

Evidence briefing: Assessing the local economic impacts of fair employment policies

1. Summary

Fair employment (or fair work) policies are measures that employers put in place to improve employee wellbeing. Examples include paying a living wage, ensuring workers have certainty about work hours (use of fair shift scheduling, avoidance of zero-hours contracts, etc.), providing flexible work, training and development opportunities, implementing equality and diversity policies, recognising collective representation, and providing benefits (such as free access to telephone based mental health support, counselling, and legal and financial advice from an outside provider).

This briefing provides a framework to help policymakers think through some of the benefits and costs of introducing fair employment policies within their own organisation or encouraging adoption by local employers. It draws on a rapid evidence review of the evaluation evidence on local minimum wages, our toolkit on high involvement management practices, and on economic theory and evidence. Reflecting What Works Growth's remit, it focuses on the potential effects on local economic outcomes such as employment and wages. As this policy will have economic effects at multiple levels, the effects on individuals, employers and the local area are discussed separately.

¹ We also searched for evaluation evidence on the impacts of fair employment charters but were unable to identify any studies that met our criteria for inclusion.

Key messages

Assessing local economic impacts

Effects for workers

- It is important to assess how many and which workers will be affected.
- Paying a living wage will have a direct effect on the hourly wages of the lowest paid employees in adopting organisations.
- Adoption of a living wage may also affect wage rates received by other employees in adopting organisations if employers seek to maintain differentials or in other non-adopting organisations if they face increased competition for lower paid staff.
- Some non-pay provisions of fair employment charters may also affect wages.
- Where better pay and conditions make individuals less inclined to change jobs, this may have a negative impact on career progression and pay over the longer-term.
- There is little evidence that the introduction of compulsory minimum wages reduces employment and hours worked but there is a lack of evidence on whether this is also the case for voluntary living wage schemes.
- Increases in pay may not increase household income if they are offset by reductions in benefits. The impact will also depend on whether the worker is in a single or multiple-income household.
- To offset higher wage rates, employers may increase use of zero hours contracts, increase
 work intensification, or cut back on overtime, shift premiums or other staff benefits although
 such adjustments may be less likely for organisations voluntarily adopting a living wage
 than in response to statutory minimum wages. Fair employment charters can help ensure
 increases in wages are not offset by declines in work conditions.

Effects for employers

- Unless employment or hours adjust, the adoption of a living wage will increase wage bills, with potential impacts on prices, profit margins or investment.
- Implementing other elements of fair employment charters may also incur costs.
- Potential benefits for employers include improved organisational reputation, staff motivation and retention, and reduced sickness absence.
- Work with employers to understand the likely implications of adopting fair employment practices and whether there is a need for accompanying business support.

Area-level effects

- Decide whether to adopt fair employment policies internally or whether to also encourage other local employers, including anchor institutions, to adopt.
- Coverage will determine the scale of the impacts on the local economy.
- Where local authorities or other public sector anchor institutions increase wage rates, this will limit their ability to fund other activities.
- Assess whether adoption of living wages might lead some employers to leave the local area. Relocation is likely to be limited and will depend on whether the business is tradeable and can easily relocate to another area. Also assess effects on firm entry.
- Increases in wages may lead to some additional jobs being created in the local non-tradeable

sector but this is likely to be limited.

Assessing wider effects

Fair employment policies may have positive impacts on health and wellbeing.

Assessing costs

 Monitoring compliance with a living wage or fair employment charter will be important to maintain the credibility of the policy.

Monitoring and evaluation

• Use monitoring and evaluation to assess the impacts of fair employment policies. This will help improve future decision-making.

2. Background

In the UK, there are two main elements to fair employment policies – paying a living wage and adopting a fair employment charter or standard. Advocates argue that fair employment policies produce benefits for individual workers – better pay and conditions, an improved sense of fulfilment, more opportunities, and improved wellbeing. These must be offset against costs, such as reduced employment or reductions in employee benefits. Employers may also benefit if fair employment increases workforce commitment and morale, reduces absenteeism, lowers staff turnover and improves productivity and performance. Again, these benefits must be offset against costs.

Living wages

Since 1999, all UK workers should be paid a statutory minimum wage. The minimum wage is tiered, with older employees paid more than younger and a separate rate for apprentices. The rate for those aged 23 and older until 31 March 2024, and those aged 21 and older from 1 April 2024 onwards is referred to as the National Living Wage (NLW), with the rates for those below this age but over school leaving age referred to as the National Minimum Wage (NMW). An independent public body, the Low Pay Commission, advises the Government on the rates, which are updated annually.

Living wages are voluntary minimum wages that are set above the mandatory government minimum. The Real Living Wage (RLW) is a well-known example, adjusted annually based on cost-of-living calculations made by the Resolution Foundation, on behalf of the Living Wage Commission. There is also a London Living Wage (LLW) to reflect the higher living costs in Greater London, calculated annually by the same organisations. The NMW rates for 2024/25 will be £6.40 for under 18s and apprentices and £8.60 for those aged 18 to 20, the NLW will be £11.44 for those aged 21 and over, the RLW £12.00 and the LLW £13.15.3,4 For an individual aged 21 or over, moving from the NLW to the RLW is equivalent to a 4.9 percent wage rate increase, whilst moving from the NLW to the LLW would be equivalent to a 14.9 percent increase.

Fair employment charters and standards

Fair employment charters and standards (referred to throughout this briefing as charters) are voluntary employer agreements. These aim to encourage good pay, fair and flexible working conditions, and promote diversity and social mobility. The devolved administrations and several local and mayoral

² The Living Wage Commission was set up by the Living Wage Foundation to oversee the calculation of the Living Wage rates in London and the UK.

³ Low Pay Commission (2022). The National Living Wage Review (2015-2020).

⁴ Living Wage employers have until May 2024 to implement the RLW and LLW.

combined authorities have fair employment charters which they encourage local employers to sign.

Charters vary in their requirements – for example, the extent to which employers need to demonstrate compliance – and whether they also support employers to change policies and practices. For example, the Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter (GEC) is both a membership and an assessment scheme. Employers apply to be a member or supporter. Membership involves assessment by a technical panel to ensure that members meet the required standards. Businesses not yet ready to be members but committed to improving employment practices can join as a supporter. They are encouraged to work with the GEC team to prepare for full membership. For the Greater London Authority's (GLA) Good Work Standard employers complete a foundation assessment to ensure they meet basic minimum legal requirements and practices and, if they pass, a detailed self-assessment. If they meet the required score, a panel decides whether to award the standard.

In some cases, being accredited as a fair employer brings additional benefits. For example, under the GLA's Good Work Standard, employers can use accreditation to demonstrate social value when competing for public sector procurement opportunities with the GLA, Metropolitan Police, London Fire Brigade and Transport for London.

One element of fair employment charters that What Works Growth has previously examined is high involvement management practices. These are policies and procedures that seek to increase employee involvement in management decision making, and to equip employees with the skills and autonomy to identify improvements in firm processes. They aim to increase employee job satisfaction and effort, encourage employee investment in their own productivity, and improve commitment.

3. Assessing local economic impacts

3.1 Effects for workers

Effects on wages

Assessment of effects needs to start by identifying which workers will be affected.

- Workers with wages below the living wage at adopting employers should see increased wage rates.
- Workers that earn above the living wage at adopting employers may also see increased wage rates if the employer maintains differentials between grades.
- Workers at non-adopting employers may also see increased wage rates if there is increased competition for workers. The larger the proportion of workers in a local area that are covered by voluntary living wage agreements, the more likely this upward pressure on wages in nonadopters is to develop. This is discussed in more detail in the section on area effects.
- It is less clear how non-pay provisions in fair employment charters will affect wages. It
 may be possible to assess the likely impact of specific non-pay provisions for example,
 evaluations of high involvement management practices suggest they may have a positive
 effect on wages.

For all the groups set out above, a living wage would increase current wage rates. Longer term effects could be negative if either higher wage rates or better conditions reduces the likelihood of workers changing jobs, as this plays an important role in career progression.

Analysing the wage rate structure of employers committing, or likely to commit, to pay a living wage

^{5 &}lt;a href="https://www.gmgoodemploymentcharter.co.uk/">https://www.gmgoodemploymentcharter.co.uk/

⁶ https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/business-and-economy/supporting-business/good-work-standard-gws/guidance-and-support-employers

will help estimate how many workers should see higher wage rates. Multiplying this by the gap between current wage rates and the living wage will allow calculation of the additional pay for local employees. This calculation assumes no change in employment or hours worked. This is discussed in the next section.

These policies will affect some groups more than others. For example, 14 percent of women who are in work are paid below the RLW, compared to 9 percent of men, and the ethnicity hourly pay gap for the bottom of the pay distribution almost halved from 15.1 percent to 8.7 percent after the introduction of the NLW.^{7,8} Adopting a living wage is thus likely to also have redistributive effects, especially as women and minority ethnic groups are more likely to be employed in anchor organisations (including local authorities and NHS trusts).

Effects on pay

If hourly wages increase, the effect on total pay will depend on whether employment and hours are unchanged.

There are two reasons to believe this may not be a major issue. First, most evidence on the introduction of, or increases to, the NLW suggests little or no reduction in employment or hours. Evaluations of mandatory minimum wages in other countries, including those in our rapid evidence review on local minimum wages, find similar results.

Second, as these are voluntary commitments, it seems unlikely that employers will adopt if increased wage rates need to be offset in this way. The main exception could be for non-adopting employers if there is upwards pressure on area-level wages.

Reductions in employment or hours may be more likely in specific cases. The rapid evidence review finds some instances in the United States where the introduction of mandatory local minimum wages led to reductions in employment in the tradeable sector, and for less experienced workers in the non-tradable sector (such as cafés, bars and restaurants). Again, these effects may be limited for voluntary agreements unless non-adopting firms face upward wage pressure.

Consider whether employment or hours are likely to change because of the adoption of a living wage, although it is likely there will be no changes unless there is context-specific evidence to the contrary. Multiplying any likely change in total hours worked by the likely change in hourly wages (discussed above) will provide an estimate of the change in total gross pay for workers.

Effects on household incomes

Consider whether higher pay will lead to an increase in household income. This will partly depend on the household composition of affected workers. As an example, NLW workers are the main earner in only around 35 percent of households with an NLW worker. Just under half are secondary earners and, in many cases, the overall household income is largely determined by the other, higher earner.⁹

Evidence from the NLW finds that increases in hourly wages are often offset by losses in benefits. Households with at least one NLW worker saw pay increase by more than other households between 2015/16 and 2019/20 (31 per cent compared to 20 percent), but total incomes increased at a similar rate due to losses of in-work benefits. ¹⁰ It is likely that increases in pay due to the adoption of local living wages would have a similar impact on benefits, suggesting that the impact on household incomes may be small.

Understanding the household composition and benefits status of affected workers – or if this is not

⁷ Aziz and Richardson (2023). Employee Jobs Paid Below the Living Wage 2023.

⁸ Low Pay Commission (2022). The National Living Wage Review (2015-2020).

⁹ Low Pay Commission (2022). The National Living Wage Review (2015-2020).

¹⁰ Low Pay Commission (2022). The National Living Wage Review (2015-2020).

available, local statistics on these indicators – should help estimate the extent to which increased wage rates and pay will feed through into higher household incomes.

Other effects

Workers could be negatively affected if employers choose to offset an increase in wage rates by changing other aspects of work organisation. Examples include increasing use of zero-hours contracts, removing shift premiums, cutting paid breaks, ending free food, and ending overtime rates and premium pay for weekends and bank holidays, or work intensification (additional tasks, higher performance standards, etc). There is some evidence of such effects in response to mandatory minimum wages but, as before, it seems less likely they will occur for voluntary agreements.^{11,12}

Fair employment charters could pre-emptively address this by requiring a commitment not to offset the living wage in this way.

Key messages

It is important to assess how many and which workers will be affected.

Paying a living wage will have a direct effect on the hourly wages of the lowest paid employees in adopting organisations.

Adoption of a living wage may also affect wage rates received by other employees in adopting organisations if employers seek to maintain differentials or in other non-adopting organisations if they face increased competition for lower paid staff.

Some non-pay provisions of fair employment charters may also affect wages.

Where better pay and conditions make individuals less inclined to change jobs, this may have a negative impact on career progression and pay over the longer-term.

There is little evidence that the introduction of compulsory minimum wages reduces employment and hours worked but there is a lack of evidence on whether this is also the case for voluntary living wage schemes.

Increases in pay may not increase household income if they are offset by reductions in benefits. The impact will also depend on whether the worker is in a single or multiple-income household.

To offset higher wage rates, employers may increase use of zero hours contracts, increase work intensification, or cut back on overtime, shift premiums or other staff benefits – although such adjustments may be less likely for organisations voluntarily adopting a living wage than in response to statutory minimum wages. Fair employment charters can help ensure increases in wages are not offset by declines in work conditions.

3.2 Effects for employers

Consider the impacts on employers. Assuming there are no changes to employment or hours, paying a living wage will increase the wage bill. Implementing other elements of fair employment charters, such as providing training and development, will also increase costs. Employers may deal with these in different ways – for example, by increasing prices to consumers, reducing profit margins, or reducing investment.

Three studies included in the rapid evidence review (out of four looking at this outcome) find that the

¹¹ Giupponi and Machin (2022). Low pay inequality.

¹² Low Pay Commission (2022). The National Living Wage Review (2015-2020).

introduction of mandatory local minimum wages increased prices – but as all except one focused on the restaurant sector this finding may not generalise. In one study, the lowest quality restaurants (based on customer ratings) were most likely to increase prices, and by the largest amount. This study also found that these firms were the most likely to close – highlighting that underlying performance is likely to determine ability to adjust to higher wages or increased costs from implementing fair employment charters. Once again, employers are unlikely to adopt these policies if they will have negative impacts on their business – but non-adopters may be negatively affected if they experience increased costs due to increased competition for workers.

Adopting fair employment practices, including a living wage, could also have positive effects – such as improving organisational reputation, staff motivation and retention, and reducing absence. As each of these helps either reduce costs, improve productivity, or increase income, they should have positive balance sheet effects. For the private sector, this could mean higher profits, whilst for public sector organisations, it could mean more cost-effective service provision. These effects may depend on the capacity to make other changes. For example, one study found the NLW had no overall effect on productivity because of a lack of accompanying investment (for example, into new machinery). Realistically, not all employers will experience these benefits, and where they occur, they may not be large.

The lack of evaluation evidence, and the fact that adoption is voluntary makes it difficult to assess possible impacts. Work with local employers to understand changes planned alongside the adoption of living wages or fair employment charters – and whether there is business support that could help minimise negative impacts or maximise benefits.

Key messages

Unless employment or hours adjust, the adoption of a living wage will increase wage bills, with potential impacts on prices, profit margins or investment.

Implementing other elements of fair employment charters may also incur costs.

Potential benefits for employers include improved organisational reputation, staff motivation and retention, and reduced sickness absence.

Work with employers to understand the likely implications of adopting fair employment practices and whether there is a need for accompanying business support.

3.3 Area-level effects

Coverage: Who adopts?

Area-level effects will depend on the:

- Size of effects on workers and employers, as discussed in Sections 3.1 and 3.2.
- Extent to which these effects on workers and employers offset each other (for example, pay increases have a positive impact on workers but reduce employer profits). Similarly, the aggregate effect will be smaller if some workers or employers benefit whilst others are negatively affected (for example, some workers benefit from higher pay but others face increased prices needed to fund pay increases).
- Proportion of workers and residents affected (referred to as coverage).

As fair employment policies rely on adoption by employers, coverage will be determined by the number of adopting employers and how many workers they employ (for example, an employer with 1,000 employees will have a much larger impact than one with ten employees). Within this, fair employment charters will normally cover all employees but living wages will only affect the sub-set of workers whose pay will increase.

Estimates of coverage should also include non-adopting employers who have adjusted their wage rates or other conditions due to increased competition. Changes by non-adopters are more likely the higher the proportion of total local employment accounted for by adopters.

Depending on the outcome of interest, coverage will also depend on whether workers or employers are local. For example, for local household incomes, coverage will depend on whether affected workers live locally. Similarly, impacts on profit margins can affect local incomes if businesses are locally owned.

The higher the coverage, the larger the potential impacts. Options open to local and combined authorities to increase coverage are to adopt these policies internally, to encourage adoption by other local anchor institutions or by local employers more generally. As local authorities and health boards are often the largest local employers, adoption by these organisations will affect a larger share of local employees than most other employers. Persuading other local employers to adopt will increase these shares. There is some evidence that peer influence encourages the take-up of the RLW in some sectors and recent survey evidence highlights the importance of public sector leadership in net zero, suggesting that there may be benefits to local authority adoption before trying to persuade others to do so. 15,16

Local authorities and other anchor institutions may be able to use their procurement policies to encourage other local employers to adopt fair employment policies. This will have a larger local impact if their supply chain is local. Our <u>local procurement briefing</u> provides more detail on thinking through the potential benefits and costs of adopting local procurement policies.

Base the assessment of the likely costs and benefits of fair employment policies on assumptions about coverage. Will a living wage policy or fair employment charter be adopted internally, or is the aim to (also) persuade other employers to implement? How realistic are assumptions about take-up by local employers?

Wages, pay and household income

The largest impact on the local economy is likely to come from any increases in pay and household incomes. Section 3.1 discussed this for individuals and highlighted that increased wage rates may be offset by changes in employment or hours and increased pay by benefit reductions – with the former less of a concern for voluntary agreements, but the latter a significant concern.

Calculating the potential effect on pay and household income at the local level will require estimates of:

- Increases in individual wage rates, and whether these are likely to be offset by reductions in employment and hours or benefit reductions.
- The proportion of local workers likely to experience pay or income increases. It may be
 possible to capture this for adopters through accreditation processes but establishing for

^{14 &#}x27;Anchor institutions' is a term used to refer to organisations that play a major role or have a large influence in an area. Examples include local and combined authorities, NHS trusts, universities and colleges, or large private sector firms. Anchor institutions are often large employers, may control large amounts of land or buildings, and can be the largest purchasers of goods and services in a locality.

¹⁵ Heery et al. (2017). *The Living Wage Employer Experience*.

¹⁶ Behavioural Insights Team (2023). How to build a net zero society.

workers in non-adopters is likely to be more difficult. During policy appraisal, potential effects could be established using data on the proportion of workers earning less than the proposed living wage. This would provide a cap on the potential impact.¹⁷

Whether workers live locally. Increased wage rates and incomes will have more of an effect
on the local economy if the workers live in the area. Low wage workers tend to have smaller
labour markets, so they are more likely to live locally than higher paid workers.

If increased wage rates and pay are offset by benefits reduction this raises costs for employers while reducing costs for central government (who otherwise would pay benefits). As discussed in the section on employer effects, this potentially will increase prices, reduce profit margins or reduce investment at private sector employers making them less competitive. For public sector employers, higher costs will reduce their ability to fund other spending.

Employment

As we saw earlier, the evidence suggests that in most cases, the introduction of mandatory minimum wages does not tend to lead to a reduction in employment or hours for existing workers and businesses. And although there is little evidence, it seems unlikely that voluntary agreements should have big employment or hours affects. But this does not mean that there will be no effect on employment and hours at the area level.

We have already discussed one potential mechanism: there may be negative effects on employment for non-adopters. If this is triggered by adoption by a local authority or other public sector anchor institution this would be a form of 'crowding out'.¹⁸ This is more likely if a large proportion of local employers adopt a living wage (or the largest employers do so) or if coverage is concentrated in a specific sector, especially if there are already skills shortages in the sector – for example, the care sector. Assessing local labour demand and supply and the profile of adopting employers will help establish whether the policy is likely to lead to wage increases in non-adopting employers.

Some of these non-adopters may decide to close or relocate, and it may also discourage firm entry. This will have a negative impact on employment. Consider these effects when assessing the impact on area level employment. Local authorities and other public sector anchor institutions such as NHS trusts, colleges and universities are unlikely to relocate. Non-tradable sectors are also unlikely to relocate as their goods and services must be produced locally. Tradable sector businesses have more discretion as they produce for national or international markets. Understanding the sectoral composition of the local economy will help in assessing the likelihood of any area level employment effects.

Employment may also decrease if either higher wage rates or costs of fair employment charters adjust the relative attractiveness of labour and capital, leading to employers to shift to a less labour-intensive processes. One study cited in our rapid evidence review found this to be the case for new firms opening after the introduction of a local minimum wage.

Increased incomes increase demand for goods and services produced locally meaning living wages could create additional jobs in the non-tradeable sector. However, overall changes in income are

- 17 For example, ONS (2023) Low pay estimates from Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings data shows that in April 2023, just over 10 percent of employees aged 23 and over earned less than the 2023/24 Real Living Wage of £10.90, whilst around 23 percent of employees in this age band earned less than £12 an hour. The proportions are much higher for younger workers. Some areas will have a higher proportion of workers earning low wages. If 10 percent of workers locally earn less than the adopted living wage and this represented a 5 percent increase on their current wage rate, then even if all local employers adopted this and none of the increased pay was offset by declines in hours or benefits, this would equate to 0.5 percent increase in local incomes.
- 18 Crowding out occurs when public sector employment negatively affects local private sector firms, for example, by paying higher wages, making it harder for the private sector to attract or retain workers. Crowding out is discussed in more detail in our <u>public sector relocation briefing</u>.

likely to be small and only a proportion of wages are spent locally. If the increase in local spend is estimated, this could be combined with revenue per employee data to estimate the additional jobs that could be created. In 2021, revenue per job was just over £190,000 across all firms.¹⁹

Key messages

Decide whether to adopt fair employment policies internally or whether to also encourage other local employers, including anchor institutions, to adopt.

Coverage will determine the scale of the impacts on the local economy.

Where local authorities or other public sector anchor institutions increase wage rates, this will limit their ability to fund other activities.

Assess whether adoption of living wages might lead some employers to leave the local area. Relocation is likely to be limited and will depend on whether the business is tradeable and can easily relocate to another area. Also assess effects on firm entry.

Increases in wages may lead to some additional jobs being created in the local non-tradeable sector but this is likely to be limited.

4. Assessing wider effects

Having more local employers pay a living wage or adopt fair employment charters may have positive impacts on health and wellbeing. Our rapid evidence review found one UK study in which employees paid the LLW reported higher wellbeing than a comparator group. This could be due to increased satisfaction with pay, a reduction in time pressure at work, or reduced working hours. Better pay and fairer contracts can also reduce stress and feelings of vulnerability when people are struggling financially to meet their basic needs. There is also evidence from the US that state minimum wages higher than the federal minimum wage can reduce rates of suicide, and reduce incidence of low birth weight and rates of neonatal death – but these findings may not be transferable to the UK given differences in health systems and inequality.

Health is complex and influenced by many factors including income and social status, education, physical environment, social support networks, genetics, access to health services, and gender. Even when an intervention makes a big difference to an individual, this may only play a small part in their overall health outcomes. As such, effects on health are likely to be difficult to observe.

Key messages

Fair employment policies may have positive impacts on health and wellbeing.

5. Assessing costs

Consider the potential costs for policymakers.

There will be costs associated with designing and implementing fair employment policies. Key costs are likely to include activities to encourage take-up by employers, assessment against charter

¹⁹ Calculation based on data from *UK Business: Activity, Size and Location 2021* published by ONS following a user request (AH1019). Please contact What Works Growth if you would more information on this data or on how to request similar data.

requirements, providing support for employers to implement changes, and monitoring compliance.

Monitoring compliance (for example, that staff are receiving training and development, employee voices are being heard in workplace, and zero hours are not being used) will be important to maintain the credibility and fairness of accreditation. One particularly important area to monitor is underpayment. Employers are more likely to pay staff earning NLW 'off the books' or demand more unpaid hours from them if they are female, salaried, or full-time workers, with the occupations with the highest levels of non-compliance office work, leisure, and social care. As living wages are voluntary, this may limit underpayment but compliance is necessary to ensure this does not occur.

Key messages

Monitoring compliance with a living wage or fair employment charter will be important to maintain the credibility of the policy.

6. Monitoring and evaluation.

This briefing provides a framework to help policymakers assess the benefits and costs of introducing living wages and fair employment charters. Collecting monitoring data and, where possible, undertaking evaluation will help assess impacts and increase the data and evidence available to inform future decisions. This is particularly important given that there is limited evaluation evidence on fair employment policies. Uncertainties around whether increased wage rates from voluntary living wage schemes will feed through into increased pay and household income, whether effects for different groups will offset each other, and what the aggregate effects are at the area level, mean this is a priority for monitoring and evaluation.

Consider what monitoring data can be captured as part of policy implementation, as there is likely to be limited secondary data sources available. Evaluations may be able to draw on labour market and pay microdata held by ONS Secure Research Service.

Key messages

Use monitoring and evaluation to assess the impacts of fair employment policies. This will help improve future decision-making.



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