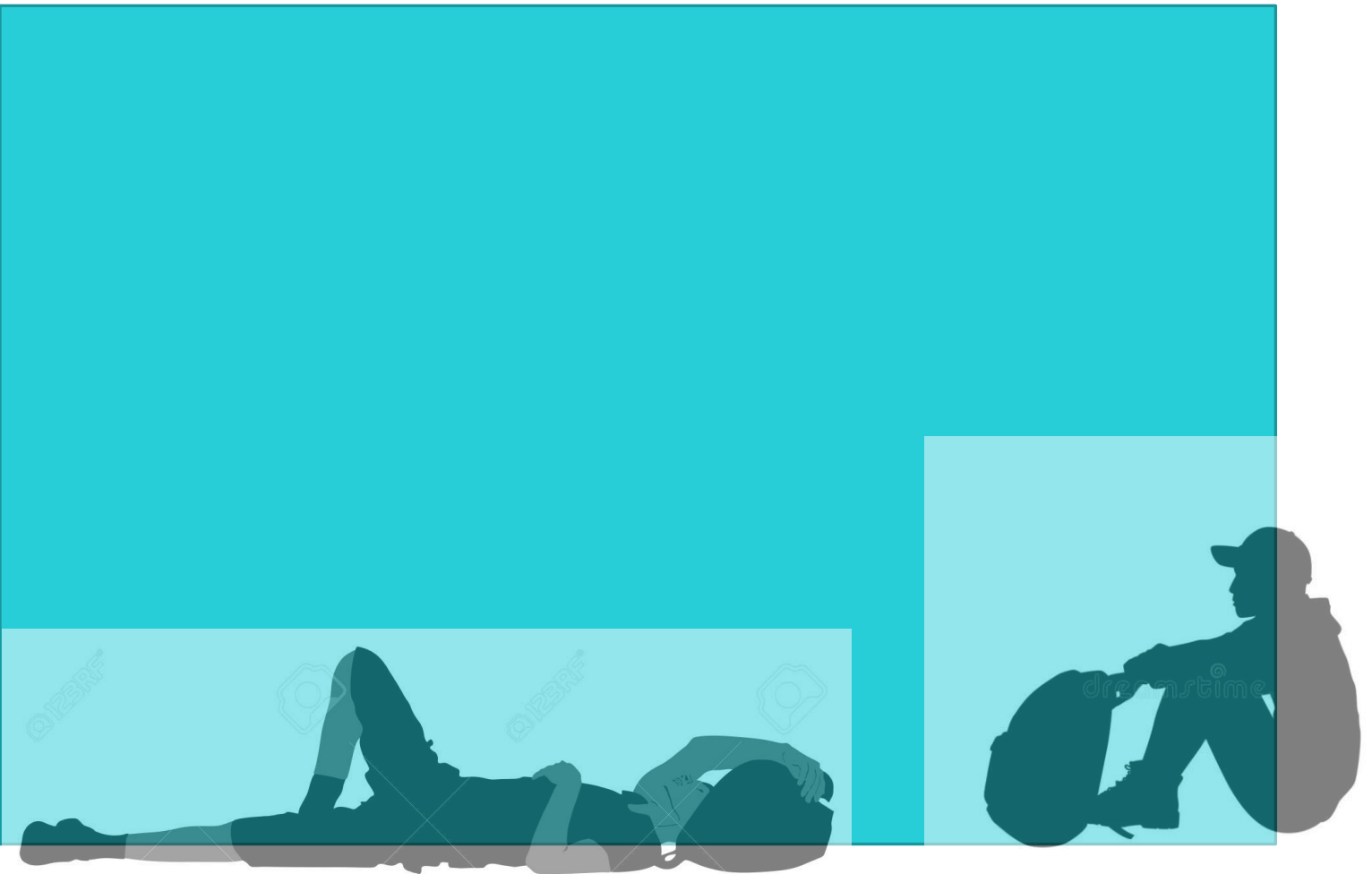


# The Housing Assessment Process as Experienced by People with Multiple and Complex Needs



*How can local authorities effectively support people with multiple and complex needs during the housing assessment process?*

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## Executive Summary

1.

Experiencing multiple and complex needs (MCN) means living with several overlapping issues (McCarthy et al., 2020) and often these needs can exacerbate and reinforce one another (Anderson, S., 2010). These issues include; homelessness, mental ill-health, substance misuse and current/historical offending. It is well-acknowledged that mainstream services often struggle to engage with people living in such complex situations and people with these needs often go without the help they need (McCarthy et al).

2.

Fulfilling Lives South East Partnership provides intensive support for people with multiple and complex needs as well as challenge and change systems that negatively affect people facing multiple and complex needs. The following project is a collaborative effort between Fulfilling Lives and a University of Brighton student researcher. The aims of this project were:

- **Reveal the difficulties** faced by people with multiple and complex needs during the housing assessment process.
- Understand the reason behind these difficulties and **what causes them**.
- **Provide recommendations** that can be used to demonstrate how Local Authorities can effectively assess people with multiple and complex needs.

3.

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with various Fulfilling Lives staff. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and

analysed through Thematic Analysis to identify important themes and patterns. These findings were combined with current findings and understanding in academic literature.

4.

Three themes emerged from the research:

- How the current **Housing Assessment Process** can be altered to support people with MCN.
- How local authorities can support people with MCN to deal with the difficult **nature of the assessments**.
- **Approaches to the Assessments** that have been seen to demonstrate positive outcomes for people with MCN.

5.

Key recommendations for local authorities when providing housing assessments to individuals with MCN:

- Follow a clear, more concise assessment process.
- Ensure that the assessment process follows a trauma informed approach.
- Show compassion and kindness to the applicants.
- Maintain confidentiality throughout the assessment.
- Take an interprofessional approach to the assessments, in which housing officers utilise the applicants existing support network.
- Allow for flexibility in the application process.

## Introduction

### Defining Multiple and Complex Needs

In the past two decades in the United Kingdom there has been a growing awareness of the poor responses from health, welfare and justice services to people with Multiple and Complex Needs (MCN). This growing awareness has led to a great deal of interest in how best to support the needs of people who face multiple and complex needs.

Experiencing multiple and complex needs means living with several overlapping issues (McCarthy et al., 2020) and often these needs can exacerbate and reinforce one another (Anderson, S., 2010). Multiple and complex needs is broadly defined as experiencing at least three of the following; homelessness, current/historical offending, problematic substance misuse and mental ill-health. Other issues experienced by this group of people may include; experience of domestic abuse; experience of childhood abuse and or sexual violence; loss of custody of children and/or physical ill-health (McCarthy et al 2020).

### Context

It is well-acknowledged that mainstream services often struggle to engage with people living in such complex situations and people with these needs often go without the help they need (McCarthy et al, 2020). At the forefront of the disadvantages experienced by people

with multiple and complex needs is the difficulties they experience accessing appropriate housing. There are significantly reduced housing options for people with multiple and complex needs and this is believed to be the result of a crisis in supply and housing services excluding Multiple and Complex Needs (Fulfilling Lives Manifesto for Change).

The crisis in supply refers to the acute housing shortage, especially on the southeast of the United Kingdom, as well as landlords increasingly refusing tenants on Universal Credit. Furthermore, housing services have been subject to criticism as a result of their fragmentation (McCarthy et al, 2020). Most housing services are divided across mental health, substance misuse, homelessness or involvement in offending and have their own systems and provisions. As a result, services often exclude people experiencing overlapping needs, meaning state services often fail to support people with Multiple and Complex Needs (Duffy & Hyde, 2014). Rosengard et al. (2007) suggests that service fragmentation is at the root of the failing response to multiple and complex needs.

Fragmentation and crisis in supply has resulted in an increased amount of pressure on local authorities to source and provide emergency accommodation. A significantly high number of people with Multiple and Complex Needs are being placed in unsupported temporary accommodation. Furthermore, the capacity of temporary accommodation or emergency hostels to support individuals with multiple

and complex need is doubted by many and some suggest that they promote rather than avert patterns of institutional cycling (Homeless Link, 2018a).

### **Housing Options in the UK**

Homeless people with complex support needs have become a policy priority in the last decade in the UK (Johnsen & Teixeira, 2010). Providers thus began looking at different models when developing and adapting their own services to better meet the needs of people with multiple and complex needs. Evidence on what housing models and approaches best work for this group of people is far from definitive, however, there is evidence to suggest some models work better than others.

In the UK the predominant approach to housing homeless people with additional needs is linear (Johnsen & Teixeira, 2010). A treatment first philosophy prevails where individuals are typically only placed in independent tenancies when they are deemed 'house ready', which is often ineffective as it has been identified by stakeholders that the current hostel schemes are not always conducive to the recovery of people with multiple and complex needs. However, in the UK this linear model is implemented more flexibly, whereby in some circumstance homeless people with multiple and complex needs bypass the generic hostels and are

placed into specialist projects after initial assessment (Johnsen & Teixeira, 2010).

The approach which is believed to have the most significant benefits to people with multiple and complex needs is the Housing First Model (Link, 2016). The Housing First Model was developed on a 'housing first' rather than 'treatment first' philosophy. It offers immediate permanent housing to those experiencing homelessness with no treatment prerequisites as well as continued support from a multi-disciplinary team.

To access these housing options an individual would need to make a homeless application where the local authority will assess their needs and draw up a personalised housing plan (The Homelessness Reduction Act, 2017). The assessment will cover certain matters such as: circumstances which led to homelessness or threat of homelessness, the needs of the housing applicant, and what support would be necessary (The Homelessness Reduction Act, 2017). The current Homeless Code of Guidance for Local Authorities is clear on the steps required to complete an assessment to ensure it is thorough; the process can be longwinded and highly personal. There is a significant gap in the research and understanding of how this assessment process can best support people with multiple and complex needs.

## About Fulfilling Lives

Founded in 2014, Fulfilling Lives South East Partnership provides intensive support for people with multiple and complex needs as well as challenging and working to change systems that negatively affect people facing multiple and complex needs. Their work is directed and informed by people with lived experiences of multiple and complex needs at every stage and with their support they evidence more effective and efficient ways for designing commissioning and delivering support for this group.

Fulfilling Lives has been funded until July 2022 by the National Lottery Community Fund. In 2019, they announced a Manifesto for Change that outlines 6 key themes that had emerged from their work so far and set out their commitments going forward. The six themes explored in the Manifesto for Change are; Health Inequalities, Domestic abuse and complex needs, Criminal Justice Systems, Treatment pathways for coexisting conditions, Unsupported Temporary Accommodation and Repeat removals of children into care.

## Research Objectives

Throughout their work and research so far Fulfilling Lives South East had growing concerns about the approaches to the housing assessment process and how it can best support people with multiple and complex needs. Most people with multiple and complex needs will be assessed by a local authority at

some point to see if they are eligible for housing support. This assessment is a crucial step and often happens when a person is most in crisis and in need of shelter. The process can be frustrating, long winded and invasive, therefore Fulfilling Lives South East sought to develop a better understanding of effective approaches to this pivotal process that demonstrates a positive impact on their lives.

This report is the first step towards this goal, to provide a better understanding on how the housing assessment processes can best support people with multiple and complex needs. This study is a collaborative effort between Fulfilling Lives South East and a Masters student from the University of Brighton's, School of Applied Science. The research merges relevant academic literature with the insight of various professionals interviewed for this study, each affiliated with the subject of supporting multiple and complex needs through the housing assessment process. In doing so the researcher sets out to capture experienced understandings of effective approaches to the housing assessment process.



## Methods

### Focus & Aims

By drawing upon current research on multiple and complex needs and engaging with the perspectives and ethos of Fulfilling Lives South East on the issue, the University of Brighton student researcher aimed to

1. **Reveal the knowledge** on the difficulties faced by people with multiple and complex needs through the housing assessment process.
2. **Understand the causes and consequence** of the difficulties faced by people with multiple and complex needs through the housing assessment process.
3. **Develop recommendations** that can be used to demonstrate how local authorities can effectively support people with multiple and complex needs during the housing assessment process.

In achieving these goals, the researcher intended on providing Fulfilling lives with an evidence-based understanding of effective approaches and a collection of recommendations that can be shared with local authorities in the pursuit of meaningful change.

### Approach and Rationale

To bring about lasting change it is important that the research involves lived experiences and understanding of the housing assessment process for people with multiple and complex needs (Frechette et al, 2020). Furthermore, it is established within Fulfilling Lives that “experts offer unique insights, challenge assumptions and help pinpoint areas for change” (CFE Research, 2020). For these reasons, the researcher set out to recruit professionals from across the Fulfilling Lives South East team who have experience and understanding of the housing assessment process for people with multiple and complex needs.

Due to the complexity of the research and the need for rich and informative data the research took a qualitative research approach (Lythcott & Duschl, 1990).

### Participants

Five Fulfilling Lives employees shared their understanding by participating in this research. The researcher invited participants via a message posted on the organisations task management platform. The message included a Participant Information Sheet which provided all the details about the project and each participants rights.

## Data Collection

Interviews with the Fulfilling Lives team took place between April-May 2021 and each lasted between 30 minutes- 1 hour. As a result of COVID-19, all interviews took place on Microsoft Teams and were all audio recorded with a voice recorder.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, guided by a list of 12 questions developed by the researcher and approved by their supervisor. This method permits the researcher flexibility to ask follow-up questions to the participant's responses when appropriate. Questions pertained to multiple and complex needs and approaches to the housing assessment process that are effective in demonstrating positive outcomes to this group of people.



## Data Analysis

Detailed transcripts of each recorded interview were written in order to perform an in depth thematic analysis on the interview data. The analysis consisted of an interpretive process of identifying themes from the participant's responses by taking notes and making codes of recurring ideas, concepts and patterns.





## Findings

When analysing the data in reference to the research question ‘How can local authorities effectively support people with multiple and complex needs through the housing assessment process?’ Three themes began to surface; ‘The Assessment Process’, ‘The Nature of the Assessment’ and ‘Approaches to the Assessment’.

### 1: The Housing Assessment Process

This theme encapsulates participants’ understanding and experience of the housing assessment process and how it can best support people with multiple and complex needs. It appeared to be a common belief that in order to support people with multiple and complex needs the process needs to be more concise and clear.

#### 1.1: A More Concise process

As it stands when a person makes a homeless application they will be assessed on 5 tests; are they homeless? Are they eligible? Are they in priority need? Are they intentionally homeless? Do they have any local connections? The council will then decide if they are eligible for temporary accommodation or emergency accommodation. It was overwhelmingly obvious in the analysis that every respondent felt the process took too long

and needed to be more concise in order to support people with multiple and complex needs.

“We would say “how long do we think we’ll be in [...] council for today?”. Because the classic was that it would often take 7 hours, it would take the whole day to do a housing assessment... you can imagine trying to contain somebody who may be alcohol dependent, substance dependent, have mental health problems and be very triggered being in a formal environment... and its uncomfortable waiting somewhere for 7 hours.”

Having multiple and complex needs means living with several overlapping issues; often one need creates another or makes other needs worse (McCarthy et al., 2020). They often lead ‘chaotic lifestyles’ (Cornes et al, 2011) and need support to gain control over their life and find acceptable solutions to these problems (Scottish Executive, 2006b). Therefore, the findings suggest a more concise process that does not take all day to complete would be beneficial for people with multiple and complex needs.

“Often I expedite part of the process, if I can get around bits of the process to make life easier for people with multiple and complex needs, then I will. I use my connections and knowledge of how systems work to make the process as easy as possible for the service users and the housing officers.”

This subtheme can be seen to relate to “interprofessional working”, a subtheme in ‘Approaches to the application’, this respondent identified how they would make the process easier for the applicants by working with the housing team directly and taking out parts of the assessments that the applicant would not benefit from doing. Many

of the most significant ‘productivity opportunities’ depend on organisations working together in local systems to explore ways of sharing services and reducing duplication (Sir David Nickolson quoted in Ham, [2010](#)).

## 1.2: A Clearer Process

One of the respondents immediately identified that each local authority has their own process and that they could only speak of their experience of the local authorities they have worked with. Another respondent noted their frustration that each local authority has their own ways of carrying out housing assessments and that there should be a national legislation that every council must adhere to. This idea is supported by Cornes et al (2011) who argues for a ‘Common Assessment Framework’ which would help to reduce duplication (in regards to the number of assessments taken) and ensure everyone is treated fairly.

“There should be one set assessment and have national legislation in place that local authorities have to adhere to. So each form is the same, instead of each local authority having different forms, different requirements and wording.”

Furthermore, A need for clarification and transparency between the local authority and the homeless applicant was identified in the analysis in order to avoid distress. Fear of the unknown is commonly identified as a source of anxiety and distress (Carleton, 2016), therefore ensuring the applicant is aware of

what is going on would help make the process easier. Furthermore, clarity would also ensure that applicants’ needs are met effectively and ensure they are aware of the services they are entitled to (The Scottish Government, 2012).

“Quite often people with multiple and complex needs are left and it’s not knowing what is going on behind that screen or on the computer that gives a lot of stress to people... Assessors need to be clear and honest about exactly what is happening. You don’t have to tell them that everything is going to be okay and that you’ll get them somewhere, you just have to be honest about exactly what is happening.”

## 2. The Nature of the Housing Assessment Process

This theme emerged when participants discussed the difficult nature of the assessments and how to avoid distress. The assessments can involve a number of difficult questions that are hard to answer and the applicant will often have to discuss their experiences. To make the process easier for people with multiple and complex needs the participants reported that local authorities should; be trauma informed, provide a safe and private environment and be compassionate towards homeless applicants.

### 2.1: Trauma Informed Approach

A trauma informed approach ensures that the individual or organisation understands the prevalence and impact of trauma (McCarthy et al, 2020). It understands that people’s

journeys are defined by the individual experience and social position, therefore acknowledging the social roots of trauma and the impact of oppressions (CHSC, 2018). Each participant highlighted the importance of housing assessments being trauma informed. There is a burgeoning evidence base for trauma-informed approaches for those with multiple and complex needs (McCarthy et al, 2020).

“[There] should be a lot more emphasis on trauma informed approaches mainly so that there can be some compassion shown to individual experiences.”

## 2.2: A Safe Environment

Trauma informed services should, at a minimum, provide an environment in which trauma is not exacerbated (McCarthy et al 2020). This includes providing a safe environment for an individual to explain their situation. One respondent spoke of a time where poor confidentiality lead a service user to become distressed during the assessment.

“This person was fleeing domestic abuse and an assessment, which was asking them specifics of their abuse, was held in the waiting room of [...] council with other people having their assessment only metres away. I was shocked.”

When confidentiality is breached service users will be reluctant to share information (Medical Protection, 2017) which could impact the outcome of the assessment. The participants believed that the lack of confidentiality during

some assessments is not a safe and trauma informed environment.

“Applicants are asked very personal questions and the interview booths aren’t exactly confidential.”

## 2.3: Showing Compassion

Due to the nature of the housing assessments and the difficult questions asked each participant identified the need for assessors to show compassion during the assessment process. In this context, compassion can be defined as being moved by suffering while understanding it is a part of human life as well as being motivated to reduce or alleviate suffering (Gilbert, 2013). Compassion has been frequently associated with wellbeing and a reduction in anxiety and depression (Neff, Kilpatrick & Rude, 2007).

“When people are presenting themselves to councils or to any housing provider that is the biggest step they have taken recently. People experience Multiple and Complex Needs live in a pure chaos... this the most important day in their life, they really need this.”

“It’s important for assessors to understand that the questions they are asking people can be re-traumatising and triggering, so a bit of compassion can go a long way”

## 3: Approaches to the Assessment Process

The final theme that emerged from participant responses pertained to approaches to the

assessments that lead to positive outcomes for homeless applicants. It was identified that the best outcomes arise when there is a interprofessional approach which allows for flexibility and creativity.

### **3.1: An Interprofessional Approach**

This subtheme highlights the importance of local authorities taking an interprofessional collaborative approach to each housing assessment where possible. Interprofessional collaboration allows those involved to achieve more together than they could individually (Green and Johnson, 2015). This theme is in line with the findings of an analysis by the Scottish Government (Housing support for homeless households, 2012) who identified a need for integrated/coordinated services, with joint working, co-operation and partnership working between a range of organisations. During the interview it was identified by each participant that their experiences of successful housing assessments all involved a level of interprofessional collaboration.

“the most useful experience was one where there was a multi-disciplinary approach. Where everyone was working hand in hand”

This participant spoke of a time where appropriate housing had been found for an individual against all odds because the local authority providing the assessment worked with the individual’s key worker.

“work with any existing support that they have, whether that be a key worker or a service that they attend regularly. They will know that individual very well.”

For assessments to be personalised (HM Government 2007) and not professionally led they should be co-produced, requiring a concerted effort from local authorities to work in partnership with service users and their support network (Corney et al, 2011). Overall current practice is best described as multi-professional rather interprofessional as local authorities and other professionals are seen to be working in parallel (Soubhi et al, 2010). Professionals who have their own expertise working in a non-hierarchical and collegiate way with everyone involved will continually improve the outcomes for and wellbeing of individuals with multiple and complex needs (McGarth,1991 quoted CAIPE 2007).

### **3.2: A Flexible Approach**

This theme conveys the need for housing assessments to be flexible and creative. The participants identified a time when a housing assessment was effective at demonstrating a positive outcome for someone with multiple and complex needs. Each positive situation involved a level of flexibility and creativity to get the desired outcome. People with multiple and complex needs have a range of different needs and require support from a range of different services (Weston, 2000). No one situation is the same and every applicant will

have different compounding needs, hence the need for flexibility.

“So I went to see the manager of housing options and I explained that my client would get really stressed if they have to come in here. It would have been really overwhelming for them. So I was told to get all the information they needed, bring it to them myself and they would get a placement”

This subtheme was seen in research on the topic by the Scottish Government (Housing support for homeless households, 2012) in which a number of their participants also highlighted a perceived need for flexibility and identified variations in individual needs called for creativity.

“I went to the local authority explained the situation and said ‘What do you think I can do?’ and they suggested we write a letter with this client, well get the client to write it and detail the reasons why it (their previous accommodation) went wrong. That for me felt really creative and like hearing the client voice, supported by me and was flexible. And it worked, despite all evidence suggesting it wouldn’t.”



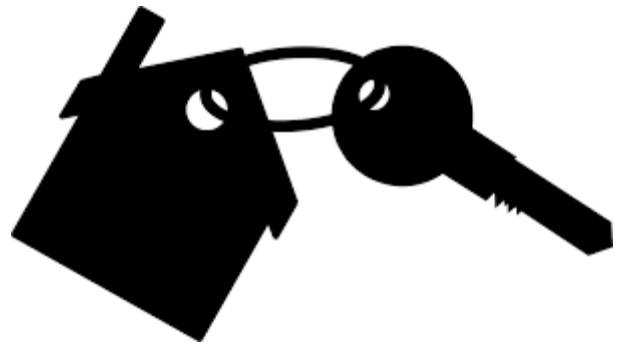
## Recommendations

The findings of this research demonstrate that the housing assessment process has been supportive of people with multiple and complex needs in the past. However, it was clear that adjustments could be made to ensure each assessment is supportive and demonstrates a positive outcome for this group. The following are recommendations for the local authorities who provide housing assessments in how they can best support people with multiple and complex needs through the process:

- Follow a clear, more concise assessment process that does not take too long to complete.
- Ensure that the assessment process follows a trauma informed approach. This means being understanding of the trauma applicants may have experienced and ensuring the process is not re-traumatizing
- Show compassion and kindness to the applicants.
- Maintain confidentiality throughout the assessment. This includes providing a safe and private environment to carry out the assessments in order for applicants to feel more comfortable sharing their situation and experiences.
- Take an interprofessional approach to the assessments, in which housing officers utilise the applicants existing support network. This could include

working alongside the individual's key worker who will know them well.

- Allow for flexibility in the application process, work creatively around the obstacles that may arise when assessing people with multiple and complex needs.



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