

**Supporting the Local Government Association (LGA)  
to consider how effective the Special Educational  
Needs Inclusion Fund (SENIF) and the Disability Access  
Fund (DAF) have been in supporting children with  
SEND to access early years provision**

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**hempsall's**

Celebrating 20 years of supporting equality,  
social mobility and best practice in children's services

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## **1 Introduction and executive summary**

The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned Hempsall's to consider how effective the Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund (SENIF) and the Disability Access Fund (DAF) have been in supporting children with SEND to access early years provision. The research was undertaken in February and March 2020.

The research found varied application and use of the funds at local levels. Such variety did not allow for consistent or centralised messaging of their availability and application, nor did it support Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) organisations and others to fully understand the funds, and support parents understanding and access to them. In some areas, there was an argument for a streamlining of processes so families could more easily access their entitlements. Local authorities (LA) were estimating numbers of eligible children in different ways, therefore a measure of success of take-up was difficult to identify. Targeted work to increase reach, take-up and outcomes would benefit from access to reliable data and estimates of eligible children. There is a tension between the benefits for parents of consistency in how funding is used across the country with local areas having flexibility to target need. Local authorities felt a need for greater flexibility around eligibility criteria so they could better connect all early years settings and schools, and reach children accessing the whole range of early years and childcare entitlements, and paid-for childcare. It was also found providers would benefit from suggested solutions for how such funds could and should be used.

### **1.1 Key aims**

The research project was aimed at answering a small number of research questions:

- How high is take-up from eligible families?
- Are eligibility criteria for the funds an enabler or a barrier to children receiving the support they need?
- Are these the right mechanisms to offer support to this cohort?

## 1.2 Methodology summary

The project was based on a number of related activities:

- An online questionnaire survey of English local authorities.
- Semi-structured telephone interviews with SEND parent representative groups and SEND organisations.
- Desk research to establish funding and take-up.

## 1.3 Background

There are two key early years funding streams aimed at supporting access to the early years entitlements for children with additional needs and disabilities; the Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund (SENIF) and the Disability Access Fund (DAF).

### **Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund (SENIF).**

All local authorities were required to establish a SENIF for three- and four-year-olds from April 2017. Local authorities, in consultation with local early years providers, parents and SEN specialists have specific responsibilities. They decide the children for which the fund could be used (within the Government framework to support children with lower level or emerging Special Educational Needs (SEN)), the amount of money they set aside for the SENIF, and how that fund is allocated to providers. Local authorities are required to publish details of the SENIF. This should include the eligibility criteria, the planned value of the fund at the start of each financial year, and the process for allocating funding to providers as part of their 'Local Offer'.

The fund is pooled from either or both of LA early years and high needs Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funding. The value of the fund must take into account the number of children with SEN in the local area, their level of need, and the overall capacity of the local childcare market to support children with SEND.

## **Disability Access Fund**

The Disability Access Fund (DAF) was introduced in April 2017 to support disabled children's access to early years entitlements for three- and four-year-olds. Three- and four-year-olds are eligible for DAF if they receive the 15 hours a week universal early years entitlement and are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

Providers receive £615 per eligible child per year. They are responsible for identifying eligible children and are encouraged to use the Department for Education (DfE)'s parent declaration template. The template includes a DAF declaration. Local authorities are responsible for checking the DAF eligibility criteria are met<sup>1</sup>. LAs must issue DAF payments to providers as soon as possible when the child takes up their universal 15 hours entitlement.

For each local authority, their total DLA claimant count of three- and four-year-old children from the DWP is adjusted downwards to remove an estimated number of children in Reception classes. This gives an estimate of the number of three- and four-year-olds eligible for DAF in the LA area, this figure is multiplied by £615 per pupil and forms part of the Early Years Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocation.

In April 2017, the Disability Access Fund totalled £12.5m. In 2019-2020 (the latest year for which data is available as at March 2020), the Fund in England was £14.4m.

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<sup>1</sup> Department for education (DfE). Early years entitlements: local authority funding of providers, Operational Guidance 2019-2020 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-national-funding-formula-allocations-and-guidance> accessed 16/04/20

**Disability Access Fund 2019-2020 by region**

<b>Government region</b>	<b>Disability Access Fund 2019-2020 (planned expenditure)</b>	<b>Estimated number of eligible children</b>
North East	£778,790	1,266
North West	£1,853,375	3,014
Yorkshire & the Humber	£1,341,430	2,181
East Midlands	£980,310	1,594
West Midlands	£2,945,400	4,789
East of England	£1,348,535	2,193
London	£2,047,405	3,329
Inner London	£833,585	1,355
Outer London	£1,213,820	1,974
South East	£1,904,525	3,097
South West	£1,196,145	1,945
<b>Total England</b>	<b>£14,395,915</b>	<b>23,408</b>

## 2 Key findings

A total of 86 local authorities completed a questionnaire, representing 57% of all English LAs. A total of five parent representative groups and eight SEND organisations contributed to the research through interviews.

### How high is take-up from eligible families?

2.1 It was possible to identify the numbers of children LA were funding. However, it was not possible to establish the percentage of eligible children accessing SENIF or DAF given a lack of local authority estimates of eligibility.

2.2 Not all local authorities had an estimate of eligibility. 44% of LAs had an estimate for DAF and 33% for SENIF. In the main, these estimates were based on historic patterns of take-up, rather than an assessment based on an analysis of the population cohort.

2.3 In the case of DAF, few LAs reported using the annual DSG funding allocation to estimate eligible numbers and/or to use this in planning and targeting action.

2.4 Without robust estimates (of the number of eligible children) it may not be possible to provide an estimate of the level or measurement of the success of take-up.

2.5 Based upon DfE budget allocations for early years education 2019-2020, there was a total planned spend on DAF of £14,395,915 across England, equating to 23,408 children. For SENIF the DfE budget allocation was £61,894,144, equating to 2.2% of the total EYSFF (Early Years Single Funding Formula) budget.

2.6 The percentage of the total EYSFF budget allocated to the SENIF (where funded out of the early years block) ranged locally from 0% to 3.6%. However, some LAs used High Needs Block to fund or 'top-up' funds drawn from the early years block. Figures are therefore not comparable between LAs.

2.7 LAs reported growing demand for SENIF, and there was a suggestion DAF was underspent in some areas. 73% of LAs reported take-up of SENIF, and 35% of LAs reported take-up of DAF, was increasing.

### Supporting take-up

2.8 The 73% of LAs who reported take-up of SENIF was increasing, related this to increased awareness and skills of practitioners and increased identification. An increase in

demand generally and in emerging and complex needs specifically was also thought to be driving this growth.

2.9 Almost all LAs reported they promoted SENIF (95%). The majority of these promoted it through childcare providers, via the Local Offer and with professional colleagues (e.g. health, social care). There was promotion reported to be directed to parents and through parent support groups albeit this was reported by LAs to be at a lower level.

2.10 Some 35% of LAs reported take-up of DAF was increasing. They reported a number of factors they attributed to this growth including targeted work to raise awareness with providers, parents and professionals.

2.11 There was general consensus amongst SEND organisations that the existing system for supporting children with SEND to access early years entitlements was not working. They considered there to be a need for a cultural shift in thinking and practice. This was reported to include specialist training for providers and resources (including funding), better responses to identification, and greater confidence of early years staff. SEND organisations also reported a need for closer join-up between early years settings (including childminders) and schools.

2.12 SEND organisations included in this research shared low awareness of early years funding in general. As a result, they commonly thought information could be improved to better raise parental awareness, choices and take-up. They suggested LAs should be more incentivised to promote SEND funding to families. They also felt SEND organisations (national and local) needed more information so they could play their part in reaching and supporting families.

2.13 SEND organisations felt a reliance on early years and childcare providers to inform parents about SEN funding meant that information did not reach all parents effectively. An identified gap was parents who decide not to use early years provision through a perceived lack of available support for their child, due to limited information. It is not known how many parents do not present themselves at early years settings either because they are unaware of the funding and/or assume support will not be available.

2.14 SEND organisations believed that information was skewed towards school-based provision and did not include the wider early years market.

2.15 LAs did have concerns regarding the pressure of demand the SENIF was under, and that demands were increasing. LAs suggested support for children with SEND to access

early years entitlements could be improved if allocated funds were managed by the LA rather than via individual settings. This was thought to better support targeting of resource (setting up, e.g. a resource loan system, training etc.).

2.16 LAs reported take-up of DAF could be improved if a list was provided of eligible children (similar to the DfE/DWP lists of children eligible for the two-year-old early years entitlement). Recommendations were made around removing the need for parents to apply and amending eligibility criteria to include younger children and children with identified additional needs but not in receipt of DLA.

2.17 All three- and four-year-olds are eligible for the universal 15 hours early years entitlement. Some children are eligible for an additional 15 hours (30 hours childcare) if their families are working and meet national economic criteria. DAF is a flat payment of £615 per year regardless of the number of hours a child attends. This may disadvantage providers working with children beyond the initial 15 hours.

2.18 Parent organisations believed additional (independent) support and services better reach parents and raise their awareness of entitlements and SEND funding. This was also thought to support families to navigate a complex range of services, promote choices, and improve take-up through application support

2.19 A number of parent groups had little knowledge of the funding streams despite them potentially being a local point of information for families. A number of SEND organisations felt they had little to contribute to the research on the basis of lacking detailed knowledge.

2.20 A common complaint levelled by SEND organisations at both SENIF and DAF is that parents and providers are expected to complete paperwork and often enter into a protracted process, with little reward. One participant commented that form filling sets up an 'assess and support' relationship which goes against childcare settings' aims to empower families and celebrate the positives in children.

### **Are the criteria for the funds an enabler or a barrier to children receiving the support they need?**

2.21 SEND organisations highlighted the pressures families with a child with SEND experience. Any application or eligibility check to access funding puts additional burden(s) upon already challenged parents and can impede their engagement.

2.22 DLA as the eligibility criterion for DAF is considered to be problematic. It was reported it can take “a long time” to assess eligibility and was reported by SEND organisations and a number of LAs as being “too rigid”. The length of time to process a DLA assessment means, in some cases, the child was moving on to school before it was completed.

2.23 LAs identified a reluctance on behalf of parents to share personal DLA information with early years providers, so early in their dealings with the setting. They also identified the timing of parents ‘coming to terms’ with a diagnosis of SEND and/or reluctance to apply for DAF as a personal and practical barrier. The perceived complexities and reported time involved in the DLA process were cited as the most common barriers to take-up of DAF.

### **Are SENIF and DAF the right mechanisms to offer support to this cohort?**

2.24 The majority of LAs responding to the survey reported a positive experience of SENIF (57%) and reported the funding supports and/or promotes inclusion. However, increasing demand, the costs and resources required to process the fund, levels of funding and inconsistency across boundaries were all identified as issues.

2.25 41% of LAs reported a positive experience of DAF either for the LA, providers, or both. Some positive experiences were tempered by other issues. For example, funding only being available for the first 15 hours of early years entitlements, or not being available for younger children. A number of LAs reported low take-up (17, 22% of survey respondents).

2.26 There was a lack of consistency across areas and local authorities, particularly for SENIF. This was in terms of eligibility criteria, access, processes and systems, and how funding was spent. There is possibly an argument for greater consistency. However, the disadvantage being it would reduce local discretionary powers.

2.27 Funding levels were generally regarded as insufficient. However, a relatively high percentage of LAs considered them to be effective mechanisms (for SENIF this was 90% of survey respondents, for DAF it was 64%).

2.28 SEND organisations highlighted a continuing (provider) focus on and preference for spending SENIF on one-to-one or specialist support - which was not considered by them to be an appropriate or efficient model.

2.29 Some SEND organisations reported SENIF was replacing High Needs Block support for more complex needs. There was little evidence of this in LA survey responses. However, it was clear SENIF was under pressure as demand was reportedly rising.

2.30 Parent organisations felt there was insufficient resource in early years provision to be totally inclusive, without additional support. They felt current funding drives a fragmented and administratively heavy approach.

2.31 Discussions with parent organisations identified families tend to find out about SENIF and DAF from childcare settings. This discourse generally occurs when families have already accessed such provision. The onus is on providers to identify emerging or assessed need, to engage parents in applying for additional funding and to put in place appropriate and effective support. The experience of individual families relies upon childcare settings' experience, skills and knowledge as well as local authority support (e.g. via Area SENCOs, inclusion teams, training, information and advice), which vary from area to area. It is possible parents may not be approaching early years settings if they are unaware of such additional support funds.

### **Impact**

2.32 Some LAs reported tracking progress of children accessing SENIF and identified positive impacts. Many LAs required settings to include targeted outcomes in funding applications.

2.33 SEND organisations were unable to identify any evidence of impact of either SENIF or DAF.

## **3 Recommendations**

### **SENIF**

3.1 **Standardising.** Standardising eligibility criteria and funding levels across LA areas would create greater consistency across the England. The main benefit of this would be to support centralised messaging to parents and providers, better empower parents, and support SEND and parent organisations to share information with families across different LA areas.

3.2 **Clear information.** Local authorities should (in accordance with guidance) ensure they clearly outline the sum of money available for SENIF, eligibility criteria and the application process. Information should be readily available in the Local Offer.

3.3 **Streamline processes and customer journeys.** Where possible, local authorities should review eligibility criteria and funding to ensure the process is as timely and efficient, and simple and accessible as possible to providers and parents.

3.4 **Ring-fence SENIF to support a focus on take-up.** Funding SENIF from outside of the Early Years funding block, providing additional Government funding, would be one mechanism to achieve increased funding levels and support a greater understanding of eligibility numbers and to measure take-up success levels.

3.5 **Identifying a gap in use of early years entitlements by families with children with SEND.** Further research could identify the extent to which parents are not approaching early years settings and not using their entitlements because they are unaware of such additional support and funding available.

#### **DAF**

3.6 **DfE could provide local authorities with data.** LAs would be much better able to target efforts to increase DAF take-up if they had access to lists of eligible children – similar to the DfE/Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) information shared with local authorities for two-year-olds eligible for early years funding.

3.7 **Remove the need for application.** Consideration should be given to removing the need for parents (with a child in receipt of DLA) to apply for DAF. The funding could instead be automatically linked to the DLA award.

#### **Both funding streams**

3.8 **A renewed focus.** Funding to support children with additional needs to access their early years entitlements would benefit from a root-and-branch review. It should consider the level of funding available, eligibility criteria for access (simplifying and standardising in the case of SENIF, and expanding in the case of DAF), and accountability for how funds are targeted and deployed. There is an argument that local authorities should be given greater flexibility to use ring-fenced and pooled funds to meet local need, and to be held

accountable for that. This would require additional resource for local authorities to manage effectively.

**3.9 Being able to measure success.** LAs, in general, would benefit from a better understanding of eligible numbers to support the local and national ability to make judgements on the success of take-up. Increased emphasis on measuring take-up and outcomes would better demonstrate the reach and impact of both funds.

**3.10 Connecting early years settings and schools.** Children spend a maximum of nine terms in early years provision, with the majority eligible for a maximum of six terms (from the age of three-years-old). Support for children with additional needs could be better coordinated between early years settings and schools to ensure a continuum of support, as evidence of the impact of such additional support may present itself later. Further research could explore this issue.

**3.11 Offer suggested solutions for providers.** Early years and childcare providers would benefit from examples of a wide range of suggested ways they could use SENIF and DAF. This could encourage a move away from the tendency to organise one-to-one support for children, where this is not necessary for the benefit of the child.

**3.12 Increase information provision.** There is scope for an increase of information provision to grow awareness of SEND funding support for children in early years, directly to parents, to SEND and parent organisations, and other partners, to extend beyond the current reliance upon early years providers.

**3.13 Consider extending the eligibility criteria.** LAs felt extending eligibility criteria to younger children and across the extended entitlement and 'paid for' hours would provide greater flexibility and increase take-up and outcomes.

## **4 Summary reports**

### **4.1 Interviews with parent representative groups**

It was agreed there was insufficient capacity and capability in settings to be totally inclusive without additional resource and that current funding drives a fragmented and administration heavy approach.

Wider systems and support were regarded as useful to inform and raise awareness of parents, supporting take up of SENIF and DAF as a result.

A number of participants had very little knowledge of the funding streams, despite being a local point of information for families. This was attributed to the focus on school support. The SEND reforms and recent local authority Ofsted Inspections are reported to have resulted in a focus on schools rather than early years which participants felt was not seen as a priority at a strategic level. Parent representatives groups reported resource for information and training around inclusion in the early years is not necessarily prioritised at a local level.

#### **4.2 What SEN organisations told us**

According to participants, it can be difficult for parents to find out about SENIF and DAF for a number of reasons. The onus on identifying eligible children rests with childcare settings, whilst confirmation of eligibility and application processes (where required) rest with local authorities. Childcare settings vary in terms of their level of knowledge and the extent to which they engage with eligible or potentially eligible families.

Participants identified a lack of information about SEND support funding streams specifically and early years entitlements more generally. Participants felt more importance was attached to school than early years, and that any additional barrier to a child with SEND accessing an early years place with appropriate support (including eligibility criteria and application processes) acted as a further disincentive to take-up. A strong message around information and communication was there needs to be more, and better, with the onus being placed not just on providers but on health visiting and local authorities so parents are reached with information and supported to take action.

“Plain English descriptions – there must be a better way of offering support without it causing stigma and exclusion, for example “would your child benefit from some extra help[rather ‘what more can we do’].”

A clear theme in all discussions with SEND organisations was a lack of consistency across areas and local authorities. Local authorities set their own SEN Inclusion Fund criteria (and funding pot) and these can differ markedly. Participants identified statutory duties placed upon local authorities that, in their opinion, were not being delivered in all cases. These included information around the Local Offer and more generally, information, advice and guidance for parents and providers, as well as equality duties.

“Information should be available through the Local Offer but this is fragmented and not always up to date due to cuts. Sometimes the gatekeepers and Local Offer make access very complicated and it becomes one more thing to complete for parents.”

Childcare settings are responsible and accountable for how funding is used to support children with additional needs access the early years entitlements, and it was reported this can give rise to an inconsistent and patchy approach.

Levels of funding were called into question with participants suggesting that the level of funding, especially taking account of the processes involved to accessing that funding, was not sufficient and acts as a disincentive for engaging with the funding streams.

SEN organisations were unable to identify any evidence of impact of either DAF or SENIF. Participants called for a cultural shift in thinking and practice. The described funding streams as fragmented and complex. A culture of identifying concerns as needing support from the first diagnosis was thought to be driving an unrealistic and unhelpful demand for services which cannot be resourced. This can result in an assumption that SEND requires extra support at all times, when children may be adequately supported already. This was seen as multi-layered issue which needs be addressed through strategy and practice across a range of services.

### **4.3 Summary of local authority survey findings**

#### **4.3.1 Take-up**

##### **SENIF**

33% of respondents reported having an estimate for the number of children in their local area eligible for SENIF. For the highest proportion of respondents, (48%), estimates were based on historic take-up or census data, with 15% basing estimates on funding applications. The majority of respondents reported take-up of SEN Inclusion Funding was increasing. They believed this was largely attributable to increased awareness and skills of practitioners, and increased identification of emerging need.

“The level of identified need in [ ] is rising. This is likely to be a mixture of providers being adept at identifying need at a younger age and the increasing needs of children. Providers are maximizing their income by applying for all available funding streams when perhaps in past years they may have accommodated a child differently.”

##### **DAF**

44% of survey respondents reported having an estimate for the number of children eligible for DAF in their local area. Just under half (49%) with an estimate of eligible numbers based this on DSG/funding allocations. Some LAs reported using other data to inform estimates including early years headcount/census, historic take-up, asking parents, using local knowledge (e.g. SENCO) and provider returns.

DfE annual funding allocations include funding for DAF. This is based on their total DLA claimant count of three- and four-year-old children from the DWP and is adjusted downwards to remove an estimated number of children in Reception classes. This gives an estimate of the number of three- and four-year-olds taking up DAF in the LA, and this figure is multiplied by £615 per pupil. Around a third (35%) of respondents reported take-up of DAF is increasing attributable to increased awareness.

#### **4.3.2 Barriers to DAF take-up**

37% of survey respondents identified barriers to DAF take-up, most commonly related to reluctance on behalf of parents to share personal DLA information with providers (with whom they are only just establishing a relation) and the complexities and time involved in the DLA assessment process.

#### **4.3.3 The process for administering SENIF and eligibility criteria**

The majority of local authorities had an application process that involved a setting providing information and support plans (often with input from an Early Years Consultant or inclusion/outreach officer).

In some areas, a panel decided whether funding would be granted and the level of funding awarded. The frequency at which panels met varied, with the most common frequency being twice a term (or half termly). A small number of respondents reported using a virtual panel rather than a physical panel. In other areas decisions regarding SENIF were made by SEN inclusion teams/early years advisory teachers, through children's family services or in early years managers meetings.

Eligibility criteria for SENIF varied considerably and overall survey respondents identified a complex landscape where access to SEN Inclusion Funding would be different according to where the child lives. Some areas would fund a child from two years old, for others, children needed to be three (in line with DfE criteria). In some areas, children could access SENIF for 15 hours a week (over 38 weeks); in other areas it may be capped to e.g. 9 hours a week.

“Three bandings dependent on child's individual needs and settings ability to meet needs. Funding is capped at max 103.5 per week (£9/hr for 15 hours.)”

Many local authorities had tiered or graduated criteria that determined whether funding would be granted, and at what level. In other areas there were no set criteria.

In all areas, childcare providers played a pivotal role in identifying emerging need and supporting parents to apply for additional funding.

#### **4.3.4 Opinions regarding SEN Inclusion Funding**

Overall, 90% of survey respondents reported thinking SENIF was an effective funding mechanism. They provided clear examples of where SENIF was making a real difference to children. Responses identified SEN Inclusion Funding being under sustained pressure, either as a result of increasing demand, or expectations regarding what SENIF can support.

“It is good [SEN Inclusion Funding] but very expensive. Providers seem to think that funding should cover all the hours the child attend the nursery and try to exclude for the hours we do not fund 1:1 support. [ ] are reviewing how we deliver this funding as the demand is very high on this funding.”

#### **4.3.5 Opinions regarding DAF**

Overall, 64% of survey respondents reported thinking DAF was an effective funding mechanism. 41% of respondents described their experience, or providers’ experiences, of DAF as positive. However, a number of challenges were identified, including funding allocated at a flat rate regardless of early years hours taken up or not being available for younger children. For some local authorities take-up has been low, resulting in an underspend against funding allocations.

“We have had some issues with Early Years providers who are offering the extended part of the 30 hour offer understanding why they are unable to access the DAF i.e. universal 15 hours only. Also, some issues with parents wanting the funds to be used to pay for more hours of childcare rather than it being used to support inclusion. We have produced a resource bank giving Early Years providers ideas for purchase of resources based on type of need/disability.”

#### **4.3.6 Recommendations about how SENIF take-up could be improved or alternative approaches.**

A number of suggestions were made to improve take-up:

- Review funding – either in terms of the amount of funding available, or in terms of how it could be used.
- Ring-fence SENIF so it is exclusively for its stated purpose – have a designated (separate) fund outside of the early years block or high needs block. Local authorities establish an inclusion fund from their early years DSG and if that is under pressure it may result in a smaller allocation to support children with SEND to access their entitlement.
- Extend the eligibility criteria to younger children and paid for hours.
- Have a greater level of standardisation across local authority areas in terms of eligibility criteria, estimates, and processes.
- Provide clarity around definitions, e.g. ‘lower level of emerging need’ – is interpreted differently.

#### **4.3.7 Recommendations about how DAF take-up could be improved or alternative approaches.**

- A centralised system for identifying eligible children similar to how two-year-olds eligible for the two-year-old early learning entitlement are identified via lists shared by DWP.
- Introduce easier application processes or remove the need for parents to apply.
- Promote awareness of DAF through a centralised promotional campaign to parents and childcare providers.
- Increase funding (£615 per year) and improve monitoring of spend to ensure it is being used as designated by increasing local authority powers and resources to audit and advise on how funding is used.
- Extend eligibility criteria to include younger children and children that have identified additional needs but not in receipt of DLA.
- Change the way funding is distributed by allocating funds to local authorities to deploy in a targeted way to meet identified local needs and priorities.

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