

Next Steps for Women in Farming Diversification in Wales

Policy Brief

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SUMMARY

Farming diversification is recognised as an economic necessity for farms. In Wales, diversification has received some much-needed cross-party attention, with recommendations focused on policy adjustments to encourage rural economic growth (Cross-Party Group for Rural Growth 2024). Yet women's contribution to farming and farm diversification is not fully valued and documented. The aim of this policy brief is to provide research evidence that can show women's contribution to farm diversification in Wales.

Based on literature reviews and interviews (30), it establishes 4 recommendations to improve the outcomes for women, through economic, environmental, social and cultural and personal pathways. These are: Policy and resource that can provide business advice tailored to women and farming; rural development policy that supports future opportunities for women; diversification policy that addresses the challenges for women and recognises women's contributions; and diversification support that can build on and learn from what already works. These co-created recommendations have been confirmed with women in farming diversification so that the findings can be confidently applied in policy.

BACKGROUND

Study Objectives

The aim of this Welsh rural economies project, is **to understand the activities, roles knowledge and resources** that make up **women's contribution to farm diversification**. If women's involvement in farm diversification - including sustainable forms of farming - can be evidenced, this can be used to improve pathways, support, and policy outcomes.

Policy Context

Farming diversification is recognised as an economic necessity for farms, often in response to economic shocks and profit margins. Diversification is led by innovation, but there are also questions about how farming communities can be sustained in this (Farrell et al. 2025). Farm diversification in Wales is an area of growth, increasing from below 10% in 2017 (Henly and Morris 2019) to 41% in 2021 (Cutress 2021). With many promising actions and activities supporting the recent growth in farm diversification and upward interest in it (Cutress 2021), little is known about its social and environmental aims and its potential for gender equity.

Diversification has long been undertaken by women, often following traditional roles of hospitality and tourism (Kempster et al 2023). Women are likely to complement agricultural labour with skills learnt from consumption (Gray 2003), and employment in creative economies like marketing, design, PR and events (Ahl et al. 2024). While less likely to be trained in agricultural colleges, women involved in farm diversification are more likely to have university qualifications (Sivini et al 2024).

It should be obvious that women are boosting economic outputs in rural communities but in policy **the picture of women in farming diversification is not encouraging** (Farrell et al 2024). Women's role in farming entrepreneurial activity has been reported to the UK government as **low value, low opportunity** with those involved in diversification as **not connected** to funding, networking, experts, or digital and business skills (Rose 2019).

The recent Senedd Cross Party Group for Rural Growth (2024) talks about the **need for adjustments** to planning and business rates and exemptions for tourism lets, **but there is no**

acknowledgement that it is women who are likely to be creating and running these businesses, or most importantly, a gender perspective to policy. The Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) (Welsh Government 2025) has been adopted in Wales and has a clear steer, only funding agricultural diversification activities that are novel, income generating, create new markets or reduce the reliance on traditional agricultural enterprises e.g beef, horticulture. It also announces that the SFS is going to create a basic payment for social value (public value of a farm's activities) which is of interest given that women are more highly associated with diversification linked to public value of traditional agriculture i.e. farm stays or meat boxes (Sivini et al 2024).

The Evidence Base

This policy brief is informed by 30 in-depth qualitative interviews with women involved in farm diversification in Wales (26) and stakeholders (4). Note that some are also farmers and spoke from a farming background. Bilingual invitations to participate were sent to different types of farming networks, to accommodate different kinds of farming interests, regions and ages. Diversification can be very broad, so we identified diverse farming careers for women, including ownership and tenancy (Sutherland et al. 2023) and diversification types (Horlings and Marsden 2019) to ensure that our invitations captured the broad contributions of women.

Interviews in English or Welsh were conducted in-person (e.g on-farm) or online (Microsoft Teams) during December 2024 to May 2025. Each interview generated a narrative about diversification experiences, challenges and opportunities, leadership and development resulting in in-depth personal accounts about practices and projects. A short survey was asked at the end of each interview focusing on careers, ownership types, and responsibilities.

The final group of interviewees included primary or joint farmers or growers, farm workers, stakeholders and those retired from farming. Most of the farmers worked in mixed farms with a range of livestock or horticulture diversification, although some were largely sheep or poultry. The size of the farms ranged from 8.75 to 850 acres and were spread over Wales, with the majority located in North and then Mid Wales. The women themselves were aged from their 20s to over 65, with over 10 having farmed for more than 10 years. Most had been raised on a farm, and owned land as a successor or are joint-farming, but many were new entrants, with a smaller number married into a farm.

Once thematic and critical discursive analysis was conducted by the researchers it was possible to generate a set of policy recommendations and assess them. This took place at a workshop hosted in the Aberystwyth Pavilion at the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show (23 July 2025) attended by 29 relevant stakeholders and contributors. The objective of the workshop was to check the relevancy and sense of the recommendations. With the most important ones identified and clarified, it is possible to present the final set of agreed recommendations here.

KEY FINDINGS

Beyond household skills: diversifying activities and motivations

It is commonly suggested that diversification by women is low value because it is seen as an extension of household work. Yet what women say about their activities, challenges this narrow definition and view of diversification.

The diversification undertaken by the women farmers who were interviewed, is varied and dynamic. Women talked about diversification that is happening at different stages and scale. Many have built on existing farm assets and resources or farming-related ideas and practices. Some diversification is **on-farm**, bringing people to the farm or sending items or skills off-farm, while others are **off-farm**, as paid jobs within the rural sector. Many women also do both, working on- and off-farm, particularly during significant periods of their life when there were other household members to support, or when the farm finances require an additional source of income.

- On farm diversification mainly features **tourism** (holiday lets), **food-related** (new production or products or food retail, including poultry, bread, bees and meat boxes) and **recreational** (equestrian, events) and **ecological** activities (horticulture, education).
- Off farm diversification mainly features the many skilled roles that women hold in the rural community, as project managers, industry leaders, professionals in finance, law and animal health

These areas of on-farm and off-farm diversification provide income and autonomy in different ways. **Tourism**, especially accommodation, is a popular on-farm diversification activity. The expansion of, or innovations in, accommodation for tourists was emphasised on traditional farms, especially where the business (i.e.B&B) has been ‘inherited’ from a previous generation, and in response to consumer demands. Some women talked about gaining more independence from ‘guests’, who can be housed away from the farmhouse or nearby e.g. in shepherds huts.

Food production provides opportunities to build on the farm’s resources, while supporting new roles and different ways to interact with the public. Examples include a food cookery school where guest bookings can be arranged around other activities, or a meat business taken to local markets. **Recreational** initiatives align with public interest in farms as desirable locations e.g. for wedding events in renovated barns, or through shared interests e.g. equestrian. As women gain autonomy and add to the farm’s income, regulatory requirements and consumer expectations, mean that women are continually **expanding their skills, roles and responsibilities**.

Women also talked about aspirations for on-farm diversification that contribute to **environmental sustainability**. Newer forms of this are: providing outdoor ecology, training and workshops to farmers and growers, education for corporates and schools, and conservation activities such agroforestry, and care farm type activities. Horticultural activities like tree nurseries, flowers and floristry are represented here. There is also an alignment of long-standing practices like specialist breeding of sheep or livestock, to sustainability. The women shared new networks and partnerships that contribute to their success.

Off-farm diversification, whether through professional jobs in health, education, project management and leadership, brings in regular income and offers opportunities for skills development and knowledge transfer, as well as access to broader networks. Most of the women have worked off-farm, both in full and part time roles. In the context of diversification, they question whether off-farm work is legitimate, thus reinforcing the view that the value of off-farm work may be underestimated, particularly when it is routinely carried out by women.

Table One: Women’s diversification efforts can be categorised into several overlapping pathways

Pathway Type	Examples	Primary Drivers
Economic	On-farm – tourism, food, recreation Off-farm – rural skilled or professional work	Income generation, financial independence, use of competencies/skills
Ecological	On-farm – agroforestry, horticulture, ecological training and skills provision, public education Off-farm – rural advisory, industry leadership	Provide food security, supply local, mentorship, innovation,
Social and Cultural	On-farm – local food markets, honey goods, Welsh-bred meat, therapeutic/care farm Off-farm – communication teaching, and leadership work	Offer labour and job diversity, protect farming heritage, support local community
Personal	On-farm – tourism usually holiday lets Off-farm – rural skilled usually teaching or management	Care provision, self-care, autonomy

Women have a range of diversification activities that can be described across overlapping pathways and motivations.

The motivations for diversification are varied. Interviewees generally agree on the importance of **economics**, with the diversification being economically viable and not using income from the farm. They also mention that diversification should not distract from the farm achieving its twin goals of food production and land management. In other words, the women say that diversification should be ‘separate from the farm’, and ‘self-sustaining’.

Economic reasons are not the only motivation for women to diversify. The women cite **social and cultural** reasons like wanting to protect farming heritage and support the local community, by extending business opportunities to other local suppliers. Widening the roles, jobs, and skills needed on-farm, offers the potential for a wider range of work, encouraging opportunity and interest in farming careers. There is an overlap with **environmental** reasons to provide food security and care for livestock, while managing the land and providing both mentorship and ecological innovation.

On a **personal** level, women’s motivations such as providing support for a family, ‘caring for’ family wellbeing, and a gendered division of care labour on the farm, play a critical role in the decision to diversify. In many cases, these act as practical forces that shape not only how women engage with diversification but why they argue that diversification provides flexibility, to care for children or older adults along with availability to help in farm tasks, while providing an income.

By anchoring diversification in personal meaning, these motivations reinforce the autonomy, control and independence that women talk about and highly value. At the same time balancing care and work, limits time and capacity to more fully contribute to farm income. Having the reduced expectation to be involved in the farm as a woman, is simultaneously viewed as a loss and an opportunity to create one’s ‘own place’ through diversification, especially within multigenerational farms.

Summary: Women’s social, environmental and personal motivations to diversify may not align with government policies that support growth values and economics. Conversely, when policies support diverse activities and motivations, women’s contribution may be overshadowed by their household involvement.

Unpaid farm labour and rural development

Farming diversification is recognised as a vital strategy for farm resilience and rural economies. However, the experiences of women are uniquely shaped by a range of i) available opportunities and capacities, ii) experiences of succession and ownership, iii) impact of rural development policies and resources and iv) challenges of farming life. The experience of women is often overlooked in top-down policy frameworks, partly because diversification is treated as a component of a whole-farm approach, despite evidence that different types of farm work are valued unequally.

Table Two: Forces shaping women’s success overlap with diversification pathways

Shaping Forces	Pathway Type	Primary Drivers
Experiences of ownership and succession	Economic	Income generation, financial independence , use of competencies
Impact of rural development policies and resources	Ecological	Provide food security, supply local, mentorship, innovation, rural networks
Challenges of farming life	Social and Cultural	Offer labour and job diversity, protect farming heritage, support local community, resilience
Available opportunities, capacities and skills	Personal	Care provision, self-care, autonomy, skill development

1. Opportunities, capacities, and skills. Women are given different opportunities to develop skills, as they are less likely to receive direct agricultural training and experiences than men. Starting from school age their route to farm diversification is indirect and often includes other off-farm careers.

Some of the women went to university, which for farming families usually means moving away from home. Women talked about careers in the arts, media, business as well as marriage leading to informal care roles as parents. For others, diversification was not a straightforward route, interrupted by events like noninheritance of a farm, lost tenancy, or a parent’s death. Similarly, marriage created partnerships and new financial or land agreements that could build opportunities or require a restart. New entrants are building farms and diversification from scratch but may lack older farming networks that may offer privileged access and support.

Women said they often had to prove their experiences and skills which - when questioned by parents or others - sometimes leads to the decision to remain small scale, or not to diversify.

In these cases, innovation can still occur but in these cases what is emphasised is the need for independent resources, money and support that can help reduce the sense of risk.

Summary: Women agree that diversification is an opportunity to build skills, knowledge and income. At the same time, women bring considerable income, knowledge and high-level skills to diversification.

2. Experiences of succession and multigenerational farms. Women speak about diversification as means of income and autonomy. This autonomy is especially valued in multigenerational farms, and where there is the uncertainty of succession. That is, if the distribution of assets is unclear, diversification is a means to align to but remain financially independent from the farm.

The need to seek finance for diversification can lead to business-related discussions with banks, solicitors and business groups. These discussions, which often prompt legal arrangements that clarify succession and inheritance for individual, are considered productive. This contrasts with publicly recorded frustrations of the wider farming community over proposed legislative changes to taxation, and its consequences for inherited land and assets of the whole farm. As such, legal joint partnerships can be costly and off-putting but can secure futures for women who have effective support, autonomy and finance.

Newcomers can be distinguished because they talked about land unaffordability, and tenancy uncertainty. They contribute to the discussion by reflecting on the inability to start diversification in the absence of land or other assets. Small holdings and microbusinesses that reduce the sense of risk are a route to diversification for this group. At the same time, being 'small' increased the likelihood of being regarded as serious by the wider farming community i.e. hobby/non-commercial farmer.

Summary: The economics of farm diversification – finance, assets, risk - which is linked to succession and multigenerational farming, may have different effects and outcomes for women.

3. Regional policies and funding. Women advance their diversification through regional development schemes that provide support (grants, advice) to activities like holiday lets or catering businesses. Women highlight the lived realities of legislation and regulation in Wales and in particular, the effects of newer policies that seem to contradict the support their farms have previously received.

One example given is the taxation rule for holiday lets in Wales. Since 2023, regulations have stipulated the minimum let days (MLD) – or the minimum days a property must be occupied and available for let - so that it can properly pay business rates and contribute to the local tourism economy. Otherwise, councils can charge the landowner a higher rate of council tax (up to 4x).

The MLD has been widely debated. Supporters say it has been introduced to ensure that second homeowners contribute economically to communities, and to help address a lack of affordable homes for locals. On the other hand, the women with farms in isolated rural areas say that they would be unlikely to meet MLD and feel especially penalised by a lack of rural differentiation. This is especially relevant in areas that experience seasonal contrasts in tourism. For example, the mountain regions of Eryri-North Wales are popular in summer but have longer and harsher winters than other tourist areas. They advocate for policies that reflect their lived experiences and that more obviously support initiatives that drive rural tourism and land management of farms - including tourism tax, inheritance tax, fair wage and environmental regulations.

In contrast, women who had diversification businesses in any of Wales' three national parks, gave examples where the rural development plans are very regionally specific. Women often identify lengthy planning processes – sometimes ending in refusal for development – and strict environmental regulations. While regulations in these areas are assessed as regionally specific, diversification is shaped also by the benefits that the area provides, like a coherent tourism plan (National Park Plan) and access rights to common land that come with many farms in these protected places.

Farming networks were notable in the discussions about rural development policies and uncertainty. Through support from local organisations and resources, women are able to

understand and meet consumer or tourist expectations, comply with agricultural and environmental policies, and access resources that addresses gaps diversification.

Summary: Types of diversification undertaken by women are still underrepresented in rural development policies, which limits the ability of these policies to respond to the specific needs of this group. This is despite women being responsive to rural development that improves local communities.

4. The challenging context of farming life and livelihoods. Women's experience of unpaid labour, challenge, and discrimination is central to their experience of diversification. Women talk about the difficulties of farming, the unrecognised value, negative politics, seasonal staffing and climate challenges They often take on roles that are demanding on their time, and that put them in the position of supporting others emotionally and undertake jobs that are unpaid and unrecognised as work. Much of the farms' administrative work, form filling, skills training, mental health care, and management of staff and the public, falls to women.

A major challenge is the discrimination and assumption about lack of skill that some women face from family members, other farmers, farming businesses as well as contractors, and planners. Deep-rooted assumptions about women farmers can mean that women risk being seen as 'not up to the job' if they complain or ask for advice or support. Women who report discrimination often lead calls for women to diversify in their own way, not only boosting encouragement of others, but also bringing a gender-sensitivity to the challenges that women in farming face.

Women in farming are still over-represented in the unpaid work that women routinely do. Most of the women are not paid a wage, are under-represented in off-farm professional development, are providing care to children and adult family, which limits their ability to participate and be recognised as contributors to a rural economy.

Summary: The challenge of rural farming life is not just about establishing inclusive spaces where women can participate, it is about creating opportunities to value and recognise women's contribution so that the diversity of the rural economy is acknowledged.

Networks matter

The support provided by networks is important to women involved in farming diversification. They serve as sources of knowledge and advice, can be tailored to women, and the type of diversification activities that they are most likely to be engaged in.

Table Three: Integrating the dimensions of farming diversification for women

Shaping Forces	Pathway Type	Primary Drivers		Networks
Experiences of ownership and succession	Economic	Income generation, financial independence, use of competencies	↔	Access to support and advice
Impact of rural development policies and resources	Ecological	Provide food security, supply local, mentorship, innovation, rural networks		Amplify women's perspectives
Challenges of farming life	Social and Cultural	Offer labour and job diversity, protect farming heritage, support local community, resilience		Value the small scale
Available opportunities, capacities and skills	Personal	Care provision, self-care, autonomy, skill development		

1. Access to support and advice

Many women from farming backgrounds say their business ideas developed while being involved in national farming organisations and farming support schemes like Farming Connect, Mentera, Nature Friendly Farming, CLA, NFU Cymru. The Welsh Government's role in the organisation of farming networks is specifically mentioned as positive and unique amongst the devolved nations. These networks give women opportunity to share experiences of Welsh farming culture (through Cymraeg/Welsh language) and receive knowledge about grants and regulations specific to Wales. Women benefit particularly when the support and

advice is practical, tailored and lasts beyond individual meetings. Women say they experience friendship and community through sharing trusted advice, and emotional and social support.

Women add that more business tailored farming support would be helpful. While benefitting from leadership and innovation skills, the farming networks may lack thorough business development training. In contrast, new entrants were more likely to enter diversification through organisations like Business Wales, despite established farmers feeling it is not well-tailored to farming, and that support can be better designed to meet farming needs.

Summary: With existing support and advice available, there is scope to build on and integrate farming and business advice and support, for new entrants and established farmers.

2. Amplify the perspective of women's farming diversification

Women's positive experience of networks depends on how their experience as women is recognised and responded to, and the ways in which their perspective is represented to others.

For some women, isolation and time demands mean they value opportunities to share their experiences with other women and identify appropriate solutions. They say that the ability to connect with other women 'off-farm' helps in the day-to-day management of diversification, from dealing with customers to sharing business ideas, and collaborating to create new business opportunities/events. Furthermore, they are willing to say how their unique experiences as women, impact their ability to fully participate or contribute to diversification policy and support.

For others, farm partnerships and changing gender roles are the norm, and there is an expectation that women are included in more equal ways in diversification networks. Younger women are more likely to call for inclusive diversification events, promoted to both women and men, to address challenges in farming and not just for women.

Women consistently talk about the multiple pressures on their time. Their time contribution to the running of a farm and to the community, is often invisible in farming diversification advice and support. In particular, many of the women do not expect to be paid a wage, even in the context of a sector that is familiar with payment for contractors and a range of farm services, from advisors to land managers.

Summary: Amplifying women's perspective is not just fairer, it properly accounts for the contributions of farming diversification to rural economies, especially in terms of time, skills, values and activity.

3. Value small-scale and ecological initiatives. Women are highly involved in ecological initiatives and plans. This is the case for both new entrants and established farmers. New entrants are more explicit about their ecological goals. However, established farmers have experience of land management over generations and of dealing with regulations, grants and paperwork.

Women often lead diversification activities that operate at a smaller scale, reflecting their reduced access to land, resources and time. While these aspects can be a major challenge, women are advocates for holding back on efforts to scale up and focusing on local diversification – like supplying organic traceable meat, free range eggs, teaching cooking and responding to local food and recreational needs. Women are curious about horizontal collaborations between horticulture and agriculture for example. They have used networks to support new entrants and horticultural diversification, as well as bringing leadership into mainstream agricultural networks. For new entrants especially, the preference for small-scale activity means addressing the challenges of anonymity and privacy of business ideas and life.

Summary: Recognising the value of women's contribution to farming diversification does more than support individual efforts and local communities. It needs to acknowledge and support small-scale efforts and local ecological initiatives so that the can thrive, and contribute to rural growth across small and local places in Wales.


RECOMMENDATIONS

From our findings summarised above and additional comments made in the workshop to review the research findings, we propose a number of recommendations for the Welsh Government, Farming and Business networks.

Our recommendations comprise four immediate practical initiatives to recognise the contribution of women in farming diversification to the rural economy of Wales. Each recommendation is mapped to the analysis of findings and represents the experience and knowledge of women across four overlapping diversification pathways identified by our research.

These four recommendations are summarised in the table below. They are expanded on in the previous pages. Our engagement activities showed that these recommendations were well supported and should provide a helpful vehicle for centrally coordinated action to support the growth of women and farming diversification businesses in Wales.

Table Four: Recommendations for policy – success and improvements in farming diversification for women in Wales

Current state for women in farming diversification, Wales			Success and Improvements	
Shaping Forces	Pathway Type	Primary Drivers	Networks	Recommendations
Experiences of ownership and succession	Economic	Income generation, financial independence , use of competencies	 Access to support and advice Amplify women's perspectives Value the small scale	1. Provide business advice tailored to women and farming
Impact of rural development policies and resources	Ecological	Provide food security, supply local, mentorship, innovation, rural networks		2. Ensure rural development policy supports future opportunities for women
Challenges of farming life	Social and Cultural	Offer labour and job diversity, protect farming heritage, support local community, resilience		3. Ensure inclusive diversification policy - recognises women's contributions and addresses challenges
Available opportunities, capacities and skills	Personal	Care provision, self-care, autonomy, skill development		4. Ensure diversification support builds on and learns from what works

Recommendation 1:

Provide business advice tailored to the needs of women and farming

in business types, 'growth plans', financing, law, employment, and ecological land management

Improving business advice does not necessarily require initiatives to be solely aimed at women, but a gender gap in accessing support and training has been identified. As our work has shown, business advice may not be focused enough on rural areas or farming, or farming advice does not address the specific needs of women as new entrants or established farmers. This recommendation supports integration of existing strategies employed by bodies like Business Wales and Farming Connect, to benefit a greater number of farming diversification activities. It focuses on tailoring business advice to link women *and* farming *and* diversification.

Recommendation 2:

Rural development policies need to support future opportunities for women in farming diversification

across rural, food, biodiversity, tourism, education and training, sustainable farming strategies

Numerous initiatives have been rolled out to support rural economic development in Wales, that support women to start, assist and build their activities. There is a significant amount of policy and regulation that farms manage as small businesses, and possible oversaturation of tourism businesses. Unfortunately, as new policies develop, they can have unintended consequences. While rural development is welcomed, our research shows cross-cutting initiatives can have a

greater impact on women, often because their contributions have not been recognised, and the responsibilities they carry to support communities and families. This recommendation supports rural-proofing that seeks to include women when pursuing wider development and ecological aims.

Recommendation 3:

Ensure inclusive farming diversification policy that recognises women's contributions and addresses challenges

supporting the valuing of women's skills, activities and roles, and tackles isolation and reduces administrative burden

This recommendation has been confirmed in our workshop as the most important for women – but also the most challenging – for policymakers to address. The difficulty that women involved in farming diversification face is that the time and resource they provide is invisible and undervalued, making it difficult to understand how to address this. Women also have burdens of isolation, ownership, lack of opportunity and experiences of discrimination.

Inclusive policy-making involves recognising the significance of women's contribution. They bring skills, knowledge and experience associated with smaller-scale but horizontal growth through local collaborations. Valuing women in terms of pay and resource is advocated. Examples were shared about other initiatives public bodies have made remunerating underpaid workers and carers for their contribution, and recognition of the overall value of farming to the rural economy.

This recommendation suggests that business and government should recognise that women have always been involved in farming diversification, holding small rural businesses and local communities together, but to build this sector, policy needs to respond to the question of 'who is holding women'

Recommendation 4:

Build on and learn from what works

programmes and practical support e.g Mentera, Farming Connect

Building on the previous experience of the Welsh Government in its delivery of support for women in farming diversification is recommended. The importance of having a central organising body that has the resources to support and build successful farming networks is underlined. Some gaps for women in farming diversification were identified, such as horticulture, alongside a call to deliver programmes that recognise that the modern economics of farming require women to work both on- and off-farm, meaning attendance at courses during the day or in person is not always possible. This recommendation recognises that networks have been central to the success of farming diversification for women, and that there is support from women who have benefitted from these networks for policymakers to draw upon to maximise the impact of these local initiatives.

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Welsh Government 2025 [Agriculture Diversification Scheme \(Window 2\): rules booklet | GOV.WALES](#)

PROJECT INFORMATION	
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