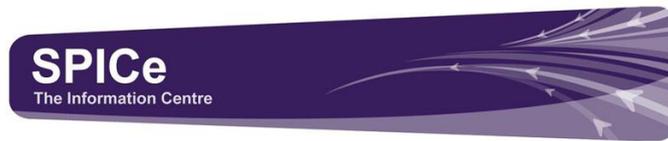
This briefing has been produced to provide the Parliament with information on the Scottish Welfare Fund, which replaced the discretionary elements of the Social Fund from April 2013.



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the *Welfare Reform Act 2012*, the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) abolished the discretionary Social Fund, with effect from 1 April 2013. It consequently transferred the funding spent in Scotland on the discretionary elements of the Fund (Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for living expenses) to the Scottish Government. This amounted to £23.8 million in 2013-14. The Scottish Government is putting an extra £9.2 million into the new Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) in 2013-14, giving a total of £33 million.

The SWF is being introduced on an interim basis for around two years. According to the Scottish Government the intention is to learn lessons from the operation of the interim scheme, before putting the new arrangements on a statutory basis. Not all aspects of DWP's Social Fund are being abolished - Sure Start Maternity Grants, Funeral Payments, Cold Weather Payments and Winter Fuel Payments will continue to be dealt with by DWP.

The SWF is designed to be a national scheme run by local authorities and based on guidance from Scottish Ministers. There are two types of discretionary grants in the SWF – Crisis Grants, and Community Care Grants. The objectives of the new scheme are to:

- provide a safety net in a disaster or emergency, when there is an immediate threat to health or safety, and to
- enable independent living or continued independent living, preventing the need for institutional care.

Local authorities have discretion on where in their organisation they process applications and how they link the scheme to existing services. It is intended that local provision of Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants alongside national guidance will allow for a more joined up approach.

BACKGROUND TO THE SOCIAL FUND

Community care grants and crisis loans for living expenses were two discretionary elements of the Social Fund, which was originally established in 1986 and was intended to provide support to those on low incomes who had needs that could not otherwise be met.

The 'regulated' part of the fund continues to cover payments including the Sure Start Maternity Grant, Funeral Payments, Winter Fuel Payments and Cold Weather Payments, which are paid according to provisions set down in regulations.

The non regulated 'discretionary' element of the fund was cash limited and provided loans and grants. It comprised Crisis Loans, Budgeting Loans, and non-repayable Community Care Grants (CCGs).

Community care grants were mainly intended to help vulnerable people live as independently as possible and were awarded to households receiving means-tested benefits. For example, supporting people to re-establish themselves in the community following a stay in residential care or providing assistance in exceptional circumstances, such as relationship breakdown.

Crisis loans were intended for people in receipt of benefit, who were unable to meet their immediate short term needs in an emergency or as a consequence of a disaster. They were also awarded to avoid serious damage or risk to the health or safety of the applicant or a member of the family.

LOCALISATION OF THE SOCIAL FUND

An initial recommendation to devolve the discretionary elements of the Social Fund came from the [Calman Commission](#)¹ (2009) on the grounds that it "fits reasonably neatly with the Scottish Government's responsibilities for wellbeing, social work and tackling homelessness as well as the responsibility that local authorities have for families". The Scottish Government (2009) indicated its support for the devolution of the Social Fund in its [response to the Calman Commission](#).

The UK Government's White Paper '[Universal Credit: welfare that works](#)' (DWP 2010) , set out plans for reform of the Social Fund on the grounds that it has not kept pace with wider welfare reform. It argued that it had resulted in complex administration, rising costs with little evidence of increasing need, was poorly targeted, open to abuse and could be more effectively delivered locally where there is an understanding and link to other support services.

As a result of provisions in the *Welfare Reform Act 2012* (the 2012 Act), Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans were abolished from April 2013. Funding was then made available to the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales and local authorities in England to provide assistance as they saw fit.

The regulated part of the Fund remains the responsibility of the DWP, which will also continue to deal with Short Term Benefit Advances, Budgeting Loans for those on income related benefits and Budgeting Advances for those on Universal Credit. More information on Short Term Benefit Advances is provided below.

¹ Recommendation 5.22

Short Term Benefit Advances

In order to retain protections previously available to benefit claimants of the Social Fund, a 'short-term advance' will replace Interim Payments and Social Fund Crisis Loan alignment payments for all benefits from April 2013.

Short-term advances of benefit will be available to help claimants who have made a new claim, but encounter a period of financial need before receiving their first payment of benefit. Claimants can receive an advance of their future award, which will then be recovered from subsequent payments of the benefit. Short-term advances will be available to claimants of any contributory or income-related benefit, including Universal Credit from 1 April 2013 (DWP 2013). To be eligible for payment the claimant must demonstrate they are in financial need.

The provisions of the 2012 Act extend to England, Wales and Scotland only. However, the Northern Ireland Executive has also consulted on proposals to replace the discretionary elements of the Social Fund. The developments taking place in each country are summarised below.

WALES

The Welsh Government has awarded a contract to Northgate Public Services to deliver the Discretionary Assistance Fund nationally for two years in partnership with Family Fund Trading and Wrexham Borough Council. The Discretionary Assistance Fund will be entirely grant-based and provide payments or in kind support to "provide urgent assistance where there is an identified need to safeguard health and well-being. The fund can also be accessed to enable or maintain independent living"(Welsh Government, 2013). There are two types of non-repayable grant support:

- **Emergency Assistance Payments** to provide assistance in an emergency or when there is an immediate threat to health or wellbeing. Anyone over the age of 16 can be considered eligible for these payments to help meet expenses due to an emergency or because of a disaster.
- **Individual Assistance Payments** to meet an urgent identified need that enables or supports vulnerable citizens to establish themselves or remain living independently in the community. To be eligible applicants must be:
 - entitled to and be in receipt of income related welfare benefits.
 - due to leave an institution or care home within 6 weeks, that they are likely to be entitled to receive income related welfare benefits on leaving.

For further detail see the [Discretionary Assistance Fund for Wales](#).

ENGLAND

Different approaches are being used across different English local authorities. Some local authorities created grants that aren't required to be paid back, while some are still using loans with a zero or low interest repayment rate. Some are using card or voucher payments as opposed to cash, while some are using credit unions to administer loans. It generally seems that those who were previously covered by the Social Fund will have access to an alternative. Some examples are contained in Annex A.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Between January and April 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive [consulted](#) on the provision of discretionary support and to obtain views on the design of the new Discretionary Support provision.

The Department for Social Development gave an update on the scheme to the Committee for Social Development on [23 May 2013](#), when an official said it is intended that this discretionary support provision will help claimants who find themselves in urgent financial need as a result of a crisis or emergency. Payment will be either a grant or loan, although replacement goods are also being considered. Income and eligibility will also be taken into account as part of the assessment.

THE SCOTTISH WELFARE FUND

CONSULTATION

The Scottish Government (2011b) published a [consultation paper](#) on the successor arrangements in August 2011. The consultation received 50 responses and the [analysis](#) (Scottish Government 2011c) was published in February 2012. The consultation proposed that successor arrangements should combine the current systems of grants and loans into one grant fund.

The consultation paper also sought views on whether there should be centralised or local delivery of the successor arrangements; whether the eligibility criteria should be modified; whether goods rather than cash should be provided; and, whether other support such as budgeting support should be provided and how appeals should be organised.

Those responding to the consultation generally welcomed the devolution of the community care grants and crisis loans for living expenses as an opportunity for the Scottish Government to remedy the deficiencies and complexities of the existing system and to secure better integration with other aspects of welfare and public policy in Scotland (Scottish Government 2011c). The main findings were:

- Respondents gave a qualified endorsement to the proposal for a single grant fund.
- Overall, where a preference was expressed, it was for local delivery, with this view particularly expressed by local authorities. Preference for central delivery came almost entirely from third sector organisations.
- Respondents felt a blend of delivery channels would best support a client-focused approach, able to meet a variety of needs, by providing a tailored service to assist the most vulnerable, to promote accessibility of the service and give choice.
- Responses indicated that eligibility and prioritisation should be based on individual need and the immediacy and extent of any threat to health and wellbeing, rather than on particular groups or events.
- Respondents felt that eligibility definitions should be provided as guidance rather than being prescriptive.

- The provision of both grants and goods was well received and other non-compulsory support, such as budgeting advice, was endorsed.
- The successor arrangements were seen to offer an opportunity to establish an effective appeals system as well as reducing the volume of appeals.

INTERIM SCHEME

COSLA Leaders and the Scottish Government agreed in February 2012 that the successor arrangements for the discretionary Social Fund would be delivered by local authorities on an interim basis from April 2013. In October 2012, Scottish Government and COSLA published the [formalised partnership agreement](#). As part of this process they also created a Design and Implementation Group (DIG) to oversee the implementation of the new arrangements. The Group was made up of Scottish Government and local authority representation. The agreement states that:

“The interim solution will offer some breathing space to determine what kind of service could be delivered in the longer term to best meet the needs of the most vulnerable. It is our joint aim within this context, to improve services through joined up working, create innovative changes to service delivery mechanisms and create accessibility improvements through the duration of the interim arrangements.”

In addition, an information event was held in October 2012 and a local authority practitioners event in January 2013.

HOW DOES THE FUND WORK?

The Scottish Government set out the objectives of the new scheme as follows:

- To provide a safety net in a disaster or emergency, when there is an immediate threat to health or safety.
- To enable independent living or continued independent living, preventing the need for institutional care.

There are two types of grant that will help to meet these objectives – Crisis Grants, and Community Care Grants.

Crisis Grants aim to help people, typically on benefits, who are in crisis because of a disaster, for example, a fire or a flood. Or in an emergency for example needing to travel to visit a sick child or when money has been stolen. Previously this took the form of a crisis loan which needed to be paid back to the DWP.

Community Care Grants aim to help people leaving facilities such as hospital, prison or a residential care home to re-establish themselves in the community. Alternatively, they help people on benefits who may have to go into care unless they get some support to stay at home. A Community Care Grant can also help families facing exceptional pressures, with one-off items, like a cooker or a washing machine.

The Scottish Government (2013d) has [issued detailed guidance](#) on how the fund should be operated and a single application form to offer consistency across the country. The Scottish Government and COSLA state that a localised approach should ensure a more client-focused or person-centred approach as the authorities involved will be able to meet clients face to face and

link clients' needs to locally available services and support. This discretion to tailor services will mean that delivery may vary from area to area.

It is expected that the guidance will be amended before October 2013 to allow people receiving universal credit to be eligible to apply to the fund. As universal credit will be paid to people in or out of work there is likely to be an extra requirement that applicants have income below a certain level to qualify.

The Scottish Welfare Fund will also offer a mixture of grants and goods; with the goods in some cases recycled. [*The Social Fund: Customer experiences and perspectives: Qualitative research with Jobcentre Plus customers*](#) (2010) found that

“customers were typically in agreement with the concept of the direct provision of reduced priced new goods instead of cash through the Social Fund as long as they retained an element of choice...Customers accepted the principle of the direct provision of second-hand furniture and white goods instead of cash through the Social Fund on the basis that, if someone was in need then they should accept second-hand if that was what was on offer.” (DWP, 2010)

There are some exclusions to the scheme, which are outlined in the [Scottish Government Guidance](#) and also in Annexe B.

Who is eligible to apply?

The following groups will be likely to access the fund (the list is not exhaustive):

- disabled people
- lone parents
- unemployed people
- older people
- care leavers
- homeless people
- ex-offenders
- carers.

[Guidance](#) states that local authorities should assess the pattern of demand against budget profiles on a month to month basis throughout the financial year and make a monthly decision accordingly on whether it is possible to make awards for high priority applications only, high and medium or high, medium and low applications.

There are four distinct stages in the decision making process that determine whether someone will receive a payment. Stage one is an initial eligibility check, including whether the person is in receipt of certain qualifying benefits. Stage two verifies whether the person meets the Fund's qualifying criteria. Stage three assesses the priority need of the applicant. Stage four checks what level of priority applicant the local authority is able to pay out to that month.

Please see further information on likely customer profiles on page 13.

HOW DOES THE SCOTTISH WELFARE FUND DIFFER FROM THE SOCIAL FUND?

Table 1: The main changes in the way that the Scottish Welfare Fund will operate in comparison to the previous discretionary elements of the Social Fund

	Social Fund	Scottish Welfare Fund
Funding	Budgets are managed over two regional areas in Scotland, based largely on previous patterns of demand	Ring fenced funding will be distributed to the 32 local authorities according to an agreed formula.
Delivery	Centralised call centre	National guidance with local delivery tailored to local need and integrated with existing services.
Types of award	Crisis loans to be repaid	Crisis grants will not need to be repaid. The offer of in kind support will also be available.
Eligibility	Crisis loans open to everyone	Crisis grants available to those on qualifying benefits with the discretion for local authorities to make exceptions.
Qualifying criteria	Specific provision for people to apply for costs to travel to visit someone who is ill, attend a funeral, visit a child being looked after while waiting for a court decision.	Travel costs are not identified as a separate criterion, though they may be claimed in connection with a crisis or a community care need
Qualifying criteria	Families without children may make claims under the criterion of easing “exceptional pressure”.	Re-focuses this criterion on families who face exceptional pressure and need support to provide a secure environment for their children.
Qualifying criteria	An application can be made 6 weeks in advance of leaving an institution.	An application can be made 8 weeks in advance of leaving an institution.
Excluded expenses	As set out in DWP guidance.	Additional items added include; funeral costs; items likely to become an on-going need; travel expenses with the exception of one off expenses (see guidance); maternity expenses where a mother has already received a sure start maternity grant; and expenses to meet the needs of people that are excluded from receiving public funds.

FUNDING

The funding for the new scheme, which has been transferred to Scottish Ministers from the UK Government, will come in three parts—set-up costs, on-going administrative costs and programme spend. In total for 2013 -14, the DWP transferred £23.8 million in programme spend to the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government [decided](#) to contribute an extra £9.2 million, giving a total of £33 million.

The Scottish Government and COSLA have agreed that funding allocated to the interim scheme will be ring-fenced and administered directly by local authorities. Allocations were made according to a funding formula agreed with the Joint Settlement and Distribution Group.

LOCAL AUTHORITY BUDGET ALLOCATIONS FOR 2013/14

Table 2: Budget allocations for 2013-2014

Local Authority	Community Care Grants £s	Crisis Grants £s	Total £s
Aberdeen City	540,786	359,055	899,841
Aberdeenshire	301,674	163,061	464,735
Angus	273,205	145,866	419,071
Argyll & Bute	263,907	108,853	372,76
Clackmannanshire	230,847	129,545	360,392
Dumfries & Galloway	430,012	193,225	623,237
Dundee City	986,18	350,457	1336,637
East Ayrshire	650,528	274,974	925,502
East Dunbartonshire	242,097	94,718	336,815
East Lothian	264,481	125,757	390,238
East Renfrewshire	182,29	75,629	257,919
Edinburgh, City of	1429,737	757,891	2187,628
Eilean Siar	36,16	11,803	47,963
Falkirk	634,342	293,48	927,822

Fife	1219,553	640,44	1859,993
Glasgow City	5756,371	1964,745	7721,116
Highland	555,135	245,538	800,673
Inverclyde	453,774	278,763	732,537
Midlothian	253,461	131,877	385,338
Moray	285,259	101,858	387,117
North Ayrshire	705,972	362,552	1068,524
North Lanarkshire	2125,263	830,751	2956,014
Orkney Islands	47,868	8,452	56,32
Perth & Kinross	420,828	172,096	592,924
Renfrewshire	693,919	454,938	1148,857
Scottish Borders	283,996	122,551	406,547
Shetland Islands	42,588	16,904	59,492
South Ayrshire	533,669	179,236	712,905
South Lanarkshire	1539,479	604,302	2143,781
Stirling	379,733	136,831	516,564
West Dunbartonshire	562,482	267,105	829,587
West Lothian	674,404	391,987	1066,391
Scotland Total	23,000,000	9,995,000	32,995,000

Source: Scottish Government (2013f)

Local Authorities can decide to augment the Scottish Welfare Fund budgets should they choose to do so. However, in doing so they must establish a further budget heading(s) as there will be a need to monitor and report on the ring fenced monies separately.

The table below shows the indicative funding the DWP has allocated to English local authorities and to the Scottish Government and Welsh Government, up to 2014-15.

Table 3: Indicative funding for local provision to replace the discretionary Social Funding, 2012-13 to 2014-15

		England	Scotland	Wales	Great Britain
2012-13	Set-up funding	£1.4 m	£2.0m	£0.1 m	£3.5 m
2013-14	Programme funding	£144.2 m	£23.8 m	£10.2 m	£178.2 m
	Administrative funding	£30.5 m	£5.0 m	£2.2 m	£37.7 m
	Total funding	£174.7 m	£28.8 m	£12.4 m	£215.9 m
2014-15	Programme funding	£144.2 m	£23.8 m	£10.2 m	£178.2 m
	Administrative funding	£27.9 m	£4.6 m	£2.0 m	£34.5 m
	Total funding	£172.1 m	£28.4 m	£12.2 m	£212.7 m

Source: House of Commons Library, based on DWP, Settlement funding allocation figures: Programme (AME), Administration (DEL) and Set-up funding allocation by country and local authority, August 2012. <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/social-fund-settlement-funding-allocation.pdf>. Figures rounded to nearest £0.1million. (Scottish figure for 2012-13 set up funding updated based on information received from the Scottish Government.)

The Scottish Government (2013a) states in the [equality impact assessment](#) (EQIA) that, due to the costs associated with recovery, it will not be possible to offer loans. As set out above, the successor arrangements will award crisis grants or in kind support instead. A knock-on impact of this decision is that, unlike the previous scheme, there will be no loan repayments that can be recycled to make further payments. Therefore, the overall pot of money will reduce. The Scottish Government hope to cover some of this loss by providing goods and in-kind support.

The Scottish Government also considered in its decision making the impact on clients of repaying loans. It explains in its EQIA that people on low incomes can get into difficulties repaying even small amounts. Therefore, grants are thought to help to reduce financial pressure and stress. The guidance will also encourage local authorities to make connections with locally available sources of affordable credit.

Local Authority spending update

On the 12 August 2013 the Scottish Government [issued a press release](#) (2013h) stating that over 20,000 people have received grants amounting to over £3.5 million since April 2013. This makes up around half of the funding that was profiled to be available during this time period. The Scottish Government suggested that vulnerable people may not yet be fully aware of the financial help available to them. However, Scottish Labour were [critical](#) of the Fund's current performance and poverty campaigners were [reported](#) as saying that council staff were trying too hard to save money by signposting applicants towards food banks and other charities. Scottish Government guidance states that any in kind support, such as food or food vouchers, should be

deducted from the Scottish Welfare Fund budget so that additional pressure is not placed on third sector food banks.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT

The Scottish Government states that the Scottish Welfare Fund will contribute to the following outcomes:

- Tackling the significant inequalities in Scottish society.
- Improving the life chances for children, young people and families at risk.
- People are able to maintain their independence as they get older and are able to access appropriate support when they need it.
- Public services are high quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive to local people's needs.

The EQIA for the scheme states that:

“The abolition of the discretionary Social Fund, at the same time as wider welfare reform is resulting in multiple changes to benefits, has potential to increase this confusion, particularly in the short term. Effective communication will be required, both ongoing and in the transition period to make sure that the changes do not compound the problem. Local Authority service design will also play a part, for example in helping people understand why they have been refused applications and where else they may go for help.”

PROFILE OF CUSTOMERS

The EQIA notes that the profiles of customers who access Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for living expenses differ. Users of Crisis Loans are primarily Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) claimants under the age of 35 while recipients of Community Care Grants are more likely to be lone parents and also more likely to have a disability.

Under the previous rules for considering applications, when a Social Fund decision maker considers an application for a Community Care Grant, they use criteria which are favourable to some groups, for example, the presence of a disabled child in the household.

The EQIA states that pensioners, disabled people and lone parents are less likely to be refused a Community Care Grant than other groups. The EQIA also highlights that disabled people are most likely to be affected by the changes. It states that:

“The data show that disabled people are slightly more likely to be successful in their applications than non-disabled people. And, they are more likely to be poorer, with less savings and coping less well financially. Disabled people are more likely to have access issues and specific needs in terms of the awards made e.g. re-used goods may not be suitable. The change in the definition of “exceptional pressure” may disadvantage disabled people in that they will no longer be eligible if they do not have dependent children. The change to a broader range of access options may have a positive impact if Local Authorities are able to provide appropriate support. The change toward integration with other local services may also be positive.” (Scottish Government, EQIA, 2013)

ANNEXE A: EXAMPLES OF SCHEMES LOCALISED TO ENGLISH LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Surrey County Council – [Surrey Local Assistance Scheme](#) – no cash payments, applicants will either be supplied with a pre-paid card or a supplier will be paid directly.

Birmingham City Council – [Birmingham Local Welfare Provision](#) – crisis grants for food or essential items will be awarded with pre-paid cards to be used in ASDA.

Sheffield City Council – [Local Assistance Scheme](#) – provides for local assistance grants, and local assistance loans. Grant payment is made to an applicant's bank account or via a smartcard if they do not have a bank account. Loans (interest free) will be administered by Sheffield Credit Union and applicants will need to become members to receive the loan.

Manchester City Council - [Welfare Provision Scheme](#) – a system of grants and loans (2% interest per month) will available to Manchester residents. There will be no cash awards for furniture or white goods, and loans will be administered by one of two credit unions. Loans will be paid into a credit union account or a credit union pre-payment card.

Middlesbrough Council – [Community Support Scheme](#) – no cash payments, assistance will be given via vouchers and/or access to items and products. It will provide Crisis Awards and Community Support Awards.

Liverpool City Council – [Liverpool Citizens Support Scheme](#) – will take the form of a Home Needs Award in the form of essential furniture and domestic appliances provided by a local supplier, and Urgent Needs Award provided via vouchers. Both will be in grant form, although where repeat applications occur, the scheme will allow the option to offer an award in the form of a loan.

ANNEXE B: EXCLUSIONS FROM THE SCOTTISH WELFARE FUND

The [Scottish Government website](#) (2013e) contains information on the items excluded from Scottish Welfare Fund payments. Please see the list below:

1. a need which occurs outside the United Kingdom
2. an educational or training need including: clothing and tools, distinctive school uniform or sports clothes for use at school, equipment to be used at school, travelling expenses to or from school, school meals taken during school holidays by children who are entitled to free school meals
3. expenses in connection with court (legal proceedings) such as legal fees, court fees, fines, costs, damages, subsistence or travelling expenses
4. removal or storage charges if the person is being re-housed following a compulsory purchase order, a redevelopment or closing order or a compulsory exchange of tenancies.
5. a television or a radio or a licence, aerial or rental costs, costs of purchasing, renting or installing a telephone (unless this is for the purpose of a personal alarm), mobile phones and any call charges
6. repair to Local Authority property or the property of social landlords who maintain property on behalf of the tenant.
7. rent in advance, which can be provided by a budgeting loan or discretionary housing payments.
8. debts, debt interest, debts to government departments or Local Authority tax, Scottish Water water and waste charges, arrears of Local Authority tax or community water charges
9. any expense which the Local Authority or other organisation has a statutory duty to meet, for example regular costs for care or housing
10. a medical, surgical, optical, aural or dental item or service (note that needs under all of these headings can be provided free of charge by the National Health Service, if are getting Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance (income-related), or Pension Credit). Medical expenses, treatments, items and medications.
11. domestic assistance and respite care
12. work related expenses
13. investments
14. holidays
15. ongoing needs which are, or are likely to become, a feature of expenditure.
16. travelling expenses, with the exception of one-off expenses relating directly to the qualifying criteria, for example travelling expenses to help someone move to a new home where that move is essential to their re-integration in the community.
17. maternity expenses covered by a Sure Start Maternity Grant – see regulated Social Fund.
18. any costs related to a person's funeral – see regulated Social Fund.
19. expenses to meet the needs of people who have no recourse to public funds.

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