

Building an In-House Trainee Programme

A practical guide to the SQE route, QWE and building a sustainable talent pipeline.

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Introduction

The Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) changes what is possible for in-house teams.

The SQE was introduced to create a single assessment standard and widen access to qualification. But its practical impact for employers is more strategic, it removes the historic dependency on a traditional training contract model and gives teams flexibility in how qualifying work experience is gained.

For in-house legal leaders, that flexibility creates an opportunity to shift from competing for talent to cultivating it.

Instead of losing high-performing paralegals or contract managers to private practice simply because qualification pathways felt out of reach, in-house teams can now support a structured route that enables people to qualify where they are, while contributing to the business.

That opportunity matters for three reasons:

- 1 **Capability** - you can shape commercially fluent lawyers, trained in the realities of your sector and stakeholders.
- 2 **Continuity** - you retain institutional knowledge rather than continually rebuilding it.
- 3 **Succession** - you build a pipeline for future legal leadership, not just operational support.

This toolkit is designed to demystify the SQE route for in-house teams and provide an adaptable framework for creating a meaningful, well-supported qualification pathway-without needing a law-firm-style seat rotation model.

How to Qualify as a Solicitor in England & Wales (SQE Route)

Under the SQE route, a candidate must:

- + Hold a degree - or equivalent qualification or experience
- + Pass SQE1 - Functioning Legal Knowledge
- + Pass SQE2 - Practical Legal Skills
- + Complete two years' Qualifying Work Experience (QWE)
- + Meet the SRA's character and suitability requirements
- + Complete all SQE assessments within the required timeframe (candidates have six years from their first SQE assessment to pass both SQE1 and SQE2)

QWE can be completed before, during or after the assessments and can be gained across up to four organisations.

The in-house reality: work and study happen together

In law firms, qualification has historically followed a familiar pattern: complete academic study, then join as a trainee for a structured two-year training contract.

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In-house is different. In most cases, the people looking to qualify are already part of the team. That means the SQE pathway is often experienced as a two-year 'double track' - working in-role while studying and logging QWE simultaneously.

A typical in-house pattern looks like:

- + Year 1: QWE & SQE1 preparation and sitting
- + Year 2: QWE & SQE2 preparation and sitting
- + End: QWE confirmation and admission steps

This is why QWE can feel a little opaque to in-house teams - there is no inherited infrastructure, and the 'seat model' doesn't naturally apply. This toolkit's purpose is to make this feel clear, doable, and ethically comfortable.

Adapting the SQE route to financial years

Because the SQE is modular, employers can plan costs and workload accommodations across financial years rather than absorbing them in a single training contract cycle.

Solicitor Regulation Authority (SRA) exam fees, from Sep 2026:

- + **SQE1: £2,006** + **SQE2: £3,086**
£1,003 each for FLK1 and FLK2

BARBRI training fees:

- + **SQE1: from £2,999** + **SQE2: £3,499**

Partnership agreements offer competitive pricing for cohort-based training.

SQE vs LPC / Training Contract: What is the difference?

Many employers instinctively try to map the SQE route onto the old qualification model - assuming the SQE replaces the LPC and QWE replaces the training contract.

The LPC was largely a bridge into a training contract but the SQE is designed to assess knowledge and skills at the level expected of a newly qualified solicitor. Law firms may continue to frontload academics before trainees join, but it's worth being aware that the assessment intention is different.

The key shift is this:

- + The previous route was **contract-led** (training contract as the gatekeeper).
- + The current route is **assessment-led** (SQE as the gatekeeper), with QWE as evidence of real-world exposure.



Stage / Feature	LPC + Training Contract Route	SQE Route
Regulatory Framework	The route was governed by the Solicitors Regulation Authority under the previous framework and has now been phased out for new entrants.	The route is governed by the Solicitors Regulation Authority and is now the standard pathway to qualification.
Entry Requirements	Candidates typically needed a law degree (LLB) or a non-law degree followed by a conversion course (GDL).	Candidates need a degree (any subject) or equivalent experience. A law conversion course is not mandatory, but a bridging course can be helpful.
Legal Education Model	Candidates completed the Legal Practice Course (LPC), a prescribed vocational programme delivered by universities/providers.	There is no prescribed course . Candidates prepare for two centralised exams (SQE1 and SQE2), often via optional training programmes.
Assessment Approach	Assessment was set and marked by providers , meaning standards could vary across institutions.	Assessment is centralised and standardised nationally , ensuring all candidates meet the same benchmark.
Work Experience Requirement	Candidates were required, after completing the LPC, to undertake a 2-year Training Contract with a single employer. This was a structured programme, typically involving rotations ("seats") across different practice areas.	Candidates must complete 2 years of Qualifying Work Experience (QWE) , which can be gained across up to four organisations and in a wider range of legal roles. There are no longer mandatory "seats".
Timing of Experience	The training contract was usually secured in advance (often before starting the LPC), but commenced only after the LPC had been completed, creating a fixed and linear pathway.	QWE can be completed before, during, or after the exams, allowing for a more flexible and individualised pathway.
Access to Qualification	The route was constrained by the availability of training contracts , creating a well-recognised bottleneck to qualification.	The SQE removes the single bottleneck of a training contract, although competition for roles remains. QWE broadens the range of qualifying opportunities.
Cost Structure	The LPC typically cost £12k–£17k , often funded by law firms for future trainees. Self-funding carried significant risk without guaranteed progression.	SQE exams cost ~£5k in total. While preparation courses add to this, costs are more modular and can be spread over time.
Role of Employers	Employers formally "signed off" the Training Contract , certifying that the candidate had completed a prescribed, regulated training programme in full. This placed responsibility on a single employer to oversee and validate the entire period of training.	Employers (or supervising solicitors) "confirm" QWE, meaning they verify that the candidate has gained relevant legal experience and developed some or all required competences. They are not responsible for assessing overall competence or awarding qualification, and multiple employers can contribute to the total QWE. There is no longer a 'training principal' role and any associated obligations.
Flexibility	The route was linear and inflexible , with limited ability to change employer.	The route is flexible , enabling candidates to combine work and study and build experience in different environments.
Consistency of Standards	Outcomes could vary depending on the LPC provider and training experience.	Outcomes are standardised at the point of assessment , creating greater consistency across the profession.

LPC + Training Contract - previous route

- + Academics (LPC) - entry ticket to trainee stage
- + Two-year training contract with seats
- + Firm-led structure with supervision baked in

SQE + QWE - current route

- + SQE1 & SQE2 are assessments of day-one solicitor competence
- + Two years QWE can be flexible, skills-based
- + Structure must be intentionally designed (especially in-house)

What this means for in-house teams

The SQE route is robust, but in a different way:
It is robust because:

- + The exam tests competence centrally, and
- + QWE simply demonstrates the opportunity to develop skills in practice.



In-house teams often want to go beyond the minimum. If your organisation's name is attached to where someone qualified, you'll want their experience to be meaningful, not just compliant. It becomes a reflection of your legal function's standards, credibility and reputation - both within the organisation and in the wider market.

That's why programme design matters.

SQE Assessments Overview

SQE1 – Functioning Legal Knowledge

SQE1 is designed to test whether candidates can apply core legal knowledge in the way a day-one solicitor must. It is computer-based and uses single best answer questions at scale.

Implications for in-house candidates: candidates need dedicated, ring-fenced time for consistent study and to familiarise themselves with the exam format. SQE preparation is best approached as a structured, longer-term programme - more of a marathon than a sprint - where knowledge is built and reinforced over time. Intensive cramming is rarely compatible with a full-time workload.

SQE1 assessments run twice a year in January and July

SQE2 – Practical Legal Skills

SQE2 is designed to assess whether candidates can perform practical tasks expected of a newly qualified solicitor. It includes oral and written components and tests core skills, not just knowledge.

Implications for in-house candidates: practice and feedback matter. Skills improve through repetition, structured mock practice, and developmental feedback both from the course provider and from supervisors in-role. Investing time, energy and thought can ensure that the QWE component contributes to candidates' performance in the SQE2 assessment.

SQE2 assessments run four times a year in January, April, July and October

SQE Prep: why it matters

Most in-house candidates are juggling full-time workloads while studying. If the organisation doesn't create space-through workload planning, study support, and realistic expectations drop-off risk increases, and qualification timelines can stretch. Structured preparation programmes are designed to reduce this risk by providing clear study pathways, consistent support and realistic workload expectations.

SQE1 is a high-volume, time-pressured assessment of applied legal knowledge. SQE2 tests practical legal skills such as advocacy, interviewing, drafting, and legal research in simulated scenarios.

This means effective prep needs to be:

- + **Structured** so learners know what to do each week
- + **Realistic** to fit around work and other commitments
- + **Exam-authentic** with mocks and plenty of timed practice
- + **Supportive** with coaching, feedback and an emphasis on wellbeing

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What good prep looks like for working professionals:



Personal study plan



Coaching and wellbeing



Bitesize learning



Employer visibility + reporting



Question bank and mocks



Expert-led faculty

“

You don't need to rebuild your team around the SQE, you can make the SQE work around the team you already have.

Oliver Storey, Head of Legal at Metro Bank

”

SQE1

80%

Pass Rate

SQE2

84%

Pass Rate

Our clients' reported cohorts; last three sittings.

Choosing the Right SQE Provider & Partner

For in-house teams, selecting an SQE preparation provider is not only about course quality. It is both an outcomes decision and a risk management decision - particularly where candidates are balancing full-time roles with study. The right provider brings structure, reliability and support, helping reduce the likelihood of delays, resits or burnout.

A practical selection checklist

When comparing providers, consider:

Outcomes and transparency

- ✓ Do they publish pass rates?
- ✓ Are results tied to meaningful completion thresholds?
- ✓ Can they explain outcomes clearly and credibly?

Exam authenticity

- ✓ Are mocks realistic and timed?
- ✓ Is feedback structured and actionable?

Employer integration

- ✓ Is there a reporting/dashboard option for sponsored learners?
- ✓ Is there account management support?
- ✓ How do they support multi-learner cohorts?

Working-professional fit

- ✓ Is learning flexible and modular?
- ✓ Are there clear study plans that adapt to limited time?
- ✓ Is support available at points of struggle (not just at the end)?

Cost clarity

- ✓ What's included (mocks, coaching, resits)?
- ✓ What happens if a learner fails (rejoin/resit policy)?



Understanding QWE

If the SQE assessments test competence centrally, Qualifying Work Experience (QWE) demonstrates real-world exposure in practice. This section explains what QWE requires, what counts in an in-house context, and how to approach recording and confirmation with confidence.

For in-house teams, this is often the least familiar - and most misunderstood - element of the qualification route. That's not because it is inherently complicated. Rather, it reflects the fact that in-house teams have not historically been responsible for running training contracts, and may be unsure whether their environment provides the breadth of experience or level of rigour traditionally associated with law firm training contracts. The key reassurance is this: QWE is skills-based, not seat/practice-area based.

QWE must:

- **Involve substantive legal services:** the work must require the application of legal knowledge, skills, or judgement.
- **Provide exposure to at least two competencies:** as set out in the SRA's *Statement of Solicitor Competence*.
- **Be confirmed by an authorised individual:** either a solicitor of England & Wales or a Compliance Officer for Legal Practice (COLP).
- **Be evidenced and submitted by the candidate:** the candidate is responsible for gathering and submitting their QWE.
- **Include relevant adjacent work:** experience outside the “pure legal” function (e.g. HR, procurement, marketing, compliance) can qualify.
- **Demonstrate reflection and documentation:** candidates should maintain a record of tasks, outcomes, and the competencies demonstrated.



The SRA Competence Framework

The SRA competence framework is grouped into four domains:

A **Ethics, Professionalism and Judgment**
Integrity, professional standards, independent judgment.

B **Technical Legal Practice**
Legal research, drafting, analysis, applying law to facts, matter management.

C **Working with Other People**
Communication, client care, teamwork, influencing stakeholders.

D **Managing Yourself and Your Work**
Self-reflection, resilience, time management, professional development.

While these domains appear high-level, each is underpinned by a detailed set of sub-competencies. For example, the “Ethics, Professionalism and Judgment” domain alone includes multiple sub-competencies covering areas such as integrity, supervision, critical thinking and problem-solving.

This level of detail can initially feel daunting. However, the practical implication for in-house teams is reassuring.



What this means in practice for in-house teams

The framework is not designed to require specific types of work or formal “seat” rotations. Instead, it is designed to capture the skills and behaviours demonstrated through everyday legal work.

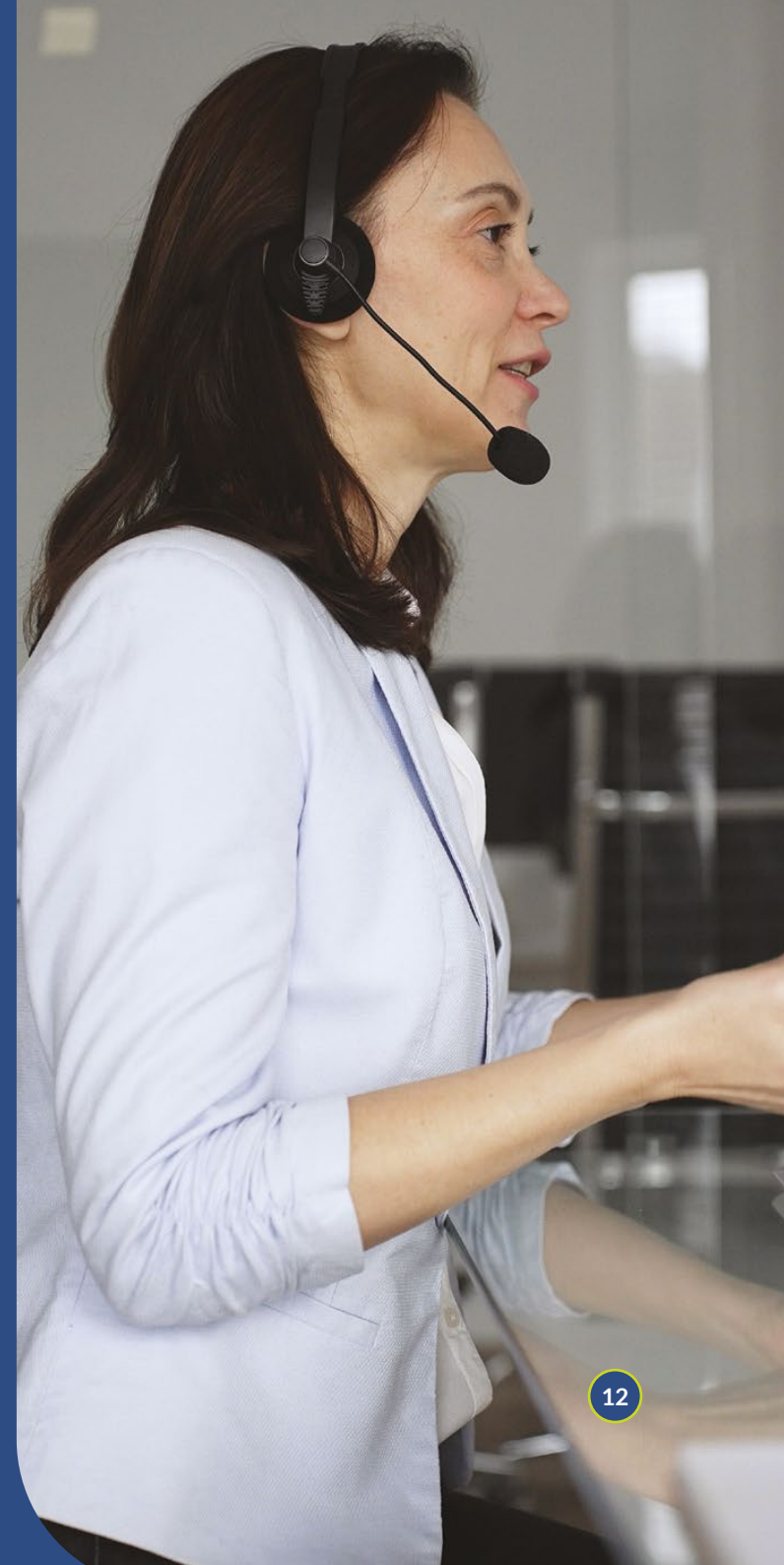
In practice, this means:

- + Many day-to-day tasks already undertaken by paralegals and junior team members - such as drafting contracts, advising stakeholders, conducting research or supporting transactions - will naturally map to multiple SRA competencies.
- + Even a single task may satisfy more than one competency (for example, drafting a contract can involve legal analysis, communication and risk assessment).
- + Work in adjacent functions (such as compliance, HR or procurement) can also contribute, where legal knowledge and judgment are applied.

Rather than asking “do we cover every practice area?”, the more useful question is: “Does the work we already do provide exposure to the skills expected of a solicitor?”

In most in-house environments, the answer is yes.

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The simplest way to log QWE: start with the task

Many candidates struggle when they start with competencies focusing on “what competency did I do today?”. A more intuitive approach is **task-first logging**:

- 1 What did you do? (the task)
- 2 What was the outcome?
- 3 What competencies did it involve?
- 4 What did you learn / what would you do differently next time?

This approach is both practical and developmental - it turns QWE into a learning process rather than an administrative task.



What counts as QWE in an in-house legal team?

One of the most common concerns raised by in-house teams is whether their work provides the “right” type of experience for qualification. A typical question is: “We don’t offer litigation or property seats. Does that mean QWE in our team won’t count?” In most cases, the answer is no.

Under the SQE framework, Qualifying Work Experience is not defined by completing specific practice-area seats (as under the traditional training contract model). Instead, the focus is on developing exposure to the competencies required of a day-one solicitor. That distinction matters for in-house teams.

While in-house roles may not replicate the law firm seat rotation, they often provide rich, real-world legal experience, including:

- + Commercial contracting
- + Advising internal stakeholders
- + Governance and compliance work
- + Managing legal risk in operational decisions
- + Regulatory interpretation

These activities map directly to multiple SRA competencies. For example, drafting and negotiating contracts can involve legal analysis, communication, risk assessment and matter management, while advising stakeholders draws on judgment, ethics and professional communication.

The goal is not to replicate law firm seat rotations, but to ensure candidates gain meaningful exposure to the types of legal work solicitors perform.



Employer Obligations & Role in QWE

This is where most in-house hesitation sits. Under the SQE, confirming QWE is not the same as certifying competence. A helpful way to think about it is: **QWE confirmation is closer to confirming employment and experience than acting as an examiner.**

What you must do

- + Confirm the individual worked in your organisation during the stated period
- + Confirm they had the opportunity to develop relevant competencies

FAQs

- + **“Is our team too small or too narrow in what we do to offer meaningful QWE?”** Much of the work already done in-house naturally maps to multiple competencies.
- + **“Do we realistically have the capacity to do this properly?”** QWE does not require a formal training programme.
- + **“How do we make this work without breaking the team?”** Successful programmes plan for study time and workload peaks rather than expecting it to be absorbed.

What you are not required to do

- + Certify competence
- + Guarantee performance level
- + Replicate a law firm training contract structure

Instead, you are confirming two things:

- + That the individual worked within your organisation during the period stated, and
- + That they had the opportunity to develop the relevant competencies through their work.

You are not attesting that they are good, ready, or competent in every domain. The centralised SQE assessments exist to test competence; QWE supports this and shows real-world exposure. It is there to allow candidates to develop the competencies which are then tested through the SQE assessment.

Why, then, do in-house teams still care so much?

Because reputationally, it matters. If someone qualifies and says 'I qualified at your organisation', most legal leaders want that to mean something. So while the regulatory bar is low, the professional bar many GCs set for themselves is higher. The Toolkit's purpose is to help teams bridge that gap without overengineering a law-firm replica.

When practice areas are missing: how to make it robust anyway

If a team worries they lack exposure (e.g., disputes), there are practical options:

- **Panel firm shadowing / secondments (light-touch):** even informal observation or project support can broaden exposure.
- **Dispute prevention framing:** contracts, governance, escalation processes, and risk decisions are often the real-world foundations of dispute avoidance-these are legitimate learning contexts.
- **Cross-functional legal work:** HR policy work, procurement frameworks, compliance projects can diversify exposure without 'creating' artificial seats.



Designing an In-House Trainee Programme

If you are actively considering sponsoring someone internally, this section provides a practical framework for structuring an in-house SQE pathway.

It does not assume a law firm model. Instead, it focuses on how to create meaningful exposure, consistent supervision and sustainable workload planning within the reality of an in-house legal team.

The best in-house programmes don't try to mimic a law firm. They start with reality - the work you actually do, the team you actually have, and the time you can actually give.

The goal is not to create 'seats'. The goal is to create:

- + **Structured exposure**
- + **Consistent supervision**
- + **Meaningful development**
- + **Sustainable workload planning**



Step 1: Identify who you can sponsor

In-house candidates are often:

- + Paralegals
- + Contract managers
- + Legal ops professionals
- + Junior compliance professionals working closely with legal

There may also be 'quick win' candidates, such as foreign-qualified lawyers in the team who may only need part of the SQE route (e.g., SQE1 only).

C - Teams 20+

You can build repeatability.

- + Defined programme milestones (Year 1 / Year 2)
- + Supervisor training and calibration
- + Broader project rotations and mentoring network

Step 2: Choose a model that fits your team size

A - Teams under 5

You don't need a committee. You need consistency.

- + Add **15 minutes weekly** to existing 1:1s for QWE reflection
- + Use task-first logging
- + Agree one supervisor and one back-up
- + Plan 'exposure moments' (cross-functional projects)

B - Teams 5-20

You can introduce light structure without bureaucracy.

- + Monthly QWE review cadence
- + Quarterly development conversation (skills, confidence and exposure)
- + Optional mini cohort of candidates to share learning

Step 3: Build ethical comfort without overengineering

Many legal leaders feel uneasy if they can't offer the full spread of practice areas. The most robust approach is to:

- ⊕ Map real work to competencies (use the matrix)
- ⊕ Identify gaps that matter for your context
- ⊕ Address gaps pragmatically (panel firm, shadowing, cross-functional projects)
- ⊕ Keep the focus on development, not box-ticking

Step 4: Create space to make it achievable

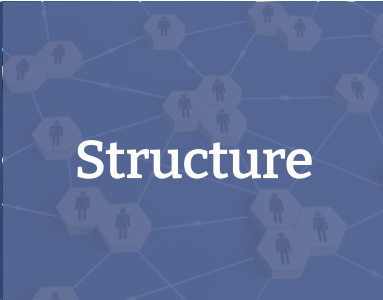
The main operational risk is not QWE sign-off - it is workload pressure.

If candidates are expected to work 45+ hours and study on top, something breaks. Teams should consider accommodations during study windows, such as:

- ⊕ A half day a week of study time (during defined periods)
- ⊕ Lighter workload planning around mocks/exam windows
- ⊕ Explicit manager alignment: "this is part of their role progression"



Time



Structure



Support



Reflection



Momentum

Futureproofing Your Programme

The SQE is often discussed in operational terms - exams, study schedules and sign-off. But its most important value for in-house teams is strategic: it allows you to build long-term capability rather than compete endlessly for it.

Strengthening your pipeline

An internal SQE pathway enables you to identify high-potential talent early, retain institutional knowledge, and develop the capabilities your organisation needs in 3-5 years.

Broadening access

The SQE was designed to widen access to qualification. For in-house teams, that means progression routes for people who might never have secured a traditional training contract: career changers, paralegals, and diverse talent pools who are already delivering value.

Building commercially fluent lawyers

In-house exposure to stakeholders, risk decisions, contracts that shape business outcomes can create exceptionally commercially aware lawyers if structured intentionally.

Measuring what matters

Once a pathway exists, you can track:

- Time to qualification
- Exam success patterns
- Competency exposure breadth
- Retention and progression after qualification

The best programmes evolve - they start simple, go live and are refined based on what works.

Partnering with BARBRI

BARBRI partners with in-house teams of all sizes to deliver inclusive, high-quality SQE training. Our programmes are designed to meet the needs of diverse learners while giving in-house teams confidence that their trainees are fully prepared for the demands of qualification.

In addition to this, we offer microlearning professional skills development courses focused on developing commercially relevant skills that complement SQE preparation and reflect the realities of in-house legal work.

To explore legal training options or request a consultation, [contact BARBRI's Partnerships team](#).

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