



NFCC
National Fire
Chiefs Council

Essex County Fire and Rescue Service Fire Peer Challenge

22nd - 24th October 2018

Report

1. Introduction, context and purpose

This report outlines the key findings from the Local Government Association's (LGA) Fire Peer Challenge at Essex County Fire & Rescue Service (ECFRS). Fire Peer Challenge is part of sector led improvement. The process has been evaluated and revised to reflect developments within the sector and ensure it continues to meet the needs of FRSs and other key stakeholders.

The ECFRS Fire Peer Challenge took place from 22nd October to 24th October 2018 and consisted of a range of interviews, focus groups and fire station visits. The peer team met with a broad cross-section of officers, staff and front-line firefighters; during the challenge the peer team were very well looked after and people the team met were fully engaged with the process and very open and honest. The peer team undertook background reading provided to them in advance, including the ECFRS operational self-assessment.

ECFRS is due to be in the third tranche of inspections by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) taking place from March 2019 onward. This peer challenge was commissioned by the Service's new Chief Executive/Chief Fire Officer Jo Turton as a bespoke project to provide an external assessment of some key operational areas and to support and challenge the Service in its preparations for Inspection. For valid reasons, including the recent history of the Service, a number of specific issues were not included in the scope of this peer challenge. They were culture, governance and industrial relations. Inevitably, however, because all three issues impact on the service ECFRS provides to its community, the peer team did take account of evidence on these issues where it was offered in the course of our meetings during the peer challenge.

The evidence gathered was considered by the team and assimilated into some key issues. Feedback on these issues was delivered to ECFRS on the final day of the challenge. This report captures the feedback into a number of themes and sets them out in more detail. The themes are:

- Structure and Bureaucracy
- Learning and Development
- Operational Training
- Operational Assurance
- Response
- Prevention

Some comment is also offered in the report on Protection and Health and Safety issues. However, in the time available it was only possible to provide a lighter touch consideration of these areas.

2. The fire peer challenge process and team

Fire peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector and peers are at the heart of the process. They help FRSs and Fire & Rescue Authorities with their improvement and learning by providing a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

The peer challenge team for ECFRS was:

- Paul Hancock – former Chief Fire Officer Cheshire FRS
- Kath Billing – Area Manager Ops Service Delivery - Cornwall FRS
- Tom Simms – Area Manager – Hampshire FRS
- Gill Elliott, Review Manager, Local Government Association

3. Executive Summary

The Service's Senior Leadership Team (SLT) is self-aware and understands the challenges the organisation faces. However, it was also apparent that whilst the SLT, managers and staff all want to "move things on quickly" there is a degree of uncertainty about what to address first. This is a period of huge challenges but also huge opportunities for the Service.

The SLT needs to be confident in its own ability to lead the organisation. A new senior leadership structure is in place and recruitment to the new posts is underway. These appointments are going to be key to the progression and changes the Service wants to make.

Staff throughout the organisation are proud of the Service, there is a definite feeling of excitement, but also impatience for the changes to take place. It is essential the SLT begins to progress the changes now to keep the momentum Jo's leadership has brought. Staff are waiting for the new SLT to provide that leadership and direction.

Throughout the visit some of the quotes we heard were:

"The energy in the organisation feels more positive"

"People want the Service to do well and they will respond well to change"

"Jo has made a difference – a real breath of fresh air"

"The Service is a different place now"

"SLT -- recognise that you have a bright future and have the courage to do what's needed"

The vast majority of staff that we spoke to felt that there were real signs of change in the organisation. The appointment of the new Chief Executive/Chief Fire Officer has been widely welcomed. Staff like her style of engagement, feel she listens and trust that she will deliver the changes that are needed. However, there is also a degree of frustration, with staff saying they have yet to see significant change. Unless this is delivered soon some of the goodwill

and optimism the team observed may be replaced by cynicism and disappointment.

The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's (PFCC) Fire Rescue Plan (FRP) is being finalised and it will support the new Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) 2020-24. It is important for both documents to be clear and well-focussed. The Services Medium Term Financial Strategy 2016-2020, is proving challenging, but has adequate funds and reserves to support the current IRMP. Beyond that, current potential savings of up to £8m post 2020 will need to be considered.

The Service is already undergoing tremendous changes. We understand that until recently there were 200 priority projects. These have since been rationalised down to 10 by SLT, although in reality each has a number of sub projects or "priorities within priorities". Further stripping out of these projects still needs to happen together with greater consideration of their implementation including resource requirements and end user engagement. Going forward, it is vital that SLT provides clarity on the main focus areas.

The most pressing operational issues the team observed during the peer challenge were in the areas of Operational Training, Response and Prevention. Some of the deficiencies in operational training such as the frequency of Hot Wear training and the non- recording of individual competencies due to the Task Book system not providing the necessary assurance required, could leave the Service vulnerable in the event of a major safety event. Watch managers need improved skills to carry out operational training on stations. The Service also needs a more consistent approach to assessor competence, maybe settling for a "train the trainer" route rather than the assessor qualification route to begin with. A review of the training function could also deliver some additional capacity by having more cross functional training and training at weekends and in the evening to specifically target training for the On-call.

Crew availability issues are having a detrimental impact on operational response. The electronic rota board (ERB) is widely considered not fit for purpose as it is not enabling availability to be recorded properly, leading to frustration particularly amongst on call staff. Clarity over crew numbers is also needed. i.e. should there be 4 or 5 fire fighters on a pump? Failure to reach agreement over the annual leave policy is leading to confusion and non-availability of whole time crews. This is an issue that must be concluded as a matter of urgency to reduce risk to firefighters and the organisation. Operational assurance is generally very good. Station audits and quarterly reports are on track and comprehensive. However, there is a lack of operational support capacity to fully implement the Operational Assurance in totality which needs to be addressed.

The availability of On-call staff is good but the staff themselves feel somewhat undervalued by the organisation. Some good work has already started around on-call recruitment, terms and conditions, support and training arrangements but on-call staff we spoke to were unaware of it, there needs to be closer

engagement and communications between the On-call and the support work which is being carried out across the Service. On-call contracts should be reviewed to offer more flexibility beyond the 90 or 120 hour contracts. Greater recognition for the efforts of on call staff generally would go a long way towards making them feel like a valued part of the Service.

The Service's Prevention function and strategy need to be reviewed. Delivery of Prevention feels un-coordinated and not sufficiently well targeted, despite the good data and intelligence that is available. Firefighters want to get involved in more Prevention work, Home Safety Visits and educational sessions delivered to schools, delivery of their own risk reduction initiatives and there appears to be considerable scope and capacity for this to happen. Having area plans would bridge the gap between the Fire and Rescue Plan and IRMP and the Station Plan. They would also enable Group Managers to have a better oversight of local community safety activities and to become more involved in meetings with partners. This could increase the amount of intelligence gathered and help to raise the profile of the Service amongst its partners.

Bar operational training, learning and development in the organisation is in a very positive place with the Talent Pool proving effective in encouraging behavioural change as part of the wider cultural shift in the organisation. The Service should now start to look more widely for its leadership development and consider new and innovative ideas that could be introduced into the organisation from outside. Appraisals are taking place but not for all staff. The Service also needs to clarify its grey book/green book roles.

4. Key Findings

4.1 Structure and Bureaucracy

ECFRS has had a Police Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) in place since October 2017. The Commissioner's Fire and Rescue Plan (FRP) is in the process of being finalised, this will underpin the Service's next IRMP.

So far staff at levels below senior management level say that they have not really noticed the effect of changed governance for the Service. This may well change with the bigger focus on collaboration with the police that is in the FRP.

The Service's Strategic Assessment of Risk (SAOR) is very comprehensive and robust. It is a live document that is constantly reviewed and refreshed annually. It is used effectively by Protection and Response but could be used better for informing Prevention work and profiling risks in the community. Local data and intelligence including from sources like the Police need to be gathered centrally and fed back out to stations.

The Service currently has both an IRMP and a Service Strategy which have been in place since 2016 and will run until 2020. The Medium Term Financial Strategy 2016-2020 has funds and reserves in place to support both. The period 2020 to 2024 will be an important time for the Service. The FRP, SAOR and the new IRMP all need to be clear and well- focussed and continue to be cognisant of the tighter financial pressures which the Service is facing beyond 2024. Consultation and engagement are going to be key activities for delivering the ambitions in the FRP and the new IRMP.

There are 20 Business Plans in place. These are due to be replaced with four Director Plans to reflect the new Senior Leadership Team structure. Currently the Business Plans feed directly into the Station Plans. The Station Plans are adequate but will need to be reviewed in line with the new IRMP in 2020. In the interim, the Service might wish to consider introducing area plans to bridge the gap between the Director plans and the Station Plans. The area plans would be “owned” by the four area Group Managers (GMs). They would give greater accountability to the GMs and Station Managers (SMs), provide them the opportunity to attend more meetings with partners, drive targeted work and enhance the visibility of ECFRS with local community partners and especially with Police colleagues.

The Station Plans support individual appraisals at station level, but appraisal completion rates are variable and the process needs to be more robust. Currently only 42% of Green Book and 72% of Grey Book appraisals are completed. Given that Service Values and new cultural behaviours are key to the Service it is important that appraisals are completed for 100% of staff. There may need to be some flexibility for On-call staff with maybe group appraisal supplemented by individual appraisal if requested.

The Service has been and is still in a period of tremendous change. It has started some significant projects as part of the 2016-20 IRMP, including moving appliances, relocating specialist equipment and converting day crew stations to on-call. A new HR system to replace the old SAP system and a new electronic mobilising system are being considered. There is a co-location project with the Police and a new e-learning system is being trialled. Other projects include a people structures programme addressing rank to role that is almost complete. There is also a new pay and grading system following job evaluations, highlighting again the significant amount of change which is going on throughout the Service. Consideration could be given to Change management training and more staff engagement and consultation to support the progression and acceptance of organisational change.

The 2020 Programme Board and the Change Board give effective oversight of programme and projects with RAG (red-amber-green) status reported on and working well. The SLT has recently undertaken a review of programmes and projects. Over two hundred have been reduced to 10 priorities. However when sub-projects are included there are still likely to be around 60 to 70 projects or “priorities within priorities” This number is too much for the Service’s capacity to manage at once and the list of priorities should be revisited and some projects re-scheduled.

The Service now needs to take stock and consider how it will implement priority projects; including timescales, resource requirements and interdependencies across business teams. It needs to engage the end users of new systems and consider training needs from the outset. Delayed replacement of the availability system is an example of lack of capacity and priority given to what is a key system. Task and finish groups is an option which could be used to target resources to get traction on the highest priority projects

The Performance Management Framework is very good - monthly and quarterly reports go to the Head of Response and SLT as well as the PFCC's performance and scrutiny manager. The Service does need to put some effort into embedding the framework and having clarity on which performance indicators and targets it needs. It might wish to consider a joint Programme and Performance Board, this would allow the team to be more agile and direct resources as needed. It would also enable a better sense of where the Service is overall as well as creating capacity.

4.2 Learning and Development

Learning and Development (L&D) at ECFRS is in a really positive place, with the exception of operational training. However all L&D staff are full of energy and enthusiasm.

The Talent Pool is a success although it is still being embedded in the Service and it has so far only run two cohorts. Feedback from candidates was positive and supportive for the people and the process. It is open to all staff including On-call staff which is innovative and creating opportunities for the wider talent across the Service.

Assessment for the Talent Pool is around behaviours rather than competence and this is helping to embed the positive behaviours that the Service wants to see throughout the organisation. Staff who have taken part are enthusiastic about the process and especially the support and guidance they receive from L&D staff; even those who have been unsuccessful spoke positively about what they have learned from the experience. Several members of staff have been through the selection process more than once. All participants whether successful or not have a personal development programme drawn up to help them take their career forward.

Not all staff on stations were aware of the Talent Pool so there does need to be some additional communication about it and the benefits it is bringing. More information days and publicity via the Intranet would help as well as Talent Pool Champions on stations.

The Service offers a number of development and leadership courses. Talent Pool participants undertake an ILM level 3 as part of their development. Other staff can study for an ILM level 5 or take part in the Executive Leadership

Programme. Feedback from Talent Pool participants about the ILM course was mixed, it may not actually suit everyone's learning style or abilities and the Service needs to consider offering other options. It also needs to consider its leadership training more broadly and to look at what other programmes or initiatives are available in the market.

Appraisals are taking place in the Service but not all staff are receiving one. It may also be timely to reconsider the training that is provided for those carrying out appraisals. Appraisal needs to be emphasising the behaviours that the Service wants to encourage. All too often watch managers are just referring firefighters to the Station Plan rather than including both the plan and values which are both key parts of a person's appraisal.

The Service needs to clarify grey book/green book roles. The peer team also heard about Lilac/Purple roles that seem to be either grey or green but which are often in practice filled by grey book staff. Confusion over who can fill which role is causing some anger and is an issue that needs to be addressed.

4.3 Operational Training

Operational training is an area of the Service that requires some urgent priority action or the Service will be operationally vulnerable and would be open to significant criticism in the event of a safety critical event occurring within the Service.

The Electronic Training recording system or Task Book does not provide the assurance and up-to-date information that is required. Staff describe it as "clunky, time consuming and not user friendly" The system doesn't allow for a record or commentary of individual competencies and this could leave the Service vulnerable to criticism. It should consider carrying out a formal assessment of competence every quarter which would be entered onto the system. This would take time to do as a tick box exercise would not be sufficient.

The Service should ensure that every Watch manager and Crew manager has the ability and skills to train staff on station. This could be done by using train the trainer sessions. Staff need basic skills such as how to use a powerpoint presentation. E-learning packages need to be updated for watch and station use. The Service has recently gone live with the Kent FRS E-learning platform but has so far only used it for General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) training.

Existing Watch Managers need development around culture and behaviours to support the whole cultural change, organisational change and talent and development of the Service. There are some new Watch Managers coming through demonstrating some excellent traits and this is a key investment area for the Service.

The Service needs a more consistent approach to assessor competence/qualifications in line with the Quality Assurance framework. It has

to decide whether to aim for the “gold” standard assessor qualification route or settle for the “silver” standard route of “train the trainer” which may be adequate for the time being to ensure something is in place to safeguard the organisation here and now.

There is some good operational training being delivered. Annual breathing apparatus (BA) development and assessment takes place. Incident Command assessments Levels 1, 2, 3 and 4 are also happening and operational crews are keen for more of this operational training for safety and competence. However the frequency of Hot Fire Wear training is not meeting Service policy. Staff should receive hot fire wear training every two years but some staff are only getting it every three years. Trauma training is also not meeting service policy, it is essential working practices meet policy statements. Staff value and appreciate the training and it is key for the organisation to get right. On-call staff are also missing out on this vital training and consideration must be given to when training can take place to best support the on-call staff.

Operational crews should be trained before the relocation of specialist equipment or appliances happens. e.g. large animal rescue equipment at Chelmsford. Whilst staff training is considered as part of the project plan to relocate specialist equipment or appliances, peers heard that this training is not always completed before the equipment or appliance arrives. Watch managers need to be tasked with assessing capacity on station so that competence is maintained as well as training completed for new equipment.

The Service needs to plan for a review of its training function. Training managers are very passionate about what they do, however training appears to be done very much in siloes. There are four or five separate training teams including BA, driving, as well as central teams. Each team has a manager and in total over 60 staff are involved in training.

To decrease silo working, increase capacity and improve consistency, training should be cross functional with all staff doing all types of training. Trainers say they are very busy but actual training contact time is not the main component part of their time. There needs to be a closer look at training capacity including how much weekend and evening training takes place to support the most vulnerable members of the operational workforce, the On-call. Quick wins can happen with the introduction of group training Instructors with their primary focus aimed at supporting training for the On-call.

Whilst such a review is not a top priority at the moment it is something that should be programmed in relatively soon.

4.4 Operational Assurance

Operational assurance was generally very good within the Service. However it was always intended that operational staff should be responsible for operational assurance and assessment. The Service wants to return assessment to the fire ground and peers. This policy needs to be signed off

quickly, and has support from the representative bodies, as the implementation of it would provide the Service with the necessary assurance.

Station audits are on track for completion and comprehensive quarterly reports are in place. The reports are excellent with sufficient detail. However operational support officers who monitor and assess on the incident ground are not achieving their targets due to a lack of capacity.

Exercises are taking place locally on stations but again support officers are unable to assess or support due to capacity issues. There should be a programme of exercises that are assessed with reports going back to the training department.

The quarterly operational station poster is excellent. The idea could be extended to other activities such as Prevention and the Talent Pool or even use the template and produce one for each of the Services priority areas.

4.5 Response

The National Operational Guidance (NOG) project is robust and there is an implementation plan in place. The Service is “almost there” on introducing the guidance but the NOG team is struggling to engage the Trainers in the project. They report being too busy to develop training packages to support NOG but with the support from L&D, this project can be completed.

There are a few training packages on the L&D Library on the intranet but many are out of date and need to be reviewed, this is impacting on Operational crews’ ability to plan and implement local training.

Control staff feel positive and part of the wider team. A number of key issues are impacting on their work and operational response more generally. For example, clarity is needed on minimum crewing numbers as a matter of priority. Should it be 4 or 5 fire fighters on a pump? The outstanding negotiation over the annual leave policy is also hindering availability. Implementation of the leave policy will assist crewing by supporting minimum crewing levels.

The electronic rota board (ERB) system is not fit for purpose and it is not supporting performance in relation to availability. This can be particularly frustrating for On-call staff who may not show up as being available when they are. Staff said they did not have confidence in the ERB and would drive in to the station to book themselves on and off. The system does not help the On-call to keep the appliance available; in fact the staff feel this system works against them. There are several systems on the market which are fit for purpose availability management systems for On-call crewing. In the future this would also support the performance management of more flexible contracts.

On-call availability at 84% is good, although recruitment of On-call staff remains difficult in some areas, but this is aligned to the national trend. On-call staff generally feel undervalued by the Service and want greater recognition for what they do and more flexibility.

Currently not all the On-call stations receive a visit from their station manager every week, but it should be noted, some managers are visiting their stations outside of their scheduled hours to ensure their On-call teams are supported.

The Service should review its O-call contracts. Currently contracts are for either 90 or 120 hours per week. Some Fire Services have moved away from this e.g. Cheshire have 50 hour contracts, Cornwall are introducing 42,63 and 84hrs. The representative bodies are also keen to see greater flexibility. A working group of officers including staff who work on call and unions to look at arrangements and contracts would give the issue the higher profile it needs.

Areas of good work has started around On-call looking at recruitment, availability, contracts and terms and conditions within the Service but this work is not being communicated adequately to On-call station managers. Going forward dedicated on call support officers might be needed to support the On-call, give them peer support and be a link to the ongoing changes across the service.

It may be a consideration for a number of On-call managers and service delivery SM/GM's to attend the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) On-call practitioner meetings where ideas and good practices are shared.

4.6 Prevention

The Service has good data from SAOR, community safety and local intelligence, but there is no real targeting of prevention work. For example with the over 65 age group. Local intelligence and information needs to be communicated into the centre and back down so that Group Managers can oversee prevention work in their areas. Whilst delivery should be done at a local level, co-ordination of activity should be retained as a central function.

Area managers need to consider how best to use all the resources they have in a more holistic way. Operational staff at stations are only one element of Prevention: volunteers, partners and other stakeholders are also key. As the service is part of a PFCC, there needs to be a more integrated and collaborative approach to sharing data, intelligence and resources to reduce community risk.

Delivery of Prevention work is not coordinated and appears to happen in siloes. For example Whole time crews are undertaking a limited number of Home fire Safety Visits, the Prevention Technicians of which there are nine, are undertaking Safe, Well and Secure visits, On call advocates a pilot on six stations are doing Home Fire Safety Visits and other community safety initiatives and activities. Multi-agency teams are carrying out sporadic Safe, Well and Secure visits in identified areas using Exeter health data.

The Safe, Well and Secure visits don't actually include a Police secure element and nothing is being done around issues such as smoking, health or social isolation, the content needs to be reviewed and changed to meet the overall Strategic direction for Community Safety and risk reduction.

There is huge capacity which is not utilised at the Wholetime stations to carry out more Prevention work. There are 23 pumps available for visits but last year they carried out only 90 Home Fire Safety Visits between them - an average of 4 each and only 26 visits were made to schools. There is an appetite from Firefighters to do more Prevention work and they are coming up with ideas for locally targeted initiatives but being told no by the central team; the point was also made they used to do more visits before the work was brought in to the centre.

Processes and arrangements are in place for monitoring performance locally with Group Managers. However, the process is very station focussed. There needs to be a greater flow of local intelligence and data between stations and the Community Safety team so that there is some central co-ordination of activities. An example of where this could work better is around local and national campaigns. They need to complement each other rather than sometimes being in conflict. Introducing area plans with objectives for the Group Managers would get them more involved in meetings with partners and bring more intelligence into the Service.

Whilst the national pay dispute is ongoing and health remains outside the fire fighter role map there may be difficulties implementing this at Essex. A consensus statement was signed in 2015 by NFCC, Public Health England, NHS England and Age UK to encourage joint strategies for intelligence-led early intervention and prevention. The firefighters "Doing Things Differently" project is not helpful as this implies it is work outside of the role map, whereas this is work which they should be undertaking now.

Given the shortcomings around Prevention work in the Service the Prevention function and strategy should be reviewed. The delivery model is likely to be changing anyway with the potential for a joint community safety function with the police.

4.7 Other Issues

The team had limited time to consider issues such as Protection and Health and Safety so can only offer brief comments which were in essence captured within a 45 minute session for each.

Protection

This area of work appears to be very sound with committed passionate officers delivering their tactical risk based inspection plan.

There is a good risk based strategy and delivery plan with a good balance of engagement education and enforcement and strong primary authority agreements in place with organisations.

Staff in the team have a clear route for development and professional qualifications and succession planning is in place across the function. There are several vacancies however and filling these will support delivery of the wider plan.

More clarity is also needed around the number of low level audits undertaken by crews a target which is monitored within Group and Station plans would provide clarity and also enable the team to manage the audits being undertaken

Health and Safety

Health and Safety is being broadened in the organisation to include a focus on Health and Wellbeing. With the Service using HSG65 as the model, it may be a consideration to move to a more integrated Health, Safety and Wellbeing model for delivery for example OHSAS 18001 or ISO45001.

The Service has a Health Calendar with a variety of health campaigns including men and women's health. It has signed up for an NHS health programme around mental health awareness, although it has yet to introduce Mental Health First Aiders. Whilst there are well-being conversations happening on stations, communication generally with stations including IT access is not good so messages and updates are not always reaching the hard to reach staff.

There are examples of how this is being addressed, for example On-call staff tend not to log on to the intranet or email, so staff briefings are sent out by hard copy. One station is piloting a Buddy Box with some health resources that can signpost staff to Mind or Blue Light resources. These communication methods need to be evaluated and if successful implemented across the service. On-call liaison officers can help with work of this type.

A new on-line Health and Safety management system is needed but procurement has been held up for two years due to lack of project management capacity. The interface between Health and Safety and the HR system is not good which leads to Health and Safety data such as sickness absence not matching with HR's records. This data is essential for HMICFRS data returns as well as the Services own performance management.

The Service is working on equality, diversity and inclusion issues as part of the culture changes. There are 40 diversity champions as well as an LGBT staff network. There is an Inclusive Workplace Programme in place that is addressing the physical workplace environment. The visits involve holding a focus group with staff which seeks to raise awareness and explore workforce reform.

During recent whole time recruitment some positive action was undertaken but this was aimed mainly at women rather than Black and Minority Ethnic applicants. It was also clear from some conversations that harassment and bullying still exists in pockets within the organisation, often related to resilience activity during the strikes two years ago.

5. Conclusion and contact information

Through the peer challenge process we have sought to highlight the many positive aspects of Essex County Fire & Rescue Service but we have also outlined some key areas for consideration. It has been our aim to provide some detail on them through this report in order to help the service consider them and understand them. The senior leadership of the Service will therefore undoubtedly want to reflect further on the findings before determining how they wish to take things forward.

Thank you to ECFRS for commissioning the challenge and to everyone involved for their participation. The team are particularly grateful for the support provided both in the preparation for the challenge and during the on-site phase and for the way people we met engaged with the process.

Gary Hughes, as the Local Government Association's Principal Adviser for your region, will act as the main contacts between ECFRS and the Local Government Association going forward, particularly in relation to improvement. Hopefully this provides you with a convenient route of access to the organisation, its resources and packages of support.

All of us connected with the peer challenge would like to wish Essex County FRS every success in the future.

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