



# Filling the talent gap

A new approach to councillor recruitment

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# Contents

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|                                                                                       |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Introduction: the challenges facing local democracy.....</b>                       | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>The headhunting project.....</b>                                                   | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Sourcing diversity: the recruiter’s perspective .....</b>                          | <b>10</b> |
| <b>A successful experiment: the Local Government<br/>Leadership perspective .....</b> | <b>13</b> |
| <b>An empowering approach: the new<br/>candidate’s perspective .....</b>              | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Recruiting new talent: the council<br/>leader’s perspective .....</b>              | <b>20</b> |
| <b>Succession planning: the cabinet<br/>member’s perspective.....</b>                 | <b>24</b> |
| <b>Conclusion .....</b>                                                               | <b>26</b> |
| <b>Be a Councillor – Appendix 1 .....</b>                                             | <b>28</b> |
| <b>About Tribal – Appendix 2 .....</b>                                                | <b>29</b> |
| <b>Contacts and resources.....</b>                                                    | <b>30</b> |

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# Introduction: the challenges facing local democracy

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Local government has been facing a recruitment challenge for a number of years: not enough people are interested in standing for elected office. This shortage has several obvious implications, both for councils and for the strength and vibrancy of local democracy – not least that they are missing out on the skills of many talented potential councillors. It can also lessen civic engagement, particularly if councils are seen as the preserve of a particular group – traditionally, older white men – and thus irrelevant to people who do not fit that model.

Another pressing issue is the question of demographics. In 2008 the average councillor was aged 59 – and this average is rising across the country. This means that there is a lack of new talent coming through the ranks, making succession planning difficult.

In 2007, Local Government Leadership (then Leadership Centre for Local Government) started examining ways to respond to these challenges and to increase the number and diversity of people standing in the 2010 elections in London. In collaboration with London Councils, which represents all 32 boroughs in the capital, and Capital Ambition, the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership for London, the successful Be a Councillor campaign was launched.

Be a Councillor, aimed at potential candidates, set about finding people who would not otherwise have come forward. Open meetings were held, there were advertisements, a website and

a number of publications sharing the stories of councillors from a broad range of backgrounds demonstrating that becoming an elected councillor lets you make a difference in your community. In addition to searching for, and encouraging potential candidates, Be a Councillor worked with the main political parties, all of which recognise the need for renewal and that drawing candidates only from a small pool of activists will seriously limit the options available to the electorate – and, in turn, to councils. For example, the publication *Finding the X factor* explains just how important it is for party groups to identify candidates who can help them to build and maintain a connection with the aspirations and needs of local citizens.



## Identifying talent gaps

One particular issue that came up through Be a Councillor is that councils and political parties need to do more to ensure that councillors, as a group, have all of the specific skills and experiences needed for effective community leadership. In other words, they need to make sure that they have elected members with the experience and talents needed to deliver every cabinet portfolio, as well as to work as frontline councillors.

In a business, managing this would be straightforward: senior executives would analyse the talents of their existing employees, compare them with the skills needed for the organisation now and in the future, and then recruit people to fill the gaps that they identify. Very often, organisations will call upon the expertise of recruitment consultants to help them do this as effectively as possible.

Recruitment consultancies have been helping businesses find the right employees for years; a good headhunter can identify exactly the right person with exactly the right skills, then persuade him or her to consider the new opportunity – even if they weren't looking to change jobs.



However, while this approach is well-established when it comes to employers deciding who they need to hire and where to find them, it has not been used to identify potential councillors – until now. In 2009, as part of the Be a Councillor project, London Councils offered the mainstream political parties the opportunity to work with an executive recruitment company to headhunt new potential councillors.

Four London councils asked executive search firms, working on a pro bono basis, to turn their talents to finding people with the experience, ability and commitment needed to stand for election. The result was an incredible learning experience for all concerned and, in at least one case, led to the identification of a candidate who went on to be elected to a council.

In this document we outline the headhunting project as a whole and explain how Tribal, one of the consultancies involved, worked with Kensington and Chelsea's Conservative Group to invite high-flyers to stand for election. And, in perhaps the best possible example of the scheme's success, we hear the story of Emma Will, who was one of those identified through Tribal's work, and who was subsequently elected to the council on May 6 2010.

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# The headhunting project

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In 2009 leading executive search firms worked with the mainstream political parties in councils to help them identify areas where they needed to strengthen their talent base. They then used headhunting techniques to identify party members and community activists who had the skills needed and who might be interested in coming on board as a candidate. For example, they approached people who were registered as members of the party but who were not actually active within it.

The consultants also organised weekend information sessions so that people could find out more without affecting their work commitments, and emphasised the transferable skills that being an elected member offers individuals. They also highlighted that anyone who was successfully headhunted stood an excellent chance of being put forward for a winnable seat.

However, there were several major challenges facing the consultancies, all of which agreed to take on the task as a pro bono assignment. The first was always going to be finding candidates who met the legal requirement of living or working in the borough in question. Then there was the political dimension: the recruiters were not simply asking people to consider putting themselves forward for office – they also had to make sure that they were prepared to join a political party.

On top of this, each search firm was partnered with a different borough, each of which had different traditions of political control and different candidate selection processes. For these reasons, the expectation for the number of candidates coming forward through this route was always modest.

One of the other big factors is that search candidates are inherently different from those who put themselves forward for consideration. They are not on the lookout for the opportunity, so it is up to the recruiter to sell it to the candidate; without getting this part right and then continuing to engage them, potential candidates soon lose interest. Equally, if you don't stay in touch with them throughout the application process, they will quickly conclude that you are not really interested in them.



## Recruitment tips

- Define what you are trying to achieve; consider any particular skills gaps in the organisation that you will need to fill now or in the future.
- Use a broad range of contacts and sources – including local businesses and personal, professional and activist networks – to identify potential targets with the necessary skills. Support this with advertising and use of social media. Be aware that some sources, for example charities, may feel that the political aspect prevents them from assisting.
- Consider potential difficulties for target candidates, including geographic constraints, political affiliation and time capacity.
- Sell the opportunity to potential candidates – it is up to you to win them over to the idea. Be clear about what the opportunity offers to them as individuals, for example supporting the local community while developing valuable leadership skills. Once they are engaged, remain in close touch throughout the application process.

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# Sourcing diversity: the recruiter's perspective

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Tribal is one of the UK's leading public sector recruiters. Last year it completed more than 160 assignments, 60 per cent of which were in local government. For this project, they were partnered with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea's Conservative Group, which retained control at the election on May 6. The Chief Executive of Tribal's Resourcing business, Julie Towers, describes the consultancy's work:

Issues such as diversity affect the political side of councils just as much as the corporate management team. As we have an extensive track record in finding high quality, diverse candidates for executive positions, we can bring our knowledge and expertise in attraction, search and selection to help find potential candidates in the political arena as well.

Our specific brief at Kensington and Chelsea was to find people with backgrounds in IT, financial services or property development, as these were the main skills that the incumbent administration expected to need to renew in the coming years.

David Welsh, the Director for Research and Knowledge Management at Tribal, and Heidi Nicholson, our Chief Analyst, worked together on the project. They both found it challenging and rewarding. “Each of our searches is bespoke to the client,” says Welsh. “We pride ourselves on finding exceptional people to run public services, and we always design searches which are as open as possible, to encourage diversity without tokenism.

“When it came to the search, we cast our net widely: we spoke to 225 people working at 167 organisations in or near Kensington and Chelsea. The objective was twofold: we needed to reach people who met the criteria of living or working in the borough, and to contact those working outside the borough but who could potentially refer us to people in the borough. This approach also helped to raise the profile of the campaign, as our sources and contacts included peers and others from within the local Conservative Association.”

During the search, more than 20 people expressed a serious interest in becoming a prospective council candidate, but 11 subsequently changed their minds. “They withdrew their interest following further consideration of the time commitment and what taking the role on might mean for them” Welsh says. “Of the remaining potential candidates, one who qualified because she worked in the borough asked to be considered for her home borough. Another was found to live just beyond the borough’s boundaries and therefore sadly did not qualify. These candidates were referred to their appropriate local associations.

We interviewed around half a dozen people, and forwarded the details of two of them to the Kensington and Chelsea Conservative Association. The Association then invited these potential candidates to join the normal selection process, attend further meetings and take part in canvassing sessions. One of the candidates, who has a background in banking, was selected to stand.”



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# A successful experiment: the Local Government Leadership perspective

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The Be a Councillor campaign is already proving incredibly successful. Joe Simpson, Director of Politics and Partnerships at Local Government Leadership (formerly Leadership Centre for Local Government), explains:

We know that significant numbers of potential candidates have attended meetings and visited the website to find out more about becoming a councillor. We have also had very positive feedback from the political parties, which have told us that a clearly different spread of new candidates has emerged.

The headhunting project has added an important additional capability. Executive recruitment firms already play a critical role in the recruitment and selection of senior officers in local government, which means that they have a very good understanding of senior councillors, who are the clients for managerial appointments. We were confident that this would also mean that they would be well placed to identify other people who would be effective within such an environment – but as councillors rather than officers.

As we have seen through this project, there is considerable overlap in the skills needed to search for both senior officers and potential cabinet members. Obviously there are also some differences, most notably that political allegiances and beliefs are not usually relevant when recruiting for management positions but are absolutely central when filling the role of potential candidate. The headhunters looked for people whose skill sets contained not just technical abilities in accounting or IT, but political savvy as well.

The experiment paid off for political groups in the mainstream parties, who witnessed how some of the techniques used by recruitment firms could be applied to their own selection procedures. However, one stumbling block that the headhunters could not overcome was the time commitment required of councillors. We have not been able to cap the time commitment so the cabinet role could genuinely be compared to that of a non-executive director.

If local government is going to recruit more people with busy working lives, then we have to be able to make this change. That is not to say that only, or principally, senior business executives should be councillors. But if we want to draw people from a wider mix of backgrounds and ages to become senior councillors, we must adapt.

While the headhunters involved in this project worked on a pro bono basis, what they have learnt from the experience will no doubt stand them in good stead in the future. It will be particularly valuable as public sector efficiency savings and hiring restraint – or even job cuts – begin to bite. We have probably reached the maximum point in terms of senior recruitment in local government; the next decade will require a significant reduction in the total number of senior public sector managers. For recruiters, the way to continued success is not growth in market size but expansion through innovation.

One of the most interesting findings for us is that all mainstream parties are having the same problem in recruitment. Before we started, each party locally was nervous about admitting this.

However, the Be a Councillor programme allowed everyone to own up to the challenges they face. As a result, we are now in a much better position to help prospective candidates through the selection process and to show people how rewarding it can be to become an active councillor.



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# An empowering approach: the new candidate's perspective

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Emma Will is the first London councillor to have been attracted to her new job by a call from a leading executive recruitment agency. When headhunters contact the former banker they're usually trying to tempt her back into another high-flying City role, but the call from Tribal offered a different challenge: stand for election and represent your community. She says:

The recruiter's call came at a good moment for me both personally and professionally, as my son was due to start school and I'd been thinking about going back to work. However, I wanted to do something different from my previous career in the City; I wanted more flexible hours and the ability to contribute to the community.

I really appreciated the Conservative Group's upfront approach and I was encouraged by the fact that the council was prepared to look outside the box to find new talent, as I wanted to join a team with a progressive attitude. I was excited by the possibility of making a difference and doing something useful to support my community, especially at such a pivotal point politically. My father once stood for election, but I had simply never considered becoming a councillor until the headhunter suggested it.

That said, my introduction to local government wasn't easy. Once I decided to find out more, I had three very tough interview rounds, including one in which I had to face 15 councillors from the local party. The final round involved members of the party ward committee.

On top of this, I was wrestling with my own uncertainty about whether I was right for the job, and thinking through the time commitment involved to make sure I could balance being a councillor with meeting my family's needs. The committee told me very clearly that the time commitment was a serious matter – after all, the borough is a £500 million a year business. However, a heavy workload isn't necessarily a deal breaker in an age when people can work flexibly, for example by working from home for some of the week.

The selection process itself was as tough as climbing the corporate ladder. Despite being invited to apply through this headhunting project, I knew that there would be a lot of competition; the other candidates were all of a very high calibre. I was absolutely thrilled to win and, in all honesty, really surprised. On reflection, I'd guess it was my professional background coupled with being articulate and enthusiastic that won the day.

The biggest challenge that I am facing now that I am a councillor – and, I hope, a potential cabinet member one day in the future – will come from the almost inevitable budget cuts ahead. Maintaining high-quality services with less money is going to be a big challenge for us all, but if we haven't got the money, we have to think more creatively.

The headhunting was definitely worth doing. My advice to anyone thinking of getting involved is this to think carefully about your strengths and weaknesses and whether you have the time to commit fully to the role.

### **Emma Will**

Emma is married with a young son and has lived in the Royal Borough for 17 years and in Royal Hospital Ward since 1995. She graduated from Manchester University with a degree in History and Italian and worked in the City before leaving to focus on family life and pursue her interest in horticulture. She went on to study at the English Gardening School and then became a volunteer at the Chelsea Physic Garden.

Since becoming a mother her interest in politics has been focused on the issues that concern everyone – healthcare, education and the environment. As an elected member she is committed to being an active, enthusiastic and approachable councillor, committed to delivering the services that matter to local residents and to protect and enhance Royal Hospital Ward.

# Profile of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

- **Densely populated**

The borough's 180,300 residents live in just five square miles of inner London, making it the most densely populated area in the country.

- **Diverse**

More than 20 per cent of the population is from an ethnic minority and more than 40 per cent of residents were born outside the United Kingdom.

- **Growing but ageing population**

The borough's population is expected to expand by more than 200,000 over the next 20 years, and to get older.

- **Extremes of rich and poor**

Some parts of the borough are among the 10 per cent most deprived in the country but others are in the 20 per cent least deprived.

- **Tourism and retail**

The visitor economy is significant and generates £3.1 billion for the council each year through the services economy. The retail sector accounts for nearly half of this.

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# Recruiting new talent: the council leader's perspective

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Local government needs councillors who represent the community but who also have the skills required to take on strategic roles and to govern multi-million pound businesses. Councillor Sir Merrick Cockell, Leader of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and former Chairman of London Councils, discusses how collaborating with recruiters helped his council:



Even in London it is incredibly difficult to find high-quality candidates who reflect the changing profiles of their local communities. We decided that our borough needed to become more proactive and to work harder to interest ‘normal’ people – rather than just political activists – in becoming councillors. In 2009, with elections pending, we saw the potential for a joint initiative with a City-based recruitment agency to source new talent and hard-to-find skills.

As a local authority leader, I am used to working with recruitment consultancies when hiring new executive directors, but we recognised that finding new councillors was a radically different mandate. Even once the firm had identified a shortlist of new talent, any successful candidate would have to become a member of a political party and adhere to the whip system. When we invite interest we can’t even guarantee they will be accepted as candidates, let alone be elected by the voters or be given a key role in the team.

As it turned out, one of the most challenging aspects of the brief that we in the Conservative Group gave Tribal was to find people with specialised skills who actually lived or worked in the borough.

Of those identified, about half withdrew when they realised the time commitment involved. Sadly, few people have any real understanding of what elected councillors actually do and the time required to serve the community and do the business of the council.

The prospective candidates identified by headhunters were not given any special privileges – they went through the same political candidate selection process as everyone else. Ward committees were not told who had come through this process, or in fact if any of the candidates they assessed had.

In the end, only one headhunted candidate, who fitted in very well in all respects, went all the way through. She was clearly highly competent and beat others that came through the more conventional route. It's a truism, but talent always wins through.

I now hope that the success of this pilot project will open the way for recruitment support to become available for more local authorities. One area where there may be a real role for recruitment experts is in identifying a wider range of potential candidates for directly elected mayors of major cities.

I am also convinced that local political associations should learn from this process. They must become more proactive in approaching new people, including friends and colleagues. Many of the personal contacts we have as politicians may not be politically active at present, or may feel out of the loop, but they are a rich source of potential candidates. Equally, our constituency party organisations should be much more willing to market the concept of democratic accountability and serving the community.

The Conservative Party recently invited anyone interested in becoming a Parliamentary candidate to come forward. Through the Be a Councillor initiative local government was ahead of the game and has demonstrated that this approach can work for local government too.



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# Succession planning: the cabinet member's perspective

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Councillor Nicholas Paget-Brown, the Cabinet Member for Environment, Transport and Leisure at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, sees the need for continuity as well as change in the search to unearth new talent. He says:

In local government recruitment, the aim is to find both people who will be good representatives of residents and potential cabinet decision-makers for the authority as a whole. The latter will be required to take political responsibility for sensitive and controversial decisions and to oversee large revenue and capital budgets.

In a stable council, members can afford to do plenty of forward planning. In our case, we recognised that experience in specialist areas would help ensure that potential cabinet members would be able to brief their peers; it would also offer the cabinet access to an expert perspective independent of advice from officers and paid consultants.

As a current cabinet member, I was particularly interested in strategies that would support the next administration. Councils face an onslaught of directives and regulations from central government and need to retain their own sense of priorities and place. All effective councillors need time.

Cabinet members need to analyse large amounts of information, to handle the media, lobby, chair meetings, motivate officers and act as cheerleaders for their directorate so that they can negotiate for and represent residents effectively. They are not officers of the council and must not do the job of officers.

We learnt a number of lessons from the recent recruitment pilot, not least that it was very resource-intensive for the headhunters involved. It confirmed that business and recruitment have different means of advancing careers. It was also interesting that they identified some good people who, for work-related reasons, were unable to get involved right now; I think we should make an effort to stay in contact with them as they may well be in a better position to get involved in the future.

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# Conclusion

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Despite the success of this initiative, headhunting for prospective councillors is far from straightforward. There are several obstacles that create barriers to people coming forward, most notably geographic constraints, political affiliation and the time commitment required.

Councillors must live or work in the borough they represent. In London, where people do not necessarily live and work in the same council area, this can make it difficult to spot potential candidates for a given authority. Practically speaking, this can also mean that headhunters working for one council identify potential candidates who then decide to stand in another area.

The problem of political affiliation may prove more intractable. A party-led search may well find people who have the potential to be good councillors, but who refuse to join a political party. If someone is set against this, then it will be hard to change his or her opinion, although they may, of course, decide to stand as an independent.

Concern about the time required to do the job properly is one of the biggest hurdles for councils to overcome, particularly when approaching people who work. People have a perception that being a councillor takes up a lot of time. While it is important to be realistic about the time involved, people need to be reassured that it is likely to be less than they think. Ensure that this comes over in any messages you put to potential candidates.

Perhaps the most important lesson from all of this is that searching for would-be councillors is a lot of work and will be time-consuming. The recruitment consultants approached more than twice the number of people they would contact during the course of other searches. Councillors and political groups can help this process in several ways, for example by networking their activists, advertising, using the Internet and social networking channels, and making direct personal approaches.



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# Be a Councillor

## Appendix 1



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Be a Councillor kicked off in 2008 when London Councils launched a programme designed to encourage more Londoners to stand in the 2010 elections. A year later – and with the support of Local Government Leadership (then Leadership Centre for Local Government) – it was rolled out nationally.

The campaign, which promotes a greater representation of women, ethnic minorities and young people, uses a variety of methods to gain people’s attention and achieve its goals. These include marketing, advertising and public relations campaigns, alongside a dedicated website – [www.beacouncillor.org.uk](http://www.beacouncillor.org.uk) – and a telephone helpline that received more than 150 enquiries within the first seven days. It even played a part in *EastEnders*, which included a storyline about Peggy Mitchell standing for councillor.

The Be a Councillor brochure called *People like you are councillors* shares the stories of people from all sorts of backgrounds and there are more examples at [www.beacouncillor.org.uk](http://www.beacouncillor.org.uk).

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# About Tribal

## Appendix 2

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Tribal is a leading provider of public sector services in the UK and more than 40 other countries.

Our resourcing business makes about 200 executive appointments every year in the UK, primarily within the public sector. Our executive resourcing team includes specialist recruiters in finance, law, IT, regeneration, the built environment, communications, HR and the third sector.

We understand the complex challenges faced by the public sector because we work in partnership with a range of organisations, including schools, colleges, universities and the NHS. We also have one of the largest teams of specialist local government consultants in the UK.

Our expertise and innovative approaches help improve the quality and value for money of public services. We have a unique range of world-class products and services. Our Measuring Improvement and Efficiency Tool (Mietool) is the standard business-case tool for local government. Our Total Place work is leading the drive to produce a better and more efficient citizen-focused model for local government. And our groundbreaking work with the Department of Communities and Local Government on shared services has provided a pragmatic and innovative view of the future.

We have worked with more than half the local authorities in England; our track record for filling local government positions first time is 98 per cent.

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# Contacts and resources

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The Be a Councillor website offers a wide range of resources including information on what councillors do, and how to go about becoming one, as well as several publications available to download.

[www.beacouncillor.org.uk](http://www.beacouncillor.org.uk)

- If you would like to find out more about representing the Conservative Party:  
[www.conservatives.com/Get\\_involved/Become\\_a\\_Councillor.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/Get_involved/Become_a_Councillor.aspx)
- If you would like to find out more about representing the Liberal Democrat Party:  
[www.BeALibDemCouncillor.org.uk](http://www.BeALibDemCouncillor.org.uk)
- If you would like to find out more about representing the Labour Party:  
[www.labourcouncillor.org.uk](http://www.labourcouncillor.org.uk)
- If you think you would want to stand as a politically independent councillor or represent the Green Party contact the Local Government Association's group for politically independent councillors:  
[independent.group@lga.gov.uk](mailto:independent.group@lga.gov.uk)
- For any queries about Local Government Leadership or the Be a Councillor campaign please contact: Joe Simpson, Director of Politics and Partnerships  
[joe.simpson@local.gov.uk](mailto:joe.simpson@local.gov.uk)



## **Is your politics fit for the 21st Century?**

Local Government Leadership's manifesto for a modern local politics is aiming to raise the game of politics locally through focusing on the 10 key challenges that define the new direction of local government, including revitalising recruitment. For more information visit:

[www.21stcenturycouncillor.com](http://www.21stcenturycouncillor.com).

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Group

The Local Government Group is made up of six organisations which support, promote and improve local government.

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