

# accommodate – better together

## Summary of the final evaluation report of Accommodate – the refugee housing partnership project

The Accommodate project set out to find ways of plugging gaps in policy and practice that have prevented integration and equitable access to housing for refugees. Hact wanted to test how effective partnership working could provide solutions. Uniquely, the Accommodate project demonstrates not only the positive benefits of partnership working, but also the responsive, co-operative and inventive spirit inherent within the social housing and community sectors.

The project was groundbreaking in its scope and ambition, and was pioneering in its outcomes. It involved five partnerships of housing associations, refugee community organisations and statutory agencies. Each had a different practical idea to improve refugee housing. Each was based in a different area of recent refugee migration. Each provided lessons that are already informing the future of refugee, and new migrant, housing and related service provision.

This executive summary provides background

information on the five partnerships, before outlining the key insights from the project, based on the four common aims of the partnerships:

- building better partnerships;
- pioneering housing and support solutions for refugees;
- empowering refugee community organisations;
- changing policy and practice.

It also reflects on hact's unique network management approach to managing diverse locally based partnerships.

This executive summary is based on the evaluation report drafted by David Mullins, Professor of Housing Policy, Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS), University of Birmingham. It incorporates the work of the CURS evaluation team, self-assessment by each of the partnerships, input from over 370 organisations and the findings of 24 community researchers.

The full evaluation reports and summary document can be downloaded at [www.hact.org.uk](http://www.hact.org.uk).

## Accommodate – the refugee housing partnership project

Hact's experience of working with refugee community organisations (RCOs) had shown that many were working in isolation to respond to the extreme levels of housing demand in their communities. Hact believed building effective local partnerships between RCOs, housing associations and local authorities would provide an answer.

Following a successful application to the Big Lottery, and with support from many other funders including the European Refugee Fund, ten partnerships were chosen to receive seed corn grants to develop action plans for practical ideas to improve refugee housing at strategic and operational levels in different parts of England.

Five of these partnerships were then selected for larger grant funding to put their plans into action as phase 2 partnerships. Each was led by a different type of agency. Each had a different focus. Each was located in a different area of recent refugee settlement.

Over the life of the project, over 370 organisations took part, including 163 RCOs, 71 housing providers and 32 local authorities. Lessons from the project have been incorporated into three further hact projects: Accommodate Newport and Accommodate West Midlands and Opening Doors. Information on these, and other hact projects, can be found at [www.hact.org.uk](http://www.hact.org.uk).

## Changing times

In the four years since Accommodate started, the policy context and experience of migration changed beyond recognition. There were significant reductions in asylum applications and leave to remain decisions, increases in secondary migration and economic migration from the eight European Union accession countries (A8s), as well as alarming levels of destitution amongst failed asylum seekers, but also some A8 migrants. Within housing policy, investment partnering reforms, housing market renewal areas and the drive towards Decent Homes standards have all impacted on housing opportunities. A linked reduction in housing supply resulted in increases in house prices and rents making access to decent housing for refugees increasingly difficult. The role played by private landlords in housing refugees has been recognised in the design of further Accommodate projects.

As a consequence of these shifts, adapting to change was a key theme for all five Accommodate partnerships. Rather than pressing on with their original aims, partners used the relationships built through Accommodate to work collectively on new responses to changing needs. In Bradford, for example, the partnership used the relationships to develop a new and ambitious design for a neighbourhood of the future. In Sheffield, the partnership developed a practical response to the growing crisis of destitution in the city (see box on page 4).

Without the links and understanding built up between the Accommodate partners over a period of time, these types of change would have been difficult to achieve. By working together, housing associations, RCOs and local authorities can better respond to changing times, and adapt their activities to meet and address new needs and new communities.

## **The Accommodate partnerships**

### **Accommodate Birmingham** – *involving refugee communities in regeneration*

Lead agency: **Family Housing Association (Birmingham)** Number of partners: 17

This large partnership worked with RCO, housing association and local authority partners to influence plans to regenerate North West Birmingham. In addition to engaging refugee communities in these plans, the partnership succeeded in establishing a well located resource centre as home for eight RCOs with free office accommodation and facilities. The resource centre provides a strong basis for future RCO empowerment and for building community cohesion in North West Birmingham after Accommodate. The partnership also delivered a training programme for front line housing staff, and to local authority staff. There are also plans for a self-build housing scheme for refugees.

### **Accommodate Leeds** – *nurturing refugee skills to improve housing supply and community cohesion*

Lead agency: **Canopy Housing Project** Number of partners: 8

This partnership initiative enabled Canopy Housing to successfully extend its community based approach to create quality homes from disused properties, while empowering refugees and local volunteers. This provided a powerful model of community cohesion in action, and homes for young refugees and refugee families. The partnership also provided office space for newly established RCOs. Links established during the project enabled Canopy to secure further properties from a local ALMO and stimulated considerable interest in the self-build model amongst other Accommodate partnerships. This heritage should enable more people to benefit from this action based approach to bringing individuals together and improving housing in Leeds and elsewhere.

### **Accommodate Bolton** – *meeting the housing needs of emerging refugee communities*

Lead agency: **Bolton Community Homes** Number of partners: 5

A smaller partnership through which the lead partner Bolton Community Homes successfully empowered New Bolton Somali Community Association (NBSCA) by resourcing it to lead a community research study. This study not only provided clear evidence of the need for action to improve housing conditions faced by Somali families, but helped build the alliances necessary to address these needs. Partnerships with housing providers and advice agencies have strengthened the capacity of NBSCA which has also been at the forefront of a local refugee forum. Further achievements include influencing the local choice based lettings scheme and NBSCA directly managing properties owned by Irwell HA. The recognition gained by NBSCA, for example by the Primary Care Trust, the Lower Dean Neighbourhood Committee and the Local Strategic Partnership provides a lasting heritage from Accommodate Bolton and has in turn fed into Bolton's wider New and Emerging Communities Strategy.

### **Accommodate Sheffield – linking refugee housing and community mental health support**

Lead agency: **MAAN (Somali Mental Health Project)** Number of partners: 13

This partnership influenced local mental health and Supporting People strategies and improved monitoring and referral by local health agencies. It also provided support to smaller RCOs and training and awareness raising for a wide range of local agencies. Towards the end of the project, partners responded to the growing crisis of destitution and its links with mental health. MAAN, the lead agency, has now extended its role to provide mental health services to other refugee communities. The lasting heritage of Accommodate Sheffield is the wider understanding of mental health and housing needs of refugees by agencies in the city and the wider recognition of the services that MAAN can provide across the refugee communities.

### **Accommodate Bradford – helping new refugees move to mainstream housing**

Lead agency: **Manningham Housing Association** Number of partners: 8

Another large partnership which brought together local advice agencies, RCOs, housing associations and the local authority to develop integrated housing options advice for new refugees. The partnership's initial plans were adapted because of reduced numbers of refugees, with advice services being based at a one-stop centre hosted by a housing association partner. Meanwhile the partnership focused on supporting the development of a refugee forum and developed ambitious plans to regenerate an estate where many refugees live. The partnership also achieved policy changes to enable refugees to have greater access to social housing under the Homehunter choice based lettings scheme by using the date of asylum application as the trigger for local connection. Relationships built through Accommodate provided a foundation for developing a scheme for resettlement of refugees in Bradford under the Home Office's Gateway Protection Programme.

## **IMPACT 1**

### **Responding to immediate and desperate need**

“Following lengthy discussions at our last Accommodate Sheffield meeting, the partners have decided that we should organise a seminar in September in Sheffield to explore some of the issues facing destitute asylum seekers. The issue has pushed itself to the forefront of the Accommodate Sheffield project as we are daily being presented with many distressing cases of individuals whose cases with the Home Office have been refused and have found themselves with no income or accommodation. We are aware of over 400 cases in just the Kurdish community, with more in the Eritrean, and other African communities in Sheffield facing these problems. Inevitably some of these cases are experiencing mental health problems and are not receiving any support. We believe that it is our duty to protect and support those who are vulnerable within the community. We also believe that hact is the most appropriate organisation to lead on this blooming issue.”

*Source: Sheffield Self-Assessment Report, July 2006*

# Building better partnerships

The central feature of the Accommodate partnership approach was to bring together different types of agencies to achieve better outcomes than could have been achieved individually. The project took place in a period of considerable ‘partnership fatigue’, so had to look afresh at what works well, and what does not work well, when partners with different resources, backgrounds and aims are brought together.

Three key insights emerged about what makes for successful partnerships.

## 1 Ensure there is something in it for everyone

Small and large partners bring different strengths and interests. Successful results depend on recognising and accommodating these differences, and constructing win-win ideas that have something for everyone. All partners will be incentivised if they can see that partnership activities are contributing to meeting their own goals, as well as joint goals.

Combining the different expertise of partners resulted in a number of successes, including:

- in Bolton, RCO staff learned from the housing surgeries held by large housing providers at the RCO’s premises;
- in Sheffield, the lead RCO agency used practical methods to support emerging RCOs by, for example, visiting their premises at times that were suitable for them;
- in Birmingham, the design of training for frontline housing association staff was influenced by RCOs.

## 2 Link solutions to problems

The best examples of successful partnership working in Accommodate arose when relationships were sufficiently strong to enable partners to bring new solutions to collective problems. As a consequence,

## INSIGHT 1

### Practical steps

Some practical steps identified by community researchers that made the partnerships work:

- value and use the expertise, knowledge and skills of new arrivals, and hold more community consultation in order to understand the needs of different communities;
- self-help partnerships working along similar lines to the Canopy renovation project in Leeds;
- the allocation of a building, similar to the Piers Road Resource Centre in Birmingham, to serve as a base for a range of different community organisations.

One refugee community organisation stated:

*“The problem that we are facing is that most people in the organisation are volunteers and they are committed to other things they are doing. I am responsible for running the organisation, but I am employed as a full time worker, so it’s hard to work with my organisation and my full time employment... My clients come to my home (we don’t have premises yet) in the evening and at weekends when I am home. After I have finished my work, my organisation is open!”*

this avoided “chasing unattainable aims and solutions that were never going to work”.

Too often, we ignore the fact that someone already has a solution. Unless there is agreement on what the problems are, and people are brought into the loop, the solutions will remain neglected. In Bradford, the partnership was

revitalised when a large housing provider, who had not been active in the early stages of the partnership, brought a new solution to the table: the Green Lane regeneration scheme. It used this to engage with the other partners, and to set a new strategic direction for the partnership.

3

### One thing leads to another

Relationships built through partnerships can be used to progress future actions well beyond the life of the initial partnership. The relationships built between Accommodate partners have resulted in:

- housing association properties being managed by the RCO partner in Bolton;
- the employment of the Accommodate project worker in Bolton by the large landlord partner;
- participation of some Bradford partners in hact's Opening Doors project, and the government's Gateway scheme;
- new initiatives emerging from the Piers Road Resource Centre in Birmingham to build community cohesion and guide applicants through the process of applying for British citizenship;
- the widening of clientele serviced by MAAN in Sheffield to include non-Somali refugee communities.

## Pioneering housing solutions

Improving access to good quality housing and support services was the second of the four common aims of the Accommodate partnerships. The importance of quality housing was highlighted in research by community researchers with 15 recent arrivals in Bolton:

*“Those who considered themselves securely housed were more inclined to feel positive about their housing.”*

Five insights emerged about how partnerships improved refugee housing.

1

### Research

Evidence based research undertaken by community members can result in better housing and support services. This approach was clearly successful in Bolton where a high quality report influenced a wide range of local agencies. It needs to be deployed carefully, however, because research can become an end in itself. Poor research can be discredited and action plans can gather dust. Key success ingredients in Bolton included involving policy makers early and learning throughout the process.

2

### Improving access to housing

This is the most important direct solution to the housing needs of refugees. Despite the limited supply of social housing, and

## INSIGHT 2

### Improving choice

Hact collated the experiences of Accommodate partnerships on their local Choice Based Lettings (CBL) schemes so that, in addition to securing local policy amendments, the project had a national policy impact.

The following learning points from local Accommodate projects were included in hact submissions to the National Integration Forum Housing and Community Safety sub-group on Choice Based Lettings:

- backdating applications to the date of dispersal (Bradford);
- developing a database of private landlords (Birmingham);
- inviting CBL provider to partnership meetings to raise awareness (Sheffield);
- improved monitoring of lettings to identify Somali and other new communities (Bolton).

the operation of needs priorities that exclude many single refugees, all the partnerships recognised the potential to improve accessibility to, and the operation of, choice based lettings (CBL) schemes (see box on previous page).

There was less initial focus on the private rented sector, which is the most important source of housing for new migrants. The research from Bolton also highlighted that conditions in private rented housing are often the poorest. Nonetheless, landlord accreditation schemes, the inclusion of good quality private housing in CBL schemes, rent deposit schemes and short term leasing are all ways by which better quality private lettings can be accessed by refugees.

3

### **Advice and signposting**

This is a common outreach approach for housing providers. In Bolton, housing advice surgeries were held at the premises of the RCO partner, by the two most important local social housing agencies. These surgeries not only brought expert advice to the community, but also built the capacity, networks and housing knowledge of community volunteers. Advice agencies need to reflect on what they are seeking to achieve when they engage in community outreach work, not only increasing their customer base, but also empowering and including community groups in the advice giving process. Given that advice from family and friends is the most common way of getting information, this approach also ensures that accurate and up-to-date information and advice is being shared within communities.

4

### **Awareness raising**

In Sheffield, the partnership held a series of conferences to get refugee mental health and housing issues onto the agenda and to influence local Supporting People strategies. In Birmingham, refugee volunteers were involved in the design and delivery of a refugee awareness training course for local housing association staff.

## **IMPACT 2**

### **Tangible benefits**

Community researchers in Leeds asked some of the volunteers involved in the Accommodate project about its benefits:

- “I get courage from the house as I contributed a lot. I am part of that house. It makes me feel good and I can always look at something I helped to build.”
- “In my country, women don’t do men’s work, they have a duty to look after children at home, but here I became different. I have learnt men’s work, like making doors, fitting carpets and painting. I have learnt many new things.”
- “One lad I know has done a scaffolding course. So it’s not only helping people who want houses but it’s helping young people as well to get into the wide world and get a job.”
- “We have just finished a house. When I first saw it, it was nothing. Now we have renovated it, it looks very nice. It makes the area look nice instead of a bad place to live. It makes people want to live here.”

5

### **Direct action**

In Leeds, refugees and local volunteers worked together to refurbish empty homes to meet their housing needs in a direct and visible way. As well as the ten homes that were refurbished, the project also resulted in positive experiences for the volunteers. It also contributed to community cohesion through physical interaction, and by bringing properties back into use, and housing refugees and other people in need.

# Empowering RCOs

The third common aim of the Accommodate partnerships was to empower RCOs. This was important, because RCOs can help housing providers connect with refugee communities, and help to engage refugees in the design and delivery of targeted services. Three key insights emerged about how partnerships can empower RCOs.

1

## Successful RCOs can take a leading role

Two of the Accommodate partnerships were led by successful RCOs. This is an achievement, but the resources and support required should not be underestimated. In the case of the New Bolton Somali Community Association, this was a result of empowerment by Bolton Community Homes, who formally led the partnership. In Sheffield, the Somali RCO, MAAN, led the partnership from the start. Learning from the project suggests that four main ingredients characterise successful RCOs:

- *a clear sense of purpose*: they know what needs doing to help to reach out to their communities, and they know what they can add to this process;
- *well connected*: they have charismatic leaders, are well known inside and outside

refugee communities and, “have the trust and respect of other community organisations”;

- *adequately resourced*: they have adequate premises in the right place, diverse funding sources, and can convert valued services into long term income streams;
- *well constituted*: they have clear accountability and governance structures, work in a transparent way, are well known to community members and communicate successfully.

2

## Enable smaller RCOs

The majority of RCOs in the Accommodate partnerships had only recently been formed, and were often dependent on one individual. As a result, attendance at meetings was patchy and they were susceptible to personnel changes – and to a lack of resources. Learning from the project suggested four key ingredients to enable smaller RCOs:

- shared office space, meeting space and office services;
- training and support in the skills required to run an organisation and space to decide if they wish to go down this road, or prefer to be an informal cultural and self-help grouping;
- appropriately run, and located, partnership meetings;
- networking opportunities, with larger organisations and other small RCOs in a similar state of development.

## INSIGHT 3

### Realism required

One Accommodate partnership noted that realistic expectations, concrete aims and adequate resources are essential ingredients for successful refugee forums:

- “We anticipated that the forum would build capacity and deliver services. This was too much to expect for a £25,000 a year project.”
- “The forum was very useful in identifying needs, but was not sufficiently robust to be at the centre of planning delivery and change.”

## IMPACT 3

### Firm foundations

One of the key achievements of Accommodate Birmingham was the opening of the Piers Road Resource Centre. This acts as a base for eight local RCOs and is now a local hub for refugee communities:

- “It has brought RCOs together and will continue to aid networking. Just being together they learn from one another. Through the project, RCOs have gained much more knowledge about housing. The refugee forum has not yet developed, but once Piers Road is running it could form a base for this.” (RCO comments).
- “Piers Road has been most beneficial for the community groups. They now have a base from which to work, offer surgeries and advice workshops, hold community events and work with other groups. In the future, the partnership will need to focus on capacity building and empowering refugees to sit on residents groups or sit on tenants boards.” (Midland Heart, large local housing association).

### 3

#### Refugee forums

All of the Accommodate partnerships tried to build refugee forums to provide a collective voice for refugee communities. They also play an invaluable role in creating a mutual support network. Success conditions include the need for premises and support, such as the Piers Road Resource Centre established in Birmingham, and the need for realistic and concrete aims (see box above, and box left).

## Changing policy and practice

This fourth, and final, aim of the project was initially seen as a rather daunting and unrealistic aim for a three year project. Yet, as this section shows, the Accommodate partnerships have had an impact locally, and insights from the project have influenced policy at a national level.

### 1

#### Policy begins at home

One of the key lessons to emerge is a recognition within partnerships that policy change begins at home. In other words, all partners should be willing to, and able to, use their experiences to change their own policies. In Bradford, for example, Manningham HA worked with its partners to make changes to the local choice based lettings scheme and as a result increased its own lettings to refugees.

Conversely, some partnerships found that some partners had conflicting aims and were, potentially, in more powerful positions to influence local policies. This highlights the importance of ensuring that all partners are signed up to the same aims, as well as recognising the need to address internal priorities, culture and strategies within large housing providers if real change is to be achieved – an insight that has been incorporated into hact’s Opening Doors project.

### 2

#### Local changes

The experiences of partnerships were fed into a number of local policy initiatives, including:

- in Sheffield, partners used their casework on mental health and refugees to influence the local Supporting People review of mental health services;
- in Birmingham, the Audit Commission identified the Accommodate partnership as a potential good practice model in facilitating refugee community input into proposals for the local housing market renewal pathfinder, Urban Living;

- in Bradford, the partnership held a conference involving key local and regional statutory and housing providers. Practical ideas developed included a refugee friendly logo, to promote refugee issues amongst service providers, a landlords forum and a communities partnership;
- in Bolton, the partnership's research into the needs of the local Somali community was incorporated into the local New and Emerging Communities strategy (see box).

### 3

#### National influence

- Hact has used the evaluation reports and learning in a variety of policy influencing activities, including input to:
- the Home Office's new model for refugee integration services;
  - the Communities and Local Government commission on integration and community cohesion;
  - the Housing Corporation's BME National Advisory Board and Action Plan;
  - a submission to the National Integration Forum Housing and Community Safety sub-group on Choice Based Lettings;
  - the Housing Corporation's National Affordable Housing Programme and arrangements to build bridges between RCOs and large investment partners who can access this funding.

## IMPACT 4

### Involved

The strong reputation achieved by the New Bolton Somali Community Association (NBSCA) in Bolton as a result of the Accommodate partnership has resulted in:

- links with the Local Strategic Partnership through the Voluntary and Community Sector Forum;
- receipt of a global grant award from Bolton at Home, the local Arms Length Management Organisation to tackle khat use among young people;
- playing a housing management role for local housing providers;
- further calls for its involvement in local policy and service development;
- influencing the New and Emerging Communities Strategy.

## Glossary

#### *Choice Based Lettings schemes:*

Method of allocating social housing introduced from late 1990s in which applicants take a more active approach in selecting and bidding for properties.

#### *Community research:*

A method of engaging members of communities to research and consult within their own communities

to bring insider knowledge about social life that is often untapped by 'outside' researchers.

#### *Decent Homes standard:*

A Decent Home was defined as meeting the statutory minimum fitness standard under the Housing Act 1985, in a reasonable state of repair, with reasonably modern facilities and services and a reasonable level of warmth (DTLR, 2002).

#### *Gateway Protection Programme:*

The Programme affirms the

Government's commitment to providing a safe haven for those genuinely in need, by enabling refugees from some of the most troubled parts of the world to rebuild their lives in the UK. The scheme is a partnership between the UK Government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

#### *Housing Market Renewal Areas:*

Part of the Government's Sustainable Communities Plan – an ambitious agenda covering nine areas of the country where housing markets are

# The hact approach

1

## Network management

The Accommodate project involved hact working with a large number of partners, with different aims, capacities and experiences. Hact's role is a good example of network management, a form of steering needed when partners cannot be forced or financially incentivised to act in particular ways. In these situations, common action depends on links, trust and understanding between actors with different backgrounds. Hact recognised that the key to successful partnerships is to ensure that there is something for everyone and that this will be discovered by encouraging partners to learn from one another rather than by setting very specific goals and targets at the outset:

- in Birmingham, the partnership learned that securing a meeting and office space to meet the immediate needs of RCOs was an important way to maintain engagement of RCOs whilst the partnership continued to pursue the aim of influencing regeneration policy;
- in Bradford, the partnership was re-energised by focusing on the redevelopment of a major housing estate at the same time as supporting an RCO forum.

To increase the prospects of discovering such 'win-win' solutions, hact intervened in the partnerships in three main ways:

- **reframing of ideas:** hact worked with the Twist Partnership to "mix things up a bit" by arranging facilitated visits between the partnerships. During these visits, visitors were encouraged to challenge the fundamental assumptions of their hosts;
- **mediation and arbitration:** at times, hact had to resolve conflicts between partners. This requires the network manager to think through the possible consequences, as they do not have the power to force compliance;
- **keeping partners interested:** hact knew that Accommodate was not the only project in which some of the larger partners were involved. As a result, it looked for new ways to maintain interest (e.g. by assisting in accessing new housing stock in Leeds).

2

## Evaluation

Accommodate was evaluated from start to finish by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS) at the University of Birmingham. This included working with partners in developing a self-assessment framework, training and supporting 24 community researchers, visiting each partnership, convening workshops and producing annual evaluation reports.

deemed to be failing. Over the next 15-20 years low housing demand and housing abandonment is being tackled via demolition and refurbishment.

### *Investment partnering:*

A new system of allocating funding to housing associations introduced in 2004 to focus funding on the 74 best developing associations.

### *Network management:*

An approach to managing complex issues where there is no dominant actor and limited scope for top

down control or financial incentives to deliver social purposes. It relies on making links and building understanding and trust between actors with different backgrounds, resources and interests, and using this understanding to promote common interests or joint goals (win-win).

### *Opening Doors:*

A project developed by hact and the Chartered Institute of Housing with funding from Communities and Local Government and the

Housing Corporation to mainstream refugee and new migrant housing needs into the service delivery and culture of housing associations.

### *Refugee Community Organisations:*

Organisations set up by members of refugee communities for the benefit of their communities.

In addition to the evaluation, partners were encouraged to reflect on their experiences by the central support team at hact, as well as through workshops for RCOs and project workers. These all helped to promote and encourage learning between the partnerships.

This approach maximises learning as it develops, while consistently generating useful pointers about what is working, and what isn't working. Hact has already incorporated many of these insights into the design of new projects, including Opening Doors and Accommodate Newport and Accommodate West Midlands. Hact and the evaluation team also benefited from input from the Refugee Housing Integration Programme Board Advisory Group, convened by hact.

### 3 Community researchers

As an integral part of the project, 24 community researchers were recruited from within the refugee communities of the five partnership areas. This approach empowered community members to shape and have ownership of the research agenda. It explored sensitive issues such as mental health and uncovered new trends such as secondary migration from Europe that might have gone untapped by outsider researchers. It also provided opportunities for accredited learning to build capacity within communities. Over 90% of the researchers received accredited research qualifications, building confidence and skills that have been used in a variety of professional contexts including student support and medical advice. A separate report of the accredited community research is available at [www.hact.org.uk](http://www.hact.org.uk).

### Accommodate

#### funders:

Accent Foundation,  
Big Lottery Fund,  
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### Accommodate

#### dissemination

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