

25/1781/FUL Redevelopment and clearance of site to deliver data centre campus consisting of (a) free standing data centre buildings (b) energy, power, and water infrastructure (c) site access and internal roads (d) site security arrangements (e) hard and soft, green and blue, landscaping and infrastructure (f) other ancillary and auxiliary forms of development. Site Of Former Mercure Hotel Tylers Way Watford Hertfordshire

Letchmore Heath Village Trust object to this application for the following reasons.

GREEN BELT

The site is currently designated as Green Belt under the adopted Hertsmere Local Plan (2012–2027) and is not allocated for general development, meaning any proposal must comply with strict Green Belt policies. The previously advanced Regulation 18 draft Local Plan has been discarded and carries no weight in decision-making. While the emerging Local Plan identifies the site as a potential employment allocation, it remains within the Green Belt and is not yet adopted, so this carries only limited weight. Consequently, the proposal cannot rely on emerging allocations to justify inappropriate development or to demonstrate very special circumstances, and the Green Belt protections of the adopted plan must take full precedence. The applicant's many references to this being an employment area misrepresent the position.

The applicant relies on a flawed application of the new "Grey Belt" policy across the site. This was introduced by the current NPPF which may allow some previously developed or lower-value Green Belt land to be considered differently if the land does not strongly contribute to key Green Belt purposes. However, this is not a blanket permission to develop open fields or greenfield areas simply on the basis of PDL status of part. The Grey Belt definition explicitly requires an assessment of contribution to the Green Belt's purposes and excludes areas where other planning protections apply.

Although part of the site comprises previously developed land, a larger area is undeveloped countryside that continues to perform the fundamental functions of the Green Belt. Even that part which is previously developed as the Mercure Hotel is of low modest form, well set back, with the built form surrounded by wide open areas. As to this (minority) portion it may pass the Grey Belt test but this would not apply to the rest of the site – the remaining major portion. As to that larger part this cannot be classified as Grey Belt – it comprises mainly woodland and makes a strong contribution to Green Belt

purposes, and therefore should remain fully protected under the ordinary Green Belt tests in the NPPF. It must be assessed as to whether very special circumstances apply so as to allow development in the Green Belt. Our view is that very special circumstances do not apply. Accordingly we request that the application be refused on Green Belt grounds, as the proposal would cause permanent and unmitigable harm to openness, landscape character, and visual amenity and constitute inappropriate development that significantly harms openness.

The applicant's claimed benefits include:

1. Speculative short-term data centre need- but the construction will take 10 years. A lower horizontal data centre, such as South Mimms, will only take 18 months to build and it is this type of data centre that will satisfy any need there may be in the short or medium term. There are no identified end users for this proposal and within the 10 year building program quantum computers are expected to be widely used commercially and comparative space requirement will drop dramatically. Quantum computers are estimated to require 1% of equivalent processing space.
2. Potential, but entirely uncertain, future connection to a district heat network which is not accompanied by any feasibility study.
3. Job creation- bUt this is minimal. A conventional industrial/logistics scheme would generate substantially more employment than this data centre in a far smaller space. Comparison with the proposal under 22/1117/OUT at 30, 000 sq. m indicates 372 direct jobs as against 146 direct jobs for this 137,900 sq. m proposal.

These claimed benefits cannot outweigh the significant Green Belt, landscape, and environmental harm, including massive electricity and water demand, a decade-long construction period generating dust and emissions, and the Major and Moderate Adverse effects acknowledged in the applicant's own LVIA and EIA. The development would not meet the very special circumstances necessary to justify such harm.

The applicant cites the planning balance in the case of the Woodlands Park Landfill Site, but that must now be disregarded as the Government has conceded that the permission should be quashed.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgl88wezczpo>

<https://www.foxglove.org.uk/2026/01/22/uk-government-admits-serious-error-data-centre/>

LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL IMPACT

The proposed development is enormous, substantially towering over anything else in the area. The four towers will each be 36.25m (119 ft) high but the actual height, inclusive of their ventilation stacks will be 38.95m (128 ft.)

The visualisations provided by the applicant are misleading and shave some 10-15% off of the true heights of the buildings and there is no visualisation which shows the entire development complete with security fencing and perimeter lighting. Nor are details of the height of that security lighting supplied.

The built form will cover the vast majority of the site resulting in removal of substantial areas of woodland and vegetation. This is contrary to the provisions of paragraphs 136 and 139 of the NPPF.

The current undeveloped parts of the site, including significant woodland and open areas, play a critical role in preventing ribbon development and maintaining separation between settlements; constructing a large, high data centre across these areas would erode this essential Green Belt function, creating a continuous urbanised frontage and undermining the openness and character the policies are designed to protect.

With regards to landscape and visual matters, and as confirmed by the applicant, the proposals result in a high negative magnitude of change to a series of viewpoints. This site is unsuitable for a data centre of this size due to the proposed massing, height and visual impact, both on the A41 which has a rural feel for road users and also from further afield. Comparisons with the development permitted under 22/1117/OUT are entirely inappropriate as the maximum height there was under half, the maximum floorspace was 30,000sqm. and the footprint of the buildings was much smaller. We do not agree that removal of the woodland under 22/1117/OUT establishes a precedent that can be applied here ; that development was entirely different, much smaller, lower and more open and loss of the woodland was a factor in an entirely different planning balance.

The proposed data centre would result in substantial harm to landscape character, visual amenity and the openness of the Green Belt, harm which is neither adequately assessed nor capable of mitigation and which is not outweighed by any claimed locational or operational need.

While the applicant places reliance on NPPF paragraph 87, which requires plan-making and decision-taking to recognise the specific locational requirements of data centres, this paragraph does not disapply Green Belt policy nor reduce the weight to be given to harm arising from inappropriate development. Under NPPF paragraph 153, inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances, which will not exist unless the harm is clearly outweighed by other considerations. The NPPF makes clear that substantial weight must be given to any harm to the Green Belt, including harm to openness and visual amenity.

The applicant's own Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) confirms that the development would give rise to Moderate to Major Adverse (significant) visual effects on a number of receptors, including medium sensitivity receptors, notably users of Byway B38 and visitors to the Bushey New and Old Jewish Cemeteries. The LVIA explicitly states that these effects arise from the height, scale and massing of the proposed buildings and that the effects cannot be mitigated by landscape treatments. This is a critical admission: the visual harm is inherent to the proposal and not a temporary construction effect, nor one that can be resolved through planting or screening.

Despite this, the LVIA adopts a methodology which materially understates the extent and severity of visual impact. The majority of viewpoints are taken at close range and during June/July, when leaf cover is at its maximum, artificially reducing apparent visibility. There is a notable absence of representative medium- and long-distance views, notwithstanding the applicant's own EIA identification of extensive areas of higher ground in the vicinity of Letchmore Heath and Aldenham, parts of Hilfield Lane and London Elstree Aerodrome, Bushey and Bushey Heath, and residential areas on the eastern fringes of Watford and Bushey. Given the acknowledged height and massing of the development, the omission of robust assessment from these elevated locations significantly underplays the true visual envelope and wider landscape harm.

The proposal would introduce a large, industrial-scale built form complete with security lighting and razor wire topped perimeter fencing reaching almost to the adjoining roadways into a landscape characterised by openness, vegetation structure and predominantly rural qualities, causing harm to Landscape Character Area 15 (Bushey Swards) as identified in the Hertfordshire Landscape Character Assessment. Even where the LVIA concludes that effects on certain public footpaths (notably B12, B35 and A17) and road users reduce to "Minor

Adverse” or “Negligible” after 10 years, this relies almost entirely on speculative future planting to mask the lower portions of the development. In fact the applicant’s proposal for “ a robust ‘green halo’ “ will do nothing to mitigate the visual impact of new buildings and in any event will be more or less cancelled out by the 4m security perimeter fencing and lighting which will have a substantial adverse visual impact, particularly as this will be very near to the A41 and Sandy Lane, there being virtually no set back from these highways.

The applicant’s approach does not address the permanent and irreversible harm caused by the bulk, height and massing of the buildings, nor does it mitigate their impact on openness or skyline intrusion. Visual mitigation cannot negate the spatial impact of built development in the Green Belt.

Particular weight should be afforded to the impact on sensitive receptors whose experience of the landscape is one of quiet enjoyment and contemplation. Visitors to the Jewish Cemeteries, users of Byway B38 and users of other public rights of way experience views that are valued not solely for heritage “setting” but for their contribution to landscape appreciation and amenity. As acknowledged within the applicant’s heritage evidence, views may be valued independently of heritage significance, and harm to such views remains a material planning consideration. The proposal would severely erode the quality of these views by introducing a dominant and visually intrusive built form into what are currently tranquil and largely undeveloped outlooks. Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that the proposal would result in permanent harm to landscape character, visual amenity and the openness of the Green Belt, contrary to NPPF paragraphs 135 (b) and (c) and (d) (high quality design and respect for local character), paragraph 187 (protecting valued landscapes), and paragraphs relating to Green Belt protection in Part 13 NPPF.

At the local level, the proposal conflicts with Hertsmere Local Plan Policy SP1 relating to sustainable development, and Policy CS13 (safeguarding the Green Belt), Policy SADM11 (protecting landscape character), and Policy SADM26 (Green Belt), all of which seek to resist development that undermines openness, character and visual amenity. The fact that the entirety of the compulsory 10% Biodiversity Net Gain can only be achieved off site is demonstrative of the adverse effect of the proposal compounded by the fact that tree removal will result in negative effects significant at up to County level.

The applicant states that “ a degree of landscape and visual change as a result of these factors must therefore be expected and anticipated. Put another way, the site’s status, planning history, and emerging policy position point to a clear direction of travel of this site being developed and there therefore being permanent landscape and visual change.” This is a gross misrepresentation of the position. The landscape and visual changes would be huge; the site has no settled status as such in terms of designation and planning history relates to development only a fraction of this size.

In the absence of clearly demonstrated very special circumstances, and given the applicant’s own acknowledgement of unmitigable significant visual harm, the proposal fails to comply with both national and local policy and should be refused on landscape, visual and Green Belt grounds.

HERITAGE

The submitted Heritage Impact Assessment understates the effect of the proposed 39 m buildings on the setting and significance of nearby listed buildings. Tall, industrial-scale development would dominate the skyline, alter key views, and disrupt the spatial and visual context in which these heritage assets are experienced. Under NPPF paragraph 212, harm to the setting of a heritage asset is recognised as harm to significance, and any such harm must be clearly justified and minimised. The applicant has not demonstrated that such harm would be negligible, nor considered less harmful alternatives. This also conflicts with Hertsmer Local Plan policy SADM29, which requires development affecting heritage assets to conserve and enhance the significance of heritage assets and their settings. The scale and prominence of the proposed building, particularly when viewed from the Jewish Cemetery, public footpaths, and surrounding higher ground, means the setting will be adversely affected in a way that cannot be mitigated, and the application therefore fails to comply with both local and national heritage protection policy.

The applicant’s statement that “change to the wider setting of certain heritage assets, would be distant, peripheral, and largely screened by vegetation and built development” and that “ the proposed landscape planting will further reduce visibility and soften any potential changes to the setting” are incorrect and no landscaping can adequately ameliorate this on a building of this size.

In contravention of paragraph 216 NPPF the applicant states that locally listed buildings are not covered “ in the interest of proportionality.” However their

settings contribute to the character and historic interest of the locality; as a result, the assessment underestimates the harm that the proposed tall data centre would cause to the appreciation of these non-designated heritage assets. This is also contrary to Hertsmere Local Plan Policy SADM29, which require that development affecting heritage assets, including non-designated assets, conserves or enhances their significance.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Paragraph 161 NPPF provides the planning system should support the transition to net zero by 2050 and take full account of all climate impacts including water scarcity. Paragraph 164 provides new development should be planned for in ways that:

- a) avoid increased vulnerability to the range of impacts arising from climate change and
- b) help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The Climate Change department state that "the potential climate change and environmental impact could be very significant, and not of negligible climate change impact as suggested by the applicant." This disproves the applicant's claims which include a statement that there will be a negligible impact as it will be procuring 100% renewable energy. This of course is not possible. Instead it will buy "certified renewable energy" to mitigate the impact of the energy consumption.

The Council's Climate Change Officer notes that the operational emissions of the proposed data centre could equate to approximately 63% of Hertsmere's current annual carbon emissions, yet the applicant downplays this impact and relies on uncommitted efficiency measures, meaning the proposal would fundamentally undermine the borough's climate-emergency and net-zero objectives. This cannot be regarded as environmentally acceptable in planning terms. This approach fails to mitigate real-world carbon impacts and conflicts with Local Plan Policies SP1 x) and CS policies.

The proposal also conflicts with the objectives of the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan 2025 published 1 December 2025 and with Hertsmere Local Plan Policies which require development to minimise resource consumption, protect environmental assets and avoid unacceptable environmental impacts. A large data centre, with inherently high electricity and

water demand and a prolonged construction period of up to ten years, generating sustained dust and emissions, would embed long-term environmental harm and fails to demonstrate compliance with the borough's sustainability and environmental protection objectives.

The proposal would have significant environmental impacts on the neighbouring travellers' site, located only 10 m away with 27 fixed pitches, including dust, noise, visual intrusion, and excessive light spill from a 24/7 facility, with the height and scale of the development likely to disturb residents and sensitive habitats in the surrounding woodland. Despite claims that interior lighting will be switched off outside operational hours being a 24/7 facility the likelihood is that there will always be some illumination. Security lighting on the perimeter fence and within the site will add to this. Insufficient detail has been given with regard to perimeter security lighting and it is not possible to tell how high they will be but as these will operate during hours of darkness their height, lumens and number must be clarified.

Furthermore while the applicant's EIA includes a dust assessment, it is largely qualitative and relies on mitigation measures via a Construction Environmental Management Plan, where not even a draft has been produced, rather than robust, site-specific evidence, meaning the proximity of sensitive receptors, including the adjacent travellers' site and 1-5 Sandy Lane, at the very least, remain at real risk from dust, noise, and particulate disturbance during the prolonged construction period contrary to Policy SADM20 (Environmental Pollution and Development)

Part of the site is clearly within a designated groundwater Source Protection Zone and Environmental Health raise some serious concerns.

ELECTRICITY

Based on the applicant's proposal of PUE of 1.3 the electricity required by the data centre would be 1910 GWh. This is 4.5 times the electricity currently used across the whole of Hertsmere, including homes, industries and businesses. Hertsmere has a population of around 110,200. 4.5 times that would equate to a population of around 500,000 so the electricity to be used is equivalent to that used by a town of that size, for example the City of Liverpool.

A PUE of 1.3 is well above best practice and compares unfavourably to data centres already in operation. Though the EIA states that this is an "energy-efficient design ..with ... procurement of 100% renewable electricity" this

doesn't exist. On 22 January 2026 a judicial review was permitted of the Woodlands Park appeal, a case frequently cited by the applicant in support of this application. In that case the electricity demands of the facility were not properly considered. In a letter, Carolyn Southey-Jenson, for the Treasury Solicitor department, admitted that the data centre had been approved on the basis that "mitigation measures" for electricity could be put in place. This included the "sourcing of low carbon energy", she explained. "[The government] no longer considers these could be secured," the letter continues, which represented a "serious logical error". The government has conceded "that the permission should be quashed".

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WATER

Data centres are extremely water-intensive, requiring millions of litres for cooling and support systems, placing increasing pressure on public water supplies already under strain from drought and rising demand.

The Climate Change Department says that total water needed every year by the development would be 764,000,000 litres, equivalent to the water required for the needs of 15,000 Hertsmere residents.

In the Affinity Water supply area, which includes Hertfordshire, future shortfalls are projected, and here it is clear that Affinity can give no assurance that the network can sustainably meet the proposed data centre's continuous demand. It is essential that Affinity are able to give this assurance and most importantly that supply of water to the data centre will be without detriment to existing households and businesses or the environment. Would it be residents or the data centre that would need to reduce water consumption in the event of shortages?

Climate change is already reducing water availability, and introducing a high-consumption development without firm supply guarantees is contrary to the Environmental Improvement Plan 2025 and the Hertsmere Local Plan.

It is also noted that the Climate Change department view is that too much water is required under the current design and that the applicant investigate lower water use cooling systems to mitigate the impact of water consumption.

NOISE

Data centres operate 24/7 with large cooling systems and backup power generators that produce a continuous low-frequency hum and periodic high-

intensity noise, which has been repeatedly linked to sleep disturbance, chronic stress, and other health impacts for nearby residents. Communities near existing data centres have reported persistent background noise comparable to city traffic or a constant industrial hum—even inside homes—indicating that mitigation measures are often inadequate in practice. The acoustic footprint of a data centre is permanent and can significantly diminish quality of life.

The NPPF requires the delivery of sustainable development which does not prejudice the amenity of existing and future users. UK Power Networks say “It is a recognised fact that transformers emit a low level hum which can cause annoyance to nearby properties”

The applicant’s noise assessment is insufficiently robust, relying on assumptions rather than measured, site-specific data for the actual plant and equipment proposed. It fails to account for the fact that tall buildings, such as the high-rise elements of this data centre, can amplify and carry operational noise over greater distances, exposing sensitive receptors—including, but not limited to, the travellers’ site and nearby residential properties—to higher levels of disturbance than predicted. In view of the massive height of the buildings, additional, more distant, receptors should also have been included. Hertsmere Environmental Health has noted that the assessment does not demonstrate compliance with recommended limits, particularly for tonal or continuous noise, meaning the applicant’s conclusion that noise impacts will be minor or non-significant is unsupported.

At two of the noise sensitive receptors in the limited assessment there will be permanent night time exceedances which will be troublesome on a permanent nightly basis to those affected. There may well be others which would be demonstrated by including more receptors.

We ask that the Council assess the Noise Assessment stringently as it is clearly a problematic aspect of data centres. Construction noise also requires much more scrutiny. The applicant’s statement *that average daytime construction noise levels at noise sensitive receptors are predicted to remain below the relevant noise category thresholds ... accordingly, the resulting residual temporary effects are assessed as Negligible and therefore not significant* is simply not credible

The proposal conflicts with NPPF paragraph 198 and Hertsmere Local Plan requirements to protect amenity and minimise adverse effects from development-related noise.

FIRE

Data centres are a fire risk due to high-density electrical equipment, heat, extensive cabling, and the increasing use of high-energy lithium-ion batteries. While major incidents are infrequent, they can be catastrophic. As Joule Group who produced the Fire Strategy report are not a qualified consultant for specialist regulations and requirements outside of the Building Regulations (fire safety) a further report should be obtained from a suitably qualified consultant for hazardous materials and processes advisory. We also note that the Council has only consulted with the hydrants department of Hert FRS and would ask that a full FRS consultation takes place so that fire risk can be adequately assessed. This is particularly important as a vertical data centre of this height would be challenging to evacuate.

As this is a full application both these steps are necessary, at this stage.

FLOODING

Although barely alluded to by the applicant, part of the site lies within Flood Zones 2 and 3 along Hilfield Brook and is subject to surface water flooding, yet the submitted Flood Risk Assessment and drainage strategy rely heavily on post- decision conditions rather than demonstrating now that flood risk can be safely managed throughout the lifetime of the development. Climate change projections show scattered areas of Flood Zones 2 and 3 will penetrate well into the site.

Hertfordshire's flood risk mapping shows significant surface water ponding and run-off pathways that could affect the site and surrounding areas during medium or high probability rainfall events, yet the application does not adequately explain how runoff will be controlled to greenfield rates, how vulnerable access and egress will be maintained in flood conditions, or how climate change will be factored into long-term flood resilience.

Reliance on post-decision conditions to resolve fundamental flood risk issues is inappropriate for a development of this scale and potential impact, and the lack of robust, site-specific evidence means the application does not satisfy the sequential and exception tests in the NPPF or demonstrate compliance with Herts mere Local Plan Policies SADM13 (Water Environment), SADM14 (Flood Risk) and SADM15 (Sustainable Drainage Systems), which require that flood risk is fully considered and safely mitigated.

CONSTRUCTION

The construction period is lengthy at 10 years which reflects the magnitude of the project which will have a direct and substantial effect on the busy A41, the Sandy Lane HCC Traveller Site and the National Animal Welfare Trust site parallel to the site's boundary and nearby residences. A sizeable proportion of the surrounding settlements use the A41 on a frequent basis as it is the main non- motorway road in the district and so construction impacts will be widespread and severe on the roadwork which is already subject to frequent overload and queuing.

This is a full application and a draft Construction Traffic Management Plan should be provided at this stage. This is necessary to assess not only the effect of construction here but the cumulative effect of it with the impact of construction from the very many nearby developments that have been permitted.

PARKING

The proposal for just 119 parking spaces and 72 cycle parking stands is well below Council requirements which are calculated according to floor space. On B8 use of this size those requirements would be 1,753 car spaces and 260 cycle spaces. The applicant maintains that "HBC's Sustainable Transport & Standards SPD do not include standards directly applicable to the proposed data centre land use and the proposed provision has been based on the applicant's expected operational requirement" but data centre use is B8.

This needs to be assessed particularly as the full build out of the site means that there would be little room for additional parking provision if the site reverted to a non-data centre use in future.

GEOLOGY

It is clear that further geological investigations are needed to determine the suitability of the site for this development. As this is a full application this should be done at this stage so that the Council can properly assess suitability.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

In relation to the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) the Council advised that account be taken of 23/1731/FUL (National Animal Welfare Trust Site) and 24/1283/OUTEL (Land NE of Elton Way - B8 and Ancillary Offices for up to 45,000m2.) However there are other cumulative aspects that must be

considered in terms of construction traffic and noise as well as the impact on resources of having 2 hyper data centres in Hertsmere.

Nothing is known about construction traffic for this application as no CTMP has been supplied despite this being a full application but for a 10 year build significant issues will arise. The developments permitted by 23/1731/FUL and 24/1283/OUTEL will add to the construction traffic but no modelling has been carried out. This will be exacerbated by the developer's S.106 obligations under 24/1283/OUTEL regarding upgrade works to the Toby Carvery roundabout and the M1 Junction 5 interchange. Added to that the recently consented BESS off Hilfield Lane (25/0153) will bring more construction vehicles to this area, as will the very substantial works to upgrade the Elstree substation and build the new Letchmore Heath substation where the construction will take 5 years and where during the peak period of construction there will be one construction vehicle journey every 90 seconds over an 8 hour working day. These last 2 developments, both in Hilfield Lane, are only permitted construction vehicle access via the A41.

Whilst the applicant states the proposed development has limited potential for cumulative noise effects when considered alongside other schemes, this is incorrect. Significant cumulative noise effects will occur where development construction overlaps.

The cumulative impact of the permitted data centre at South Mimms and this proposal will very significantly increase electricity, water usage and emissions across Hertsmere.

ALTERNATIVE SITE ASSESSMENT (ASA)

The applicant's ASA is too narrowly drawn and considers only sites which are within the Hemel Hempstead or Acton availability zone **and** within 10km of the Letchmore Heath National Grid Substation. But the applicant is only taking a small portion of its power from Letchmore Heath substation; it states "the onsite power will be supplied by National Grid Electricity Transmission (NGET) via Uxbridge Moor substation – being built next to Iwer Station and Letchmore Heath substation" Figures supplied by the applicant show this will be in the proportion 72% from Uxbridge Moor and 28% from Letchmore Heath, thus negating the argument for proximity to Letchmore Heath substation.

In fact there are also Availability Zones in Hayes and Slough which are respectively 4 and 5 miles from the Uxbridge Moor substation and which would

be much more appropriate – Uxbridge Moor Substation supplying the vast majority of power to this application is 21 miles away with degradation guaranteed.

Furthermore the Letchmore Heath substation is already earmarked for the total supply of power to the recently consented data centre at South Mimms (this will be a distance of 5 miles) and data centres should be powered by independent utility feeds from separate substations. Substation supply is not recommended for more than one high-availability system because it creates a catastrophic single point of failure so that if the substation fails due to a fire, equipment malfunction, or natural disaster, both data centres will lose utility power simultaneously.

Whilst the applicant has submitted a Socio-Economic Impact Assessment any socio-economic benefits would also accrue to a similar data centre situated elsewhere. In particular the benefits to the UK's digital economy should be considered on a nationwide, not local basis.

For the reasons given above we ask the Council to reject this application.

JANET ENGELS

LETCHMORE HEATH VILLAGE TRUST

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