

# **Social Policy and Cultural Services: A Study of Scottish Border Museums as Implementers of Social Inclusion**

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## **Abstract**

*This article examines the findings of an exploratory case study based on local authority museums in the Scottish Borders to assess the impact of social inclusion policies from the Scottish Parliament. Taken from museum curators' perspectives, the findings suggest that social inclusion policies have not filtered through the system to reach the curators due to unclear government policy and confusion regarding terminology, strategy and guidelines. Curators found it difficult to engage with social inclusion discourse, despite employing socially inclusive actions in everyday practice. The relationship between the local community and museum was seen to be unique and multi-layered, with a perceived dimension of community ownership, which has implications for social policy on central, local and individual levels.*

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## **Introduction**

When New Labour placed social inclusion as a priority in the post 1997 election agenda, they broadened the net of intervention and embedded social inclusion concepts and aims within cultural policy in the UK (Sandell, 2002). Museums are encouraged to openly demonstrate their social inclusion activities and show themselves as agents of social inclusion, tackling deprivation and disadvantage to help justify their value and role in society (Sandell, 1998). Local authorities have increased involvement in arts services through the attachment of other internal policy concerns, when in the past arts services were a discretionary extra (Gray, 2002). Although social inclusion has been on the agenda for the arts sector since devolution in Scotland, it has gained little attention from social policy analysts, despite the attempted integration of cultural institutions as instruments of social inclusion. This article explores the impact of social inclusion policies on Scottish museums, as institutions affected by New Labour's Scottish Cultural Strategy 'Creating our future . . . minding our past' (Scottish Executive, 2000, 2001, 2002).<sup>1</sup> The Scottish Borders local authority museums are used as an exploratory area-based case study to help create a picture of social policy implementation from museum curators' perspectives in order to understand how policies are actually implemented in practice.

Museums, which in this paper refer to both museums and art galleries, were originally established to collect, preserve and then present artefacts to the public (Smith, 1989). Within the UK government and museum sector there is an increasing recognition that museums can become a service with the ability to utilise social policies for positive social change and help resolve social problems (Dodd and Sandell, 2001; Dodd *et al.* 2002), although the impact of social outcomes is difficult to find or prove (Newman and McLean, 2004; West and Smith, 2005; Belfiore and Bennet, 2007). Vaughan (2001: 2) shows that new expectations and governmental policies have forced museums to face fresh challenges away from their original 'raison d'être' of protecting artefacts to a more market-orientated approach. These 'political and economic pressures have forced its professionals to shift their attention from their collections towards visitors', which has in turn shifted the identity, and, finally, the ideology of the museum (Ross, 2004: 84). Thus tackling social problems has become an important justification for funding for the arts (Belfiore, 2002) and has influenced and directed policy towards certain goals, which are effectively becoming more creative, wide-ranging and linked

to wider political objectives (Gray, 2000). Gray (2007) adds that cultural policy has been viewed in an increasingly instrumental fashion, impacting service delivery, which has repercussions on all cultural services.

This article aims to explore the impact of these ideas and policies within the Scottish Borders local authority museums by firstly discussing the practical implementation of such policies within the Scottish Borders from curators' perspectives. The concepts of social exclusion and inclusion are then outlined, along with social and cultural policies relevant to Scottish Borders Council museums (with an introduction to the new SNP policy directions). The concurrent impact of social inclusion discourse, aims and practice on the role of the museum within curators' perceptions is then explored.

## **Social Exclusion and Inclusion**

Concept definition has been an ongoing problem regarding academic cultural policy studies, with vague and debated terms such as culture, creative (cultural) industries and 'the museum' (Bennet, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005; Galloway and Dunlop, 2007 are just some of the authors who discuss these). This paper, however, focuses on the academic concepts (that centre mostly on social exclusion) and the social inclusion policies introduced for museums since 1999. Social exclusion, or 'les exclus' can be found from 1970s France and has been seen as a euphemism for poverty (Askonsas and Stewart, 2000: 38) and those unprotected by social insurance (Silver, 1994). Several academic meanings exist for social exclusion (for full descriptions and historical context see Silver, 1994; Walker and Walker, 1997; Madanipour *et al.* 1998), and all agree that social exclusion, which acknowledges the more structural causes of poverty, is a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional concept than poverty (Byrne, 1999). To highlight this, Percy-Smith (2000) offers several dimensions within the concept of social exclusion, the main ones being economic (unemployment, poverty), social (homelessness, crime, disaffected youth) and political (disempowerment, low levels of community activity). This shows that the concept and language of social exclusion is very broad, making it challenging to construct into an easily understandable strategy for services to follow.

In contrast to social exclusion, New Labour policy discourse has focused on 'tackling' social exclusion through inclusion (Fairclough, 2000). The Scottish Office (1999: 2.1) worked to the following definitions of social exclusion:

a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.

The concept of social inclusion was policy driven, especially in Scotland, where it was developed within the Scottish Executive's Social Inclusion Division and Social Inclusion Network (in contrast to the Social Exclusion Network in Westminster), which emphasised the dangers of labelling certain groups and rejected the behavioural causes of poverty (Fawcett, 2005). The Scottish Office (1999: 3.31) worked to social inclusion aims including:

- promoting opportunities and actions to take part in work, in learning and in society more generally;
- tackling barriers to inclusion and specific problems of exclusion particular groups face, and to break down the barriers which currently prevent people from participating fully in society;
- promoting inclusion among children and young people to improve the long-term prospects of the next generation;
- building strong communities and taking action to strengthen community life, to regenerate and empower deprived communities.

Although current academic literature on social policy focuses mainly on social exclusion, this research aims to look at social inclusion policy in Scotland. The two are intrinsically linked, but

while one almost stands for a general sociological grouping, the other suggests action, commitment and potential for change. Social inclusion suggests a focus on both process and outcomes and is the term preferred in policy documentation concerning cultural services. Social inclusion participation includes the opportunities an individual has, such as enhancing educational achievement and promoting lifelong learning (Newman and McLean, 2004). This article refers to social inclusion as the actionable aspects listed here when referring to changes within perceptions and behaviour after implementation of policies surrounding these issues.

### **Social inclusion and cultural policy concerning Scottish cultural services**

For museums, social inclusion is difficult to characterise or classify for several reasons, including the diversity of language used to discuss it, lack of recognition, evaluation and wider policy frameworks for local authority museums (GLLAM, 2000: 53). Newman and McLean (2004) also found that there exists a lack of clarity on what social exclusion means and what is expected from museums and art galleries regarding policy guidance. During New Labour's time of government in Scotland, social inclusion was embedded in many areas, which has also influenced Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) (previously Scottish Museums Council) policy in regards to museums (Scottish Office, 1999; MGS, 2000, 2005; Scottish Executive, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2006b). The National Cultural Strategy (Scottish Executive, 2000, 2001, 2002) identified development opportunities and stated actions to help institutions around Scotland with cultural development. Actions and objectives of the Scottish Executive (2000: 11–20) include:

- promoting community-based cultural and sporting activities in the context of Social Inclusion Partnerships, to include a wide range of activities;
- auditing all public support for arts and culture in terms of its social benefits, including its planned contribution to social inclusion;
- promoting and enhancing education and lifelong learning in and through arts, culture and heritage;
- developing wider opportunities for cultural access;
- maximising the social benefits of culture.

Policy guidance included the formation of cultural partnerships, promoting access, the development of social inclusion objectives and transparent decision making (Scottish Executive, 2000). Local authorities are responsible for helping to implement these policies and have comprehensive funding powers to direct cultural activities but have increasingly 'attached' the arts to other policy concerns and displayed limited policy coherence in this sector, due to fragmented activities, high levels of individual discretion in different areas and low political priority (Gray, 2002). Interestingly, the Scottish Borders Council has been involved in local anti-poverty strategies and making 'strong and inclusive communities' but enhancing cultural life and conserving heritage was ranked the lowest priority (Scottish Borders Council, 2007: 18–23). This shows that inclusive rhetoric is important within policy but cultural services themselves remain low in local government concerns.

One of the Scottish Executives other key priorities within this strategy was to promote and enhance the relationship with the Department of Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS) in London. Scottish policy divergence prior to 2007 was limited by institutional, political and contextual factors, due to the facilitating factor of New Labour being the main power within Scotland and England (Keating, 2005). The DCMS (2000, 2001: 8, 2006, 2008) works to similar definitions of social exclusion but seems to have more policy guidance compared to Scotland, with specific and more developed objectives relating to museums and their role as agents of social inclusion. With the election of the SNP minority government, however, policy divergence may be more realistic in the future.

The change from the New Labour to the SNP minority Government in Scotland has already delayed the introduction of the Cultural Bill (Scottish Executive, 2006a). The SNP administration has set out its overall aims in the Government Economic Strategy (Scottish Government, 2007a: 1), which aims 'to focus the Government and public services on creating

a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth'. Local authorities agree with central government on how to fulfil the 15 'outcome agreements' and 45 national indicators, only two of which relate to cultural policy (to see these set out visit the Scottish Government, 2007b). The SNP minority government have a clearly instrumental view of culture, fully integrating cultural outcomes with the national strategy (Scottish Government, 2008). Further research on the politics of policy concerning the arts is suggested to discover the impact on this sector due to the change of government.

## Research Approach

This article presents the results of a small-scale exploratory study regarding the role of museums subject to the social inclusion goals set out in the Scottish Office (1999) and Scottish Executive (2000) cultural and social strategies. These strategies were still relevant to curators as field work was conducted in 2005/6, before the election of the SNP minority government in 2007 and the implementation of *Scotland's Culture* (Scottish Executive, 2006b). The Scottish Borders Council is responsible for 12 museums, and six curators were interviewed in-depth, with the majority managing more than one museum, so that Coldstream Museum, The Jim Clark Room, Duns Exhibition Room, Eyemouth Museum, Old Gala House, Drumlanrig's Tower, Hawick Museum, Jedburgh Castle Jail and Museum, Tweeddale Museum, Halliwell's House Museum and Sir Walter Scott's Courtroom were all represented.

This research took a qualitative approach using pre-prepared semi-structured interviews that explored the perspectives of the Scottish Borders curators on social inclusion as a concept and policy. This aimed to identify attitudes, ideas, opinions and implementation experiences within their museums. A documentary analysis of the key policy documents was also undertaken to establish what processes Scottish museums were influenced by. Focusing on lower-level officials in the implementation process follows from Lipsky's (1980: xii) bottom-up approach to public service research, where the 'decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out'. Thus, this research observed the collective behaviour of public museums, as a street-level cultural service, in the Scottish Borders in order to highlight 'individual workers experiences' (Lipsky, 1980: xii) and examine implementation in practice. Transcripts were analysed by using the 'summary-aided approach to analysis' given by Miles and Huberman (1994), combining computer aided (Word) and manual methods.

Local Authority museums have had little attention in academic literature despite the important role they play in the identity of local communities. Social policies in relation to the National Cultural Strategy (Scottish Executive, 2000) have greater impact on local authority museums than National, Independent or University museums, as they are regulated, owned and funded by local and central government. Local authority museums were selected due to their large numbers in the Scottish Borders (12 compared to some small independent museums and no national or university museums). They are also subject to central and local government policies, who regulate and require evidence from curators regarding socially inclusive activities. Bennett's (1997) research also recognises the importance of investigating local authority museums in order to understand the sector as a whole. This article hopes to add to the small field of study concerning local authority museums by introducing it to social policy analysis as an area for further research.

The research limitations include the small sample size and the need for further discussion with other policy actors, such as the Scottish Borders Council, regarding social inclusion aims. Also, as a single area of Scotland, the results cannot be generalized, especially as local authorities have developed different approaches to cultural policies, which can have major implications for their success (Gray, 2002). Details on context, which often give museum studies depth, cannot be given due to the potential harm it could cause in identifying participants in such a small area. However, all are museum curators and most museums were represented. By using Lipsky's (1980) 'bottom-up' approach, the research analyses the point where policy practice is conducted, in the interactions between museums, local government,

visitors and local community, in which curators are central. An exploration of these relations is important for setting out the situation and issues worrying museums as they embark on what will be new policy guidance, governance and implementation priorities.

### **Findings: A Case Study of Implementation within Scottish Border Museums**

The expectations of the social inclusion agenda require the museum to be visitor orientated, representative and accessible to all, but is social inclusion an accepted rhetoric, discourse, policy or practice? The findings will look at the perspective of Scottish Border curators within the implementation process to explore their experiences of social inclusion and the consequent influence on the role of their museums and relationships in the community.

#### **Implementation**

Regarding the implementation of the social inclusion agenda, some direction was given centrally through curator meetings and training courses. However, the final implementation appeared to be randomly based on individual curator's creativity. Social inclusion is at the top of the funding agenda for the arts (Belfiore, 2002), and this was also a top priority within the Scottish Border museums and driven by the Scottish Borders Council, who ultimately make final funding and policy decisions:

The Council has set itself and each department has to try and meet those [social inclusion targets] so they are really saying to the cultural service 'how are you going to aspire how to meet these targets?' And there is a degree of discussion among us – you know, my bosses will say we've got to sit down and come up with a policy document that we're doing for the next few years that tick all these boxes. (Curator B)

The findings highlight that social inclusion is about 'ticking the boxes' and curators had difficulty in following the conceptualised label of social inclusion, which contributed to high levels of scepticism, with views including 'resources are coming later than the policies' and 'some people just don't want to come to museums and you can't force them in at gun point!'. Excluding one senior curator, none of the curators interviewed had personally accessed the policy documents available from the government and MGS. One reason suggested here is that social inclusion is not the only policy affecting curators who are under pressure with decreased budget and staff management, risk assessment and health and safety legislation. Most curators indicated that increased legislation had put pressure on their core duties, such as creating exhibitions:

At the moment the council is very hung up on management, which is an interesting one. Because it actually shuts managers down as much as they don't have enough time to be creative managers, only very bureaucratic managers for local authorities. (Curator D)

These actions create barriers within the process of integrating learning and access policies as they can be viewed as an added hindrance to a position already burdened by legislative paper work. This has negative implications for a strategy based on the inventiveness and creativity of individual curators. Lipsky (1980: 163) states that increased paperwork adds to the culture of accountability and challenges decision-making autonomy, which can have a negative effect on service delivery, morale and worker initiative. The Scottish Borders museums are finding it difficult to adapt and fulfil the goals given. The Scottish Borders Council is seen to have final decision-making powers over funding and policy direction, while overburdening staff with paper work and added objectives. The fundamental relationship between the local government and curators is a top-down approach that did not come across as very interactive, with most participants viewing it negatively. One curator told of the increasing pressures of decreased budgets and lack of funding to back up the policy aims, which hinder the museums from creating and implementing long-term strategies. Curators also find difficulty in relating these pressures to the official policy discourse and directives. The quote below gives an impression of distance to social inclusion policies, as an entity not linked to their everyday activities:

because the interpretation of it is very important as a big part of it is interpreting it and make it available for the general public . . . [and] it's more a question of, we usually at that level, it's been done above us, it's somebody-else's policy and we are told to do it. (Curator B)

The findings suggest that the curators did not identify with social inclusion as a policy discourse, often referring to it as 'council policy' and 'something done above us'. Lack of communication and support encourages an 'us' and 'them' mentality, encouraging the denial of policy ownership and support for it. Thus, social inclusion as a policy was not familiar to all curators and they found it difficult to connect to it as an applicable terminology or directive. Conversely, the findings show that, despite this, social inclusion as a practice was being constantly conducted and its objectives were firmly expressed in the ideological foundations of the curators themselves.

### **'Doing' social inclusion**

Although most curators found it difficult to relate to the social inclusion discourse and directives, all participants could offer examples of social inclusion in practice in line with the ideas of representation, involvement and access with groups seen as socially excluded. This mostly revolved around school groups and educational objectives but included examples of work with older and younger people (primary and secondary school age), single mothers and people in disadvantaged areas. An example of an exhibition that fulfilled aspects of social inclusion through citizen involvement and integrating the community was a World War Two exhibition that focused on the local experiences of that time. The museum applied for the help of the younger and older population of the town who provided photographs, literature, mementoes and personal experiences.

the kids would come in and look at all the things and they would go back and ask their grandparents about the war. Some had never even spoken about it until then, then come in and tell their stories. Got a look on the war from a very local level. (Curator A)

The distance between policy and practice is highlighted in the difference between *awareness* and *experience* of social inclusion. All curators had an awareness of the concept of social inclusion, but definitions given ranged from 'asking people why they don't use us' to seeing that 'potential barriers are reduced' to 'it enables people who are not really employed by museums to take part in museums, as volunteers'. For many participants, social inclusion went deeper than its overall meaning to become stated as a part of their ideology:

I'm very strong on social inclusion, always have been. I have had an interest since being with the museum service, and I believe in it quite strongly. I'm very aware that we always will and always have been working toward that . . . We are very keen on that and when we do workshops that to make sure that the cost is very very low so people are not excluded. All I can say is that at all times I endeavour as an individual, every member of the community is em . . . Welcomed really (pause) welcomed to all exhibitions and to work towards that always. I always have done. My understanding of it, the way I go about it all and bringing in exhibitions my emphasis hasn't changed because I have always been aware of that. To make sure that it's available to everyone [referring to their local area and beyond]'.

RESEARCHER: Have you gotten any reports?

About social inclusion? Not that I know of, not to me personally. This is for someone that is high up (pause). Not to me personally. (Curator E)

This shows that curators have been practicing, understanding and experiencing social inclusion as part of themselves and their museums, but the social policy itself is something separate. The practice of social inclusion was often conceptualised as 'outreach' programmes, 'community interaction', 'access' and 'volunteers'; activities that the museum has always been doing. Sandell (2002: 5) demonstrates that the roles and outcomes of museums can have an individual-, community- and society-level impact. This ranges from

face-to-face interaction to the wider political implications of display, communication and culture. The influence and outcomes of examples within the Scottish Borders are predominantly face to face, which suggests impact of strategy to be at a very individual level. Effects, such as legitimising difference, combating discrimination and stereotyping are too wide ranging for such locally orientated exhibitions. However, in the practice of social inclusion itself, individual experience presents a social integrationist, inclusive and accessible representation of the reality of the participating community, the relationship of which is explored below.

### **Community ownership**

The range of different experiences and definitions suggests a more dynamic and creative perception of social inclusion from curators. Museums in the Scottish Borders are seen to belong to the community, offering a more neutral status compared to other social services (for example Jobcentre Plus or social work departments).

I think it's very important because museums belong to the community . . . We don't own the collection; we look after them for the next generation. That's the thing that the council has to bear in mind – that they are not assets. (Curator C)

For example, the Hawick 'Common Riding', a six-week festival held every year, is central to town history and identity. In 1514 the young men of Hawick defeated an English raiding party and took their flag in triumph. The oldest flag is still in Drumlandrig's Tower at the moment, giving the museum a role as keeper of the community's identity (referring to those born and bred in the local area, often called 'Teri's'). The flag is not simply an object in a collection, however, but is an interactive and central symbol to the current festivals and perceptions of Hawick community. This interactive, central role for museums shows a strong relationship between them and the community and highlights another dimension to what social inclusion means for Scottish Border museums. It highlights that the role of the museum is both active and instrumental (serving as agency) to the ongoing identity of and participation within the community. Its perceived benefits are expressed by one curator's definition of social inclusion:

People are less likely to behave in an anti-social, uninvolved manner if they feel as if they have commitment and involvement in the museum. (Curator B)

However, the curator's idea of an instrumental and active museum is contrary to the government's idea of the museum's commitment to the social inclusion agenda – it's not what the museum can do for people but that people can be included through a commitment to the museum. As a provisional welfare model, this dimension contrasts strongly with the one-way relationship of, for example, social security provision. It suggests two things: that the Scottish Border curators do not have a consistent understanding of social inclusion policy objectives, or that the relationship between the museum and the community is more in-depth and complicated than policy documents anticipated. It shows that the Scottish Border curators' experiences of 'doing' social inclusion is both separate to policy discourse and directives and more complicated due to the unique and multi-layered relationship between museum and community.

### **The role of the Scottish Borders museums**

The difficulties experienced by curators in connecting with social inclusion discourse and directives may be associated to their perceived role of the museum. Although curators gave individual experiences of social inclusion, the perceived role of the museum is still orientated around the physical aspects of service delivery. For example, when curators were asked about their role it often included 'to take care of the collection', and 'to manage the staff'. The listing of the building and collections and the management of staff and services provided would fit into the dialogue of a tangible, physical service, which takes priority over social inclusion. This could be justified by the fact that the museums in the Scottish Borders are all based in historical buildings that are linked to the areas history and therefore have a

perceived element of community ownership. Newman and McLean (2002: 58) discuss the concept of cultural identity showing that 'visitors give complex, often contradictory, meanings to museum objects, meanings that are representative of their identities'. If the museum does help create individual identity, which is considered the main precursor to inclusion (Newman and McLean, 2002: 57), a sense of wider community identity (based on a perceived community ownership) can also be linked to an overall feeling of inclusion through the activities and collections of the museum. The role of the Scottish Border museums, then, while still collections focused, still has a role to play in the identity, and thus the inclusion, of the overall community.

However, the Scottish Borders museums provided limitations to social inclusion assumptions and have a very high rate of cynicism in regard to local authority policies. The curators themselves expressed a certain realism based on past experiences of changing government agenda's.

[I]t has always been similar. What's changed, I'd say, is the focus. (Curator F)

They come and go. If you've been around long enough – they come and go. (Curator B)

The collections and negative past experiences of government intervention highlighted above could be seen to contribute to the delayed acceptance of social inclusion policies in the Scottish Border museums. This suggests that for a museum to be socially inclusive does not mean its role is only to engage with the terminology, discourse and directives, but that the relationship can be even more dynamic and operate both ways – between the museum and the community and the community and the museum.

The research also suggests that the roles of the museum and staff within local authority areas are also taking longer to change into a more 'visitor-orientated' approach. For example, a curator had visited another area and talked to an elected museum decision-making group regarding tourist holiday visitors and they expressed some very elitist views:

Of course, perceptions don't change with the policy . . . but one group I was talking to, about tourist holiday visitors goes (in posh voice) 'oh.. We don't want that sort in here. They are not our kind-of people' . . . These dinosaur points of views are prevalent in the top decision making groups and I for one find that worrying. (Curator C)

This evidence is contradictory to the socially inclusive role envisioned for museums and links back to older arguments surrounding the power that museums can hold over the truth and their historically elitist nature. Although this is more complex, Belfiore (2002: 102) cites museums as a special case due to their 'exclusive nature' and Sandell (1998: 408) shows that museums have the ability to 'reinforce prejudices and discriminatory practices diffused in the wider society'. This makes museums a very interesting area of study and the experiences in the Scottish Borders show that the vision of museums being an instrument for social change within the social inclusion agenda has been accepted by Scottish Borders Council but not by museums themselves. The discourse and directives of social inclusion are mostly regarded with cynicism and the transition to and implementation of a formal social inclusion agenda are far from complete.

## **Conclusion**

Social inclusion aims are seen as worthy aspects of museum experiences within the Scottish Borders, however the policy of social inclusion itself is seen as a separate entity from the practice already inherent within these museums. Curators' experiences show that the barriers to adopting the social inclusion agenda include issues of increased management and legislation, lack of funding, guidelines and understanding, leading to frustration, scepticism and lack of commitment to the Scottish National Cultural Strategy. From the curators' points of view they are being asked to do more work by the Scottish Borders Council with less time, resources and power to do it, which leads to a non-commitment to social inclusion discourse



and objectives. Lack of communication and formal directives from the Scottish Borders Council for individual curators have had negative implications for policy delivery, with an 'us' and 'them' mind-set being expressed and denial of ownership in regards to policy outcomes.

To be more effective within its implementation, more inclusion of the curators in conducting the practical sides of policies should be sought. To encourage policy adoption and connection, more communication is needed between local government and curators instead of added paper work and boxes to tick. Guidance, in partnership with curators, could be developed, which acknowledges work already being done and the already existing social role of the Scottish Border museums. This article also justifies more focus on social policy within the culture and arts sector in general due to its unique and original approach in trying to tackle social exclusion and to help these cultural services understand the policy process.

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