



Our strategic plan 2015-16 to 2017-18

# Making a difference



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## Foreword

We know that when things go wrong in public services they can have devastating consequences for individuals and their families. It can often be difficult and daunting to make a complaint, and we would like to thank people for complaining and making their voices heard. We need to hear these voices if we are to achieve the improvements in public services and complaint handling that people deserve.

We sit at the apex of the complaints system and investigate complaints that people have been treated unfairly or have received poor service from government departments, other public organisations and the NHS in England. Our vision is for complaints to make a difference and help to improve public services for everyone.

We want the public to say they are confident in complaining, that it is straightforward and fair, and that they are listened to, and that services put things right, learn from complaints and improve. In 2013 we began a journey to radically modernise our organisation so that we could do more to make this vision of complaining a reality.

We identified five things that we needed to do. We knew we had to make it easier for people to find and use our service and to help more people by investigating more complaints. We knew we needed to work with others to use what we learn from complaints to help them make public services and the complaints system better. And we knew we needed to develop our organisation to achieve these things.

We have made good progress on each of these aims:

- We made a fundamental change to our processes and now investigate six times as many complaints as we did two years ago.
- We have published reports on systemic problems, which have led to hearings in Parliament, and are helping to hold Government to account for making public services better.

- We have worked with patients and service users to define what a positive experience of complaining about the NHS in England would feel like and used their feedback to develop a set of standards.

We have updated our strategic plan to take account of everything we have learned in the first stage of our modernisation. The five aims we identified two years ago still sit at the heart of our plans, modified to reflect where we are now.

Our new three-year plan puts the focus on transforming our services. We are already helping many more people with their complaints, but we need to make sure we give people the best possible experience at every stage - from first getting in touch with their complaint through to getting a final decision from us. In consultation with service users, advice and advocacy groups and others, we will develop a new Service Charter, describing the service people can expect from us in future.

We also plan to make big changes to how we investigate big and repeated mistakes and how we take the learning from these to Parliament and public service providers. We also have plans to do more to help organisations improve how they handle complaints on the ground.

The third and final stage of our modernisation requires legislative reform. The Public Administration Select Committee has made recommendations for change which we believe will improve things for everyone. This includes creating a streamlined public services ombudsman. This would make it easier for people to have their complaints heard, will make it better for Parliament, and offer more value for money to the taxpayer. We hope the legislation that is needed to make this happen will be put in place within the time period of this plan.

**Dame Julie Mellor DBE**

Chair of the Board and Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman

## An overview of our plans

This strategic plan sets out our overarching aims and objectives for the next three years. It updates the strategic plan we first published in November 2012. We have written it to engage with, and inform, our external stakeholders about our direction of travel. It also gives our staff a clear set of medium term organisation-wide goals to which everyone's work contributes.

Our medium-term aims and objectives were agreed two years ago when our 2013-14 to 2017-18 strategic plan, 'Delivering more impact for more people', was originally published. Our latest review of our progress is set out in our Annual Report 2013-14 – published in July 2014.

In the last two years we have been building the foundations that will allow us to improve our service in the longer term. Feedback from our users, stakeholders and Parliament has helped us to identify what we want to do differently, and we have already made some major changes. These include:

- establishing new internal governance arrangements,
- dramatically increasing the number of investigations we do,
- developing our external relationships, and
- achieving some important milestones in how we use our insight to lobby for wider improvements to the complaints system and public services.

In the last six months, working with our Chair and Board and taking into account feedback from the Public Administration Select Committee, our users and our other stakeholders, we have reviewed our aims and objectives to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

There has been significant change in the external environment in which we operate and this has given us the opportunity to reflect and reframe some of the key outcomes we are seeking to achieve. In particular, our new aims place a priority on improving the quality of our services, and on progressing our ambition for a streamlined public ombudsman service.

The focus of the next period will be about further improvements to the quality of services for individual complainants and changes to how we investigate and share insight into big and repeated service mistakes, increased convergence with the Local Government Ombudsman, and close collaboration with others to bring about a new streamlined public ombudsman service.

The diagram on the next page shows at a glance some of our key milestones over the period of this plan.



## Five years at a glance 2013-14 to 2017-18

We are now almost two years into a five-year strategic plan:

### Years 1-2 Building

**Years 1 and 2 were about building the foundations for change:**

- ▶ Investigated six times more complaints.
- ▶ Established new governance arrangements and appointed a new senior team.
- ▶ Built closer relationships with Parliament to hold service providers to account.
- ▶ Built stronger relationships with external organisations nationally and locally.
- ▶ Established the case for change to create a new streamlined public ombudsman service.

### Years 3-4 Transforming

**Years 3 and 4 are about transforming what we do and how we do it:**

- ▶ Releasing the full potential of our staff to contribute to the success of our organisation.
- ▶ Embedding new ways of resolving complaints and improving the quality and pace of our work.
- ▶ Raising awareness of our services and making them more accessible.
- ▶ Making more use of technology to deliver our services and to generate more insight into public sector performance.
- ▶ Improving how we use insight from individual cases and systemic investigations to bring about change.
- ▶ Working more closely with the Local Government Ombudsman and other public ombudsman services, and beginning the transition to a streamlined public ombudsman service, depending on the legislative timetable.

### Year 5 Realising

**Years 5 and beyond are about a new public ombudsman service:**

- ▶ Continuing the transition to a streamlined public ombudsman service.
- ▶ Improving awareness of the role of ombudsman services.
- ▶ Putting in place mechanisms for the seamless referral of complaints across public services.
- ▶ Making full use of digital technology to deliver our services.
- ▶ Developing a common approach to insight across the system, to identify improvements to complaint handling and big and repeated mistakes in public services.

more **impact**  
for more **people**

## Who we are and what we do

### Our role

We were set up by Parliament nearly 50 years ago, initially to investigate complaints that individuals had been treated unfairly or received poor service from UK central government departments and agencies. In 1993 complaints about the NHS in England were added to our remit and they now make up almost 80% of our work. We are part of the wider administrative justice system – accountable directly to Parliament. Through our investigation of their complaints, we are able to give people a direct voice and power in relation to the state.

We investigate complaints independently and impartially without taking sides. We ask people to complain to the organisation they are unhappy about before they bring their complaint to us. Our powers are set out in law and our services are free to everyone.

The law gives us the power to investigate and make final decisions on complaints about public services for individuals. We make recommendations on how organisations should put right mistakes they have made. We also ask them to produce action plans to show what steps they will take to prevent similar mistakes in future.

We use the evidence and insight from our work for wider public benefit. If we find big or repeated issues in service delivery or complaint handling, we can report this to Parliament so it can hold the providers of services to account.

We are now at another important stage of development as a twenty-first century ombudsman service. We will continue to work with others to make the case to Parliament that now is the time for a further change in the way citizens can get redress when things go wrong. We want to see an end to the current fragmented ombudsman landscape and Parliament to legislate to bring forward plans for a streamlined public ombudsman service.

At the same time, we will continue to make the case for changes to our powers to make our services more accessible and bring them into line with other ombudsman services across the world. We want to be able to conduct investigations on our own initiative, so we can help more people – especially those likely to suffer the most from service failures – more quickly. We want people to have the choice to bring complaints to us directly, without having to contact a Member of Parliament first, and we want to be able to accept people's complaints on the telephone and by email.

### Our vision

We want complaints to make a difference and help to improve public services for everyone:

- We want everyone, whoever they are, to be confident that complaining about public services is straightforward and fair and will make a difference.
- When people complain about public services, we want them to be listened to, be involved in how the complaint will be considered and know that mistakes will be put right.
- We want the commissioners and providers of public services to learn from complaints and to use them to improve services for everyone.
- We want people to have a voice and power to hold government departments, agencies and NHS organisations to account when things go wrong.
- We want to support the sectors we work with to improve.





## A changing landscape and our vision for change

We operate in a complex and rapidly changing environment. Public services provided by central government and the NHS are undergoing transformation and the relationship between the users of services and the state is changing. Our strategic plan helps us to steer a course between the need for operational continuity and the demands of a rapidly changing world, to ensure that our services remain relevant. While we retain our overall vision and long-term aims, we recognise that we need to continue to adapt and improve all the services we provide. Public expectations of us remain high and our services must mirror what we expect of others. This plan clarifies the choices we face as an organisation and identifies the medium-term business change priorities that are critical to achieving future success.

We know when we listen to individuals and groups of complainants that their expectations of us and the wider complaints system continue to change. Our research with our users and stakeholders has shown that people want us to investigate more

cases, be more open and transparent about how we go about our work, communicate with them more clearly and provide remedies more quickly. We also recognise there is still an unmet need for advice and advocacy services to help some people through the complaints process.

Many people still feel the complaints system as a whole is not fit for purpose and can be difficult to access. Some people still lack the confidence that complaining will make a difference. We see increasingly that it is often at the point of transition and life changes that the commissioning and provision of services goes wrong and gives rise to complaints.

We also know the nature of the complaints we consider is changing. In particular, we have seen the impact of financial pressures across central government and NHS services, changing commissioning roles, lack of transparency between providers and the complexity of multi-agency delivery.

Public expectations of us remain high and our services must mirror what we expect of others.



## Strategic choices

At a time when there are even greater expectations of our services and we continue to have the benefit of significant flexibility in our operating environment, we need to make strategic choices. These include choices about our overarching aims, the pace of change, how we use our resources and how we meet the different needs and expectations of new and existing service users.

Putting things right to provide remedy for individual complainants remains at the heart of our business. At the same time, we want to extend the reach of our wider influence through making even better use of our insights and expertise from our casework to improve both complaint handling and public services.

Importantly, over the period of this plan we expect Parliament to make significant progress in the delivery of legislative change to create a new streamlined public ombudsman service. We are already working closely with the Local Government Ombudsman on a programme of convergence and have mapped out those characteristics that we jointly think will be important for any new ombudsman service.

We have reflected on the progress we have made in the last two years and the opportunities that lie ahead. As a result, this is how we will sequence the delivery of our strategic aims over the next three years:

- We will prioritise improvements to the quality of our services, so that we can achieve and maintain excellence in our frontline customer services, investigations, decision making and overall service delivery. Our new Service Charter will play a key role in shaping delivery and driving improvement.
- We will place even more emphasis on delivering better value for money, with a focus on increasing productivity and ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of all parts of our service.
- We will bring forward a programme of work to increase access to our services through changes to service delivery and targeted awareness-raising campaigns.
- We will test and shape our plans for convergence with the Local Government Ombudsman, and for more streamlined public ombudsman services, against criteria for the design of an optimum ombudsman service.
- We will use our insights from complaint handling to prioritise our contribution to improvements to public services through targeted influencing programmes that focus on where there are big or repeated service failures to be addressed.

## Our strategic aims and objectives

### 1 We will make it easier for people to find and use our services.

Our research tells us that only four out of ten people with a complaint know about our services. The awareness is even lower in particular groups of people, including those aged between 16 and 24 and black and minority ethnic groups. We want to make more people aware of our services and for them to be more accessible to everyone who needs them.

#### Our objectives:

- We will raise awareness of our services through working more closely with organisations in our jurisdiction, consumer organisations and national advice agencies, and target our work for the benefit of those groups most likely to suffer from service failures.
- We will improve access through more on line services and through publishing more information about our service standards and how we assess and investigate cases.
- We will use information from a wide range of sources to spot emerging trends, potential service failures or repeated problems, so we can act to make sure those affected can use our service.

#### What will success look like by 2017-18?

- ▶ There are higher levels of knowledge and awareness of our services among consumer and advice agencies that work with the people who are most likely to need our services.
- ▶ Commissioners and providers of central government and health services routinely tell people that they can come to us if they remain dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint.
- ▶ We have a quality-assured first contact service for initial enquiries that meets customer service industry standards and provides a choice of telephone and digital services.

### 2 We will help more people by resolving and investigating more complaints and providing an excellent customer service for everyone who contacts us.

We are already making good progress in investigating more complaints. In 2013-14 we investigated just over 2,000 complaints – a six-fold increase on the year before. We have also halved the average length of time to complete an investigation. But we want to do more to meet the demand for our services and improve the quality of our work at every stage of contact with us.

#### Our objectives:

- We will consistently meet our new service standards, do more to understand the needs of our service users and tailor our services to meet them.
- We will provide excellent services through our investigation methodology that will ask 'why' something has happened, as well as 'what' went wrong, and through the quality of our decision making.
- We will meet demand for our services by increasing productivity for both individual and systemic investigations.
- We will use a wider range of approaches to resolve and investigate complaints to achieve more impact for our work.
- We will seek to align with the Local Government Ombudsman around core service provision where this helps achieve our strategic aims.

#### What will success look like by 2017-18?

- ▶ We are externally recognised for the quality of the services we provide for people who bring their complaints to us and the organisations in our jurisdiction.
- ▶ We have increased our productivity to meet the demand for our service by 2017-18 within existing resources.
- ▶ We are recognised as a learning organisation that strives for continuous improvement.

### 3 We will make public services better by working with others to share what we learn from complaints.

We can maximise our impact by seeking out the root causes of problems and working with public service leaders to improve public services for everyone. When we select our areas of focus we will prioritise those services that affect the most vulnerable people who are likely to find it most difficult to complain.

#### Our objectives:

- We will generate and communicate insight into service failure based on our casework, including a focus on failures affecting the most disadvantaged service users.
- We will work with commissioners, service providers, regulators, the voluntary and community sector and consumer groups to raise awareness of our findings and to influence improvements in public services.
- We will support Parliament in holding Government to account for service improvement.

#### What will success look like by 2017-18?

- ▶ We can demonstrate that our casework and insights have contributed to improvements in public services as judged by the actions that others have taken in response to our recommendations.
- ▶ We can demonstrate a strong and productive relationship with Parliament through which we help it to hold public services to account.

We will focus on public service failures affecting the most disadvantaged users.

### 4 We will work with others to make it easier to complain about public services and to help public services resolve complaints better.

Our research tells us that just over half of people think the complaints system is complicated and 64% of people who complain do not think it will make a difference.

#### Our objectives:

- We will generate and share insight from our casework with public sector leaders, so they can improve the way they deal with and learn from complaints. We will include a focus on improving the experiences of those who find it hardest to get their voices heard.
- We will use our insight to help increase the capabilities of those who handle complaints in public services.
- We will use our insight to support Parliament in holding public services to account for improving the way they deal with complaints.
- We will work with Parliament and others to achieve public ombudsman services that are better for users and Parliament, and that provide even better value for money for the taxpayer.

#### What will success look like by 2017-18?

- ▶ We can demonstrate that our casework and insights have contributed to improvements in complaint handling across public services as judged by citizen experience.
- ▶ We are operating as a streamlined ombudsman service for England and for non-devolved issues in the UK.
- ▶ More people think complaining makes a difference.



## 5 We will make sure our organisation works well to help us achieve our aims.

We know from external research and our own casework that organisations that value and treat their staff well, and have high levels of employee engagement, are more likely to deliver excellent results.

### Our objectives:

- We will focus on building our capability and strengthening our focus on performance. In particular we will recruit and develop a diverse, inclusive and flexible workforce able to serve our diverse users.
- We will adopt a structured approach to change that informs how we involve, engage and empower our staff. We will involve our staff, users and wider stakeholders in designing the future.
- We will harness technology to deliver better customer service, knowledge management and efficient ways of working.
- We will deliver better value for money through improved productivity, demonstrable return on investment and greater efficiency. We will share services with other organisations where this helps us achieve our strategic aims.
- We will have a robust and proportionate approach to corporate governance, transparency, risk management and decision making that meets the Ombudsman Association principles and public sector standards of good governance.
- We will be agile in responding to changes in the external environment.

### What will success look like by 2017-18?

- ▶ We have a high-performance culture underpinned by continuous learning, improvement and knowledge sharing.
- ▶ We have higher levels of employee engagement.
- ▶ Diversity and inclusion is even more integral to our business.
- ▶ We are well run as an organisation with high standards of corporate governance, greater transparency and effective administration.
- ▶ The public has trust and confidence in us.
- ▶ We have made significant progress in converging key services with the Local Government Ombudsman.

## What this means for us

### Our values

We established a core set of values some years ago. They focus on excellence, leadership, integrity and diversity. These values have served us well and are acknowledged as what our service strives to stand for and how we want to treat our staff, service users and stakeholders.

However, we recognise that the values of an organisation also evolve over time and need to change to reflect the wider organisational goals and the changing environment in which it operates. Over the next year we want to review our core values with our staff and stakeholders, to ensure they reflect our strategic aims. We expect this work to form a key strand of our new people plan.

### Our people

Our new medium-term people plan will form a key plank of how we achieve our strategic objectives.

Our aim is to promote wider access to our services and provide resolution and investigation services in the shortest time possible, without compromising on quality. To do this we will continue to invest in our staff so they are equipped with the knowledge, skills and experience that allows them to deliver their best. We will champion investigation methods that allow us to understand the root cause of problems and lead to robust decision making. We will make sure that our processes add value and are continually updated and improved to model the improvements we seek in public services for everyone.

### Leadership and engagement

We will focus on encouraging leadership at all levels of our organisation by involving and engaging staff in planning and delivering change so we maintain a collective commitment to deliver more impact for more people. To drive engagement we will provide inspirational leadership that identifies opportunities to quickly adopt new ways of working through creating awareness, developing understanding and promoting buy in.

We will network more widely to encourage external sensitivity and listen to feedback to ensure that we continually learn and improve. We understand that to deliver the best, we need to be the best at what we do, and will encourage a high performance culture that delivers and rewards great results. To ensure we retain our talented people, we will introduce succession planning and talent management with greater mobility within the wider ombudsman service landscape.

## A focus on equality and diversity

We will actively evolve and integrate our diversity and inclusion initiatives to ensure that they are joined up and embedded in our work. We will continue to monitor the demographic profiles of our workforce and our service users to ensure that we have the diversity of thought and skill to support inclusion.

We will learn from our staff and our service users to ensure that access to our services, our processes and practices is also inclusive and caters for diverse needs. We will partner more widely and develop relationships with advocacy groups that will allow us to draw insight from our casework to avoid big and repeated mistakes. To build a 'diversity and inclusion' confident workforce we will educate and build awareness that seeks to reduce unconscious bias and promotes fairness, respect, equality, dignity and autonomy for all.

We will learn from our staff and users to ensure that access to our services, our processes and practices is inclusive and caters for diverse needs.

## Our medium-term financial plan

Our current net budget is £33 million. Most of this is made up of public money voted for by Parliament for our services. We receive small amounts of income from our property assets and from the provision of clinical advice services to other ombudsman schemes.

The development of our updated strategic plan is in the context of continued financial challenges across the public sector. Our current 'flat' budget settlement has already placed demands on our organisation to deliver even better value for money. We intend to continue to focus our resources on investing in improved performance and delivering better customer services.



Over the period of this plan, we expect to deliver increased volumes of all aspects of our complaint handling work and to increase the impact of our work. We will be doing this within the context of an expected 'flat' budget settlement, which means in real terms a decrease in our funding for each year of the plan. We will achieve this through increased levels of productivity and a continued drive for efficiency across all of our work – especially in relation to procurement and all other of our non-pay costs.

We will update the medium term financial plan each year as part of our annual business planning round. For 2015-16 we will develop our plans by identifying other key risks, issues and pressures, including the changing demand for our services, and undertaking sensitivity analysis to complement the updated position for funding.

## Our strategic indicators of success

Our strategic indicators of success are informed by our overarching aims for the period of this plan. Because we want to work with others to bring about changes at a system-wide level as well as delivering excellent services ourselves, it is not always straightforward to measure the impact of our work and the specific contribution we have made to bring about wider changes. We are keen to undertake further work with our Board to understand how we can best measure our long-term impact.

Our strategic impact measures form part of our overall performance management framework that operates at three key levels:

**Five-year strategy: strategic impact through reporting twice a year to the Board on overall progress to deliver the strategy.**



**Annual business plan: quarterly progress review.**



**In year operational metrics monthly.**

At the very highest level we want to be able to report on:

- The confidence of the public in making complaints and understanding our role in the system, through our annual omnibus survey.
- The awareness, accessibility and quality of our services and the quality and impact of the decisions we make through our service user feedback mechanisms.
- The perception of our independence, influence and authority among our stakeholders and partners through our annual stakeholder audit and organisations in jurisdiction research.

The indicators of success for each of our strategic aims are set out on the next two pages alongside the current baseline and the sources of data we will use to help us assess our progress.

Each year, as part of our business planning round, we will agree targets for the year for each of the commitments. This will allow us to measure progress towards meeting our overall strategic aims annually.



Aim	Indicators of success and current baseline	Data sources
<b>1. We will make it easier for people to find and use our services</b>	<p><b>Increased awareness and understanding of our role</b> Baseline: 19% overall level of awareness in 2014</p> <p><b>Improved service user feedback on overall satisfaction with our services</b> Baseline: 69% for enquiries, 67% for investigations 2013-14</p>	<p>Annual omnibus survey of the public</p> <p>Annual service user feedback survey</p>
<b>2. We will help more people by resolving and investigating more complaints and providing an excellent service for everyone that contacts us</b>	<p><b>Growth in volumes of intake, assessment and investigation</b> Baseline: outturn 2013-14: 27,566 enquiries, 7,760 assessments, 2,199 completed investigations</p> <p><b>Reduce the time it takes to decide on an investigation</b> Baseline: 67% of cases within one month, 95% of cases within six months and 99% of cases within 12 months</p> <p><b>Improve the quality of our intake, assessment and investigations services</b> Baselines to be established through the outcome of the first round of quality assessments in January 2015</p>	<p>Core management information</p> <p>Core management information</p> <p>Analysis of outcome of quality assessment frameworks</p>
<b>3. We will make public services better by working with others to share what we learn from complaints</b>	<p><b>Evidence of increasing impact in the eyes of the organisations in our jurisdiction and our other stakeholders of the contribution we make to help improve public services</b> Baseline: feedback from organisations in jurisdiction and stakeholder survey</p> <p><b>Evidence of change resulting from influencing programmes</b></p>	<p>Annual survey of sample of organisations in jurisdiction</p> <p>Annual stakeholder survey</p> <p>Annual qualitative assessment of impact included in the annual report</p>

Aim	Indicators of success and current baseline	Data sources
<b>4. We will work with others to make it easier to complain about public services and to help public services resolve complaints better</b>	<p><b>Evidence of increasing impact, in the eyes of the organisations in our jurisdiction and our other stakeholders, of how we work with others to make the complaints system better</b> Baseline: feedback from organisations in jurisdiction and stakeholder survey</p> <p><b>Progress with delivery of long-term ombudsman reform agenda</b> Baseline: milestones established in project plan</p> <p><b>More people think complaining makes a difference</b> Baseline: April 2014 : 4 out of 10</p>	<p>Annual survey of sample of organisations in jurisdiction and stakeholder survey</p> <p>Six monthly assessment of progress</p> <p>Annual omnibus survey</p>
<b>5. We will make sure our organisation works well to help us achieve our aims</b>	<p><b>Increase employee engagement score</b> Baseline: August 2013: 47%</p> <p><b>Overall control framework, governance and risk management arrangements are appropriate to our needs</b> Baseline: 2013-14 arrangements approved</p> <p><b>Meet financial performance standards</b> Baseline: 2013-14 accounts approved without qualification</p>	<p>Staff survey every year</p> <p>Annual governance statement</p> <p>Annual resource accounts</p>



## Risk management

A key part of our approach to delivering our strategic plan is to actively identify and manage risk. We do this by identifying our strategic and operational risks, assessing their likelihood and impact and determining how these need to be actively managed during the year. We monitor our risk management activity monthly at the Executive Team and quarterly by the Audit Committee and Board.

### Key risks over the period of this plan include:

- Our future funding settlement: we will need to continue to work closely with the Treasury to make the case for our future funding.
- Inability to respond to changes in demand for our services fast enough.
- Failure to consistently deliver excellence in our services.
- Lack of sustained increases in awareness of our services.
- Failure to deliver a new customer relationship management system in a timely manner according to the specification we require.
- Limits to our capacity to deliver long-term change at the same time as improvements to the delivery of our day-to-day activities.

## Your feedback

We welcome feedback on how we can best achieve the aims and objectives set out in our strategic plan.

Over the coming period we will develop new ways to get your feedback on our work. We will publish more details on our website. In the meantime, if you want to provide any feedback please contact us at [strategyfeedback@ombudsman.org.uk](mailto:strategyfeedback@ombudsman.org.uk).



## Find out more

There are different ways you can find out more about our work and progress in delivering this plan:

Visit our website at: [www.ombudsman.org.uk](http://www.ombudsman.org.uk)

Follow us on Twitter: @phsombudsman

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