



The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Water Voice - Accountability Session

Summary report

Water company: South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water

Accountability Session date: 03.03.26

Delivered by Taylor McKenzie
Research & Energy Saving Trust

Version: Final 16.03.2026

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Questions created and asked by community members



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Community members identified **three priority questions** they wanted to put directly to South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water during the Accountability Session.

The questions were developed through a structured process involving the full Water Voice community (c.50 members). In January and February 2026, members collectively identified and refined priority themes through Spotlight surveys. These priorities were then shaped into draft questions during a dedicated briefing session, before being finalised and formally put to South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water at the Accountability Session.

Each question was led by a community member and explored in depth during the session. South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water provided on-the-record responses, with commitments and actions discussed in real time.

	Topic	Community member question
Q1	Value for money: Bill rises	<i>“Our bills seem to have risen sharply over the last year. Why have bills increased so significantly? How is this money being spent, and how will it benefit us as customers in the short, medium & long term?”</i>
Q2	Investment, infrastructure and long-term resilience	<i>“Customers are experiencing repeated burst mains, flooding, pressure issues and even loss of supply, in areas that are already water stressed and seeing housing growth. What are you going to do to support future proofing to ensure that ongoing housing development does not continue to impact current water customers?”</i>
Q3	Communication and information: Reactive, opaque and hard to access	<i>“Why do we as customers feel uninformed about bill increases, investment plans, compensation rights and available support such as Priority Services Register? What specific changes will you make to ensure communication is proactive, transparent and accessible rather than reactive or buried online in technical documents?”</i>

The sections that follow set out each question in turn, alongside the actions discussed and the expectations community members have for delivery through the company’s published action plan. This will be published on **Friday 10th April 2026**.

Executive summary - insights by question



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The Accountability Session for South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water highlighted customers' need for clearer explanations of rising bills, confidence that infrastructure investment will maintain a reliable supply and more proactive, accessible communication about services and support.

Q1.

Value for money: Bill rises

During the session, South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water explained that bill increases are linked to a significant programme of infrastructure investment intended to improve resilience, reduce leakage and upgrade treatment facilities.

Community members welcomed the investment programme but emphasised that customers need **clearer explanations of why investment is needed now, how it will benefit them and what outcomes they should expect to see over time.**

The discussion therefore focused on improving transparency around how customers money is used and ensuring communications explain both the **scale of investment and the benefits it delivers.**

Customers recognise the need for investment but felt explanations of rising bills have not been communicated clearly or effectively to the community in the past or during the session.

Q2.

Investment, infrastructure and long-term resilience

South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water explained that population growth and housing development are increasing the pressure on infrastructure and water resources. The company outlined **plans for investment** to improve network resilience and long-term supply.

Community members **wanted reassurance** that infrastructure investment will keep pace with housing growth and **maintain reliable service** for existing customers

Customers want confidence that infrastructure investment will keep pace with housing growth and protect existing service levels.

Q3.

Communication and information:
Reactive, opaque and hard to access

The water company acknowledged that customers can sometimes find information difficult to access or understand. The company explained that it is working to improve the way it communicates with customers, including simplifying information, making key messages clearer and increasing transparency around bills, investment and available support services.

Community members welcomed the acknowledgement but felt the response did not fully address their concerns. Many felt that important information is still too often **hard to find, overly technical, or only communicated after issues arise.** Customers emphasised the need for communication that is **proactive, clear and accessible**, particularly when it comes to explaining bill increases, outlining investment plans and raising awareness of support schemes such as the Priority Services Register.

Customers want clearer, more proactive communication so they can easily understand their bills, rights and available support - the information may exist, but it isn't reaching people in a way that works.

Actions agreed during the Accountability Session



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Q1.

Value for money: Bill rises

- Provide clearer explanations of why bills are increasing now
- Clearly show how customer money is being spent
- Demonstrate the benefits customers will see from investment
- Improve confidence in infrastructure investment and the metering programme.

Q2.

Investment, infrastructure and long-term resilience

- Provide clearer explanations of how infrastructure investment will support growing demand and housing development
- Demonstrate how they will maintain a normal supply of water to existing customers when adding new housing developments onto the infrastructure
- Reassure customers that infrastructure capacity will keep pace with housing growth
- Show how long-term water supply planning will protect existing customers in water-stressed areas.

Q3.

Communication and information:
Reactive, opaque and hard to access

- Improve transparency and clarity in communications about bill increases, investment plans and company decisions
- Provide more proactive updates to customers when it comes to investment and available support.
- Increase awareness of customer rights, compensation schemes and support services such as the Priority Services Register
- Ensure key customer information is communicated in simple, accessible formats that are easy to find and understand.



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Q1. Value for money: Bill rises

Clarity, transparency and reassurance on rising bills and investment

Question asked by South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water Community member:

*“Our bills seem to have risen sharply over the last year. Why have bills **increased so significantly**? How is this money **being spent**, and how will it **benefit us** as customers in the short, medium & long term?”*

During the session, South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water explained that bill increases are linked to a significant programme of infrastructure investment intended to improve resilience, reduce leakage and upgrade treatment facilities.

Community members welcomed the investment programme but emphasised that customers need **clearer explanations of why investment is needed now, how it will benefit them, and what outcomes they should expect to see over time.**

The discussion therefore focused on improving transparency around how customer money is used and ensuring communications explain both the **scale of investment and the benefits it delivers.**

Actions

- Provide **clearer explanations** of why bills are increasing now
- Clearly show **how customer money is being spent**
- **Demonstrate the benefits** customers will see from investment
- **Improve confidence** in infrastructure investment and the metering programme

“If they said my bill was £100, 25% of this is going to be spent on infrastructure... 4% is going to the shareholders... that simple.”

“It just felt like a very politically correct sort of answer... no real commitment that the bills are going to come down.”

“I’m a family {of 6} on low income... my bill increasing {by 25%}, it’s not affordable - it’s either food or paying the bills sometimes.”



Customers recognise the need for investment but felt the explanations of rising bills have not been communicated clearly or effectively to the community in the past or during the session.

Q1. Value for money: Bill rises



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"You said" (Community member actions)	"We did" (South Staffs and Cambridge response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South Staffs and Cambridge response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale/ final comments
Provide clearer explanations of why bills are increasing now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The company explained that bill increases are linked to an ambitious proposal for the largest ever investment programme – approx £1bn over 5 years. Investment is required to meet future demand, environmental obligations and regulatory requirements. Future plans: A "Your Water, Your Future" newsletter will accompany bills to help explain investment and future spending plans to customers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide simple explanations of why bills are increasing now. Clearly explain the regulatory process and investment decisions. Help customers understand how today's investment benefits future supply and resilience. 	Some communication improvements can be implemented in the short term. Further detail expected within the company action plan.
Clearly show how customer money is being spent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The company explained that customer bills fund investment in infrastructure, leakage reduction, supply resilience and environmental protection. Some financial information is already available through company publications and reporting. No future commitments were stated on the night. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide clear and simple breakdowns showing where customer money goes. Use visuals or summaries to explain how the customers bill supports investment and improvements. Improve the visibility of how spending benefits customers and the environment. 	Further detail expected through the company action plan following the session.
Demonstrate the benefits customers will see from investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The company outlined plans for significant investment in infrastructure, leakage reduction and new water supply schemes. Examples included reducing leakage and strengthening network resilience. No future commitments were stated on the night. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly show the outcomes customers will see from the investment. Provide measurable indicators where possible (e.g. leakage reduction, improved resilience). Communicate short, medium and long-term benefits. 	Within the next 3 months
Improve confidence in infrastructure investment and the metering programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The company confirmed that the metering rollout forms part of a wider strategy to manage water demand and protect the long-term supply. Infrastructure investment is also planned to maintain network resilience as demand grows. No future commitments were stated on the night. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide clear explanations of how metering supports water security and fairness. Improve transparency and trust in long-term investment decisions. 	Commitment to reducing leakage by 20% over 5 years. Commitments and plans within the next 3 months

Note: This table is an excerpt from the full Action Plan. South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water will provide formal responses to each action within 28 days of the session date. The updated plan will then be shared with participating community members for review and agreement.

Q2. Investment, infrastructure and long-term resilience

Confidence, resilience and long-term infrastructure planning to support growing demand



Question asked by South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water Community member:

*“Customers are experiencing **repeated** burst mains, flooding, pressure issues and even loss of supply, in areas that are already water stressed and seeing housing growth. What are you going to do to support **future proofing** to ensure that ongoing housing development does not continue to impact current water customers?”*

South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water explained that population growth and housing development are increasing pressure on the infrastructure and water resources. The company outlined plans for investment to improve network resilience and long-term supply.

Community members wanted reassurance that infrastructure investment will keep pace with housing growth and maintain reliable service for existing customers.

Actions

- Provide clearer explanations of how infrastructure investment will support growing demand and housing development
- Demonstrate how network upgrades will reduce burst mains, pressure issues and supply interruptions.
- Reassure customers that infrastructure capacity will keep pace with housing growth.
- Show how long-term water supply planning will protect existing customers in water-stressed areas

“They haven’t clarified any benefits at all to us as customers of that work, what is the long term, what will that lead to?” How much water are they saving by these leakage repairs etc? We need more detail around that.”

“What’s the point of having a meter if the pipes are leaking everywhere else and it’s not a true reading?” / “I want to see less leakage, less silly roadworks that cost a lot of money and a lot of time for people, and I want to see where the money’s going.”



Customers want confidence that infrastructure investment will keep pace with housing growth and protect existing service levels.



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Q2. Investment, infrastructure and long-term resilience

"You said" (Community member actions)	"We did" (South Staffs and Cambridge response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South Staffs and Cambridge response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South Staffs and Cambridge response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale
Provide clearer explanations of how infrastructure investment will support growing demand and housing development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water explained that population growth and housing development are increasing the pressure on infrastructure and water resources. The company outlined plans for investment to strengthen network resilience and support long-term supply. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Replacing mains that are time-expired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide clear explanations of how infrastructure planning accounts for housing growth. Show how investment decisions are made to support both new developments and existing customers. Explain how customers will benefit from these long-term investments. 	Timescale: Infrastructure upgrades outlines to take place in the next 5 years, and actions will be answered within the next 3 months
Demonstrate how network upgrades will reduce burst mains, pressure issues and supply interruptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The company explained that infrastructure investment includes programmes to upgrade parts of the network and reduce leakage in order to improve reliability and reduce failures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Replacing 250km of mains in the next 5 years Investment to ensure the maintenance of pressure and flow standards - £12m over the next 5 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate how infrastructure upgrades will reduce burst mains and pressure issues. Provide measurable indicators of improvement where possible (e.g. fewer bursts or supply interruptions). Detail how much water will be saved 	
Reassure customers that infrastructure capacity will keep pace with housing growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The company acknowledged concerns that housing growth can place additional demand on existing infrastructure. Investment planning aims to ensure sufficient capacity to support future demand. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with housing developers to ensure the installation of household appliances that use less water. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide reassurance that infrastructure capacity will be increased where needed. Demonstrate that new housing development will not negatively impact existing customers. 	
Show how long-term water supply planning will protect existing customers in water-stressed areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The company outlined plans for long-term investment to strengthen supply resilience and ensure reliable water services as demand grows. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New reservoir to meet growing demand, including meeting demand on hot summer days and during the winter, when freeze thaws cause more pipes to burst 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain how long-term water supply planning protects customers in water-stressed areas. Provide greater transparency on how resilience planning addresses future population growth and demand. Response so far has felt like 'towing the party line' – improving confidence and reducing scepticism in company intentions requires greater transparency 	

Note: This table is an excerpt from the full Action Plan. South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water will provide formal responses to each action within 28 days of the session date. The updated plan will then be shared with participating community members for review and agreement.

Q3. Communication and information: reactive, opaque and hard to access

Clarity, transparency and proactive communication customers can easily access



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Question asked by South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water Community member:

*“Why do we as customers feel **uninformed** about bill increases, investment plans, compensation rights and available support such as Priority Services Register?”*

*What specific changes will you make to ensure communication is **proactive, transparent and accessible** rather than reactive or buried online in technical documents?”*

The water company acknowledged that customers can sometimes find information difficult to access or understand. The company explained that it is working to improve the way it communicates with customers, including simplifying information, making key messages clearer and increasing transparency around bills, investment and available support services.

Community members welcomed the acknowledgement but felt the response did not yet fully address their concerns. Many felt that important information is still too often **hard to find, overly technical, or only communicated after issues arise**. Customers emphasised the need for communication that is **proactive, clear and accessible**, particularly when it comes to explaining bill increases, outlining investment plans and raising awareness of support schemes such as the Priority Services Register.

Actions

- Improve transparency and clarity in communications about bills, investment plans and company decisions
- Provide **more proactive updates** to customers when it comes to investment and available support.
- Increase awareness of customer rights, compensation schemes and support services such as the Priority Services Register
- Ensure key customer information is **communicated in simple, accessible formats that are easy to find and understand**

“This is all written down and if we want to go to the website it’s written there, but we need to be communicated with so much better so that we **understand** what’s going on.”

“I **totally ignored that email...** because it said ‘Get help with your water bill’. I didn’t need help, so I didn’t open it.”



Customers want clearer, more proactive communication so they can easily understand their bills, rights and available support - the information may exist, but it isn’t reaching people in a way that works.

Q3. Communication and information: Reactive, opaque and hard to access



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"You said" (Community member actions)	"We did" (South Staffs and Cambridge response on the night)	"We will do in the future" (South Staffs and Cambridge response on the night)	What is the 'Ideal' South Staffs and Cambridge response? (In the eyes of our community)	Timescale/ final comments
<p>Improve transparency and clarity in communications about bills, investment plans and company decisions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledged customers should clearly understand where their money goes Confirmed newsletters such as <i>Your Water, Your Future</i> aim to explain investment plans Accepted communication could be clearer and more locally specific 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make communications more granular and area-specific Use customer contact points and billing cycles to share clearer information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publish simple explanations of where customers money is spent Clearly link bill increases to investment, outcomes and benefits for customers 	<p>Timescale: All within 3 months</p> <p>South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water closed by confirming that they do a lot of these things already and/or have tried in the past.</p>
<p>Provide more proactive updates to customers rather than relying on information buried in technical documents or websites</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accepted the need for more proactive communication with customers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactive outreach is already being considered Use customer interactions and communications to provide information earlier Explore proactive outreach when bills or circumstances change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contact customers proactively when key changes occur Move from reactive explanations to proactive updates and alerts 	
<p>Increase awareness of customer rights, compensation schemes and support services such as the Priority Services Register</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confirmed compensation payments are increasingly automated rather than requiring customers to apply Explained the need for Priority Services Register is checked during customer interactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve awareness of support services including social tariffs and affordability support programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly promote customer rights, compensation and support schemes Ensure vulnerable customers are identified and supported earlier 	
<p>Ensure key customer information is communicated in simple, accessible formats that are easy to find and understand</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognised current communications can be complex or buried in longer materials Accepted the need to make information easier to find 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simplify communications and provide clearer signposting to key information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide clear, concise summaries on bills and communications Use simple formats that highlight key information customers need quickly 	

Note: This table is an excerpt from the full Action Plan. South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water will provide formal responses to each action within 28 days of the session date. The updated plan will then be shared with participating community members for review and agreement.

What happens after the Accountability Session?

After the Accountability Session, there is a clear and structured follow-up process.



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Publication and transparency

Within 5 working days

A full (anonymised) transcript of the session was [published](#) on **Tuesday 10th March**

Within 10 working days

A plain-English summary is published, setting out:

- The questions asked.
- The key points raised by Community members.
- The actions agreed for inclusion in the action plan.

Anything recorded as *not yet agreed*.

Tuesday 17th March



Action plan

Within 28 days

The water company must share its **action plan**, setting out how it will deliver the agreed actions.

The action plan will be **shared with the Water Voice community on Friday 10th April**



Customer feedback

Participants will be asked, via a short survey, whether they feel the action plan:

- ✓ Reflects what was agreed in the session
- ✓ Goes far enough to address customer concerns

This feedback forms part of CCW's ongoing monitoring and follow-up with the company and helps inform future accountability work.



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Background



What is an Accountability Session?

An Accountability Session is a formal, facilitated meeting where **water consumers directly question senior executives from their water company** about performance, service failures and issues of concern – and **agree the actions they want the company to take**.

They sit at the heart of CCW's statutory role to strengthen consumer voice and ensure companies respond transparently and meaningfully.

Why do they exist?

Accountability Sessions exist because customers deserve a real say in how their water company performs. They give people a direct line to the people in charge – not through a survey, not through a complaint form, but face-to-face.

For years, customers have felt that water companies weren't listening closely enough. *Water (Special Measures) Act 2025^{*} requiring a relevant undertaker to have arrangements in place for involving consumers in decisions of the undertaker that are likely to have a material impact on consumer matters.*

These sessions make that happen. They create a space where customers can:

- Ask honest questions
- Raise the issues that really affect them
- Agree the actions they expect the company to take next.

It's all about making the process fair, open, and focused on what matters most to the people who actually use and pay for the service.

^{*}<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2025/5/enacted>

Objectives

What the session aims to achieve



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1. Give customers a real voice

These sessions make sure customers aren't just "heard" – their views actually guide the conversation and shape what happens next.

2. Make companies answer directly to the people they serve

Senior water company leaders must respond openly, honestly, and in real time. No hiding behind reports or press statements.

3. Agree clear actions that lead to real improvements

By the end of each session, everyone should be clear on:

- ✓ what the company will do
- ✓ how they'll do it
- ✓ how customers will know things have improved.

4. Build trust through transparency

Everything is published – the questions, the answers, the agreed actions – so customers can see what's happening and whether companies are following through.

5. Make sure all types of customers are represented

People from different backgrounds, ages, abilities and regions take part, ensuring the outcomes reflect real experiences across the community.

Outputs

By the close of the process, this Accountability Session will have:

- Provided CCW with **robust, publishable evidence** of consumer concerns and company responses.
- Established a clear and transparent set of customer-agreed actions that the water company must reflect in its published action plan. The action plan itself is published by the company following the session, in line with the accountability process.
- Given consumers confidence that their participation leads to **real scrutiny and follow-through**, reinforcing the credibility of the accountability process.
- Informed future regulatory engagement by highlighting **systemic or recurring issues** requiring wider attention.

Together, this ensures the session delivers both **immediate accountability** and **longer-term value** for consumers and the sector.

Methodology

How does it work?

CCW

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01



Prioritising what matters most

1. We listen to what customers tell us each month

Through Barometer & Spotlight surveys and the online community

2. We play back what they said

In the January Spotlight survey, we show customers the issues they raised & ask them to prioritise the most important ones.

3. Confirm their priorities

In the February Spotlight survey, customers confirm if they agree with which points matter most.

02



Getting ready (Briefing session)

Selected 12 customers join a 2-hour online (via Zoom) briefing before the main meeting.

Everyone gets clear, easy-to-read information beforehand so they feel confident and prepared.

The facilitator talks them through:

- How the session will work
- The issues they've prioritised
- How to shape their questions & come up with a set of questions for each priority.

We will brief the CCW Chair separately at this point & remind them on their role, share guide & prioritised topics / Priorities will be sent the Water Companies at this point

03



The Accountability Session (Main meeting)

12 customers take part in an online session (via Zoom) with a senior water company representative for 2 hours.

TMcK facilitator & Chair guiding the conversation:

- Customers ask their prepared questions
- Challenge the company's answers
- Explore what needs to change.

Live polls let everyone share honest views – even those who prefer not to speak out loud.

Welsh panels will be given the option of English, Welsh or simultaneous translation .

04



Agreeing what should happen next

During the main accountability session, after each issue is discussed, the facilitator checks whether customers feel the company's proposed actions are good enough.

Together, they work towards a clear **consensus** on what actions the company must take.

05



Publishing the outcomes & following up

A summary is produced showing: the questions asked, how the company responded, and the actions agreed.

- CCW publishes a **transcript within 5 working days**
- CCW publishes a **summary within 10 working days**
- The company must publish its **action plan by day 28**

Panellists are asked short follow-up questions about whether the plan reflects what was agreed.

CCW then tracks progress and updates panellists before the next session.

[Priorities will be shared with the ISG]

Sample

Who takes part in an Accountability Session



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We've brought together a **small, representative group of around 12 people** for each accountability session.

This number keeps the conversation manageable and ensures everyone has the chance to speak.

Each person is selected by the panel manager from their panel of 50 participants.

Our panel managers are responsible for selecting a representative range of participants and ensure that anyone who has expressed a keen interest in taking part in an accountability session is included at this stage.

We make sure each session of 12 includes the following types of panellists:

- **Age** - younger adults, middle-aged adults and older customers (2 per age bracket)
- **Gender** - a balanced mix (at least 5 males & 5 females)
- **Income levels** - including low-income households (3 financially vulnerable, 3 x 20-40k, 3 x £40k-60k & 2 x £60k+)
- **Location** - Rural and Urban water users (different house-types represented)
- **Ethnic backgrounds** - reflecting the local population, 2-3 from an ethnic minority background
- **People with accessibility, neurodivergent or additional support needs** (at least 1)
- **Different customer types** - e.g metered/unmetered, renters/homeowners
- **Different attitudes** – including 3 x positive, 3 x neutral & 3 x negative customers
- **Bathing water users** – 3 regular users (for WaSC panels)
- **Welsh speakers** – at least 2 Welsh speakers within our two Welsh panels & options for accountability session language

This ensures all voices are represented, not just the loudest or most confident.



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Thank you!



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