

# INVESTMENT AND INNOVATION

## OUR BLUEPRINTS FOR GROWTH



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## Introduction

In the UK we have some of the most forward thinking, productive and innovative farm businesses working across a wide range of sectors.

As well as producing food for the nation, with the right conditions farmers and growers can contribute to the government's mission of achieving greater economic growth and improving productivity.

This in turn provides jobs and drives investment across a range of related industries, from those supplying goods and services to farming, through to those who buy and sell the goods we produce.

But to deliver, farmers need to be operating in an enabling business environment, with the right regulatory framework, that provides the certainty and space to allow businesses to plan, invest and grow for the future.

This includes having a taxation policy that, rather than dampening the appetite to invest, encourages businesses to invest to make their farms more productive and climate friendly.

It means creating the right regulatory environment, one which will allow for innovation but also protects consumers and the environment.

And it requires increased support for research and development and knowledge exchange so that farms can adapt for the future and benefit from new technical advances.

More can also be done to remove obstacles, big and small, that obstruct the smooth operation of farm businesses, whether day-to-day or over long periods of time.

With rural crime increasing, for example, there needs to be appropriate legislation and support to stop thefts, fly-tipping, hare coursing and other criminal activity that causes financial harm and stress to farmers, directly undermining their ability to carry on productive enterprises.

And with the overhaul of the English planning system there should be a greater recognition of farming and food production which will allow for farming businesses to grow and develop.

There needs to be more investment in skills so future generations are attracted to joining the industry, embracing new ways of working, alongside balanced policies that ensure an adequate supply of workers.

All of this needs to be supported by a much higher degree of transparency from government, particularly as it develops policies and schemes under the Agricultural Transition Plan, including predictable timelines, clear evidence pathways, regular

monitoring and reporting and a disciplined consultation structure that is regularly reviewed against its key performance targets.

This blueprint sets out our key asks of government to improve investment and innovation within the agriculture sector, the agri-food sector and the broader rural economy.

# Taxation

## Tax and capital allowances

Taxation can act as both an incentive and a barrier to investment and innovation. It is critical that government creates a fiscal framework that encourages farm businesses to invest in a sustainable and profitable future, and that avoids creating unnecessary financial burdens that can act as a dampener on growth.

In particular, better structured capital allowances can stimulate investment in a climate-friendly future for food production. Over 90% of our farmer and grower members are unincorporated small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs), i.e. sole traders or partnerships, so they do not enjoy many of the tax incentives available to limited companies.

We want to stimulate more investment under the Structures and Buildings Allowance (SBA) as well as for plant and machinery. The former presently attracts a much smaller, longer-term tax allowance compared with the latter.

A substantial fraction of the capital investment needs for the modernisation of farm businesses fall into this category – for example, upgraded buildings (dairy parlours, poultry units) which are a pre-requisite for more efficient plant and machinery.

Having a broad list of low carbon categories would remove the administrative burden of proving that specific items or makes/models of equipment were recognised by the Treasury.

Suitable categories might include: new or refurbished buildings; low carbon machinery, fuel and energy systems, and controls; 3-phase power; equipment to reduce methane or ammonia emissions; rainwater harvesting.

As part of the 2024 Autumn Budget, the government announced it would not introduce draft legislation to ensure double cab pick-up vehicles continue to be treated as goods vehicles for income tax purposes, including for capital allowances.

Treating double cab pick-ups the same as cars for income tax purposes will have an adverse impact on farm businesses, where these vehicles are essential for carrying goods across all terrains, and potentially on their availability

Tax simplification is another area that the government should focus on. Farm businesses have increasingly diversified and therefore their tax affairs have become increasingly complex.

The current proposal from government is that a business would have to submit quarterly returns for each individual income stream. This would result in significant extra costs

and take extra time to produce for little or no benefit for either the business or HMRC, given farming's fluctuating income and expenditure pattern.

Reconsidering Making Tax Digital and the quarterly reporting of individual income streams would remove unnecessary bureaucracy, save time and money, and allow farmers and growers to focus on growing their businesses.

Many farms operate Furnished Holiday Lettings (FHLs) as part of a wider tourism trade. In October 2024, the government announced it would abolish the favourable tax treatment of FHLs to level up the tax treatment between short-term and long-term residential letting.

These changes will have an unfair and adverse impact on farmer and grower businesses which have diversified to generate additional income streams, particularly as many farms will be unable to switch FHLs to residential letting due to planning restrictions.

### **Asks:**

- Improved tax relief for capital items which incentivises long and short-term investment and climate smart innovation, going beyond the existing Structures and Buildings Allowance, Annual Investment Allowance and Full Expensing.
- To support greater investment in productivity and efficiency, and to deliver our net zero ambition, there should be broad categories of low carbon capital that have higher rates of tax relief, covering eligible plant, equipment, buildings and infrastructure.
- The decision on the tax treatment of double cab pick-ups should be reversed.
- The decision on removing the FHLs tax regime should be reversed, with a formal test for when they qualify as a trade for tax purposes introduced as a minimum.
- Allow businesses to treat all income streams as a single trade, at least for quarterly updates, as part of the government's Making Tax Digital drive.

## **Inheritance Tax reliefs**

Agricultural Property Relief (APR) and Business Property Relief (BPR) were designed and introduced to prevent the sale or break-up of businesses or farms to finance Inheritance Tax payments following the death of the owner.

They have encouraged longer-term investment in farming by allowing farming businesses to be passed down through the generations. This has ensured that people who buy farmland keep it within agriculture, either farming it in hand or renting it out to tenants, often younger farmers and growers looking for opportunities in the industry.

The new tax rules announced in the 2024 Autumn Budget could force farmers to sell or break up their family farms to pay an Inheritance Tax bill.

The new tax rules will also discourage people from buying farmland and renting it out to farmers. This could lead to less land being available for farming and more being used for other purposes.

We believe around 75% of commercial family farms will be above the new £1 million combined threshold for APR and BPR.

Our analysis also found that the majority of medium-sized working farms that will be affected will not be protected by the ten-year payment window because the resulting payments would still be unmanageably large relative to the economic returns they earn.

These changes are a prime example of tax policy harming growth and investment. Research by Family Business UK found that, across the whole economy, the decision could lead to more than 125,000 jobs losses and reduce the value of goods and services produced across the economy (GVA) by £9.4 billion.

Given farming is disproportionately hit by the changes, given the large asset base and very low returns on capital employed, there can be no doubt that agriculture in particular is likely to experience a serious reduction in investment and innovation, as farm businesses are broken up and farmers divert profits away from reinvestment and growth to cover potential future tax liabilities.

### **Ask:**

- Government should halt plans to change APR and BPR to properly consult on the changes with industry and carry out detailed impact assessments of the policy options.

## **Regulation**

### **Regulatory framework**

The NFU recognises the need for regulation to protect the environment, human and animal health, and the interests of consumers.

The key principle behind good regulation is that it should strike a balance between managing risk and harm from any given activity, economic or otherwise, and maximising the societal and economic benefit of that same activity.

This means ensuring regulation is proportionate and meets its objectives without imposing unnecessary burdens on businesses.

Regulation should also strike a balance between providing sufficient protection and encouraging innovation, so that potentially useful activities – for instance, technological innovation in new plant varieties, animal genetics or crop protection – are not obstructed, as long as they are shown to be safe.

In many instances, current regulation pertaining to agriculture, the environment and business activity is adequate and proportionate. But there remain areas where better regulation is needed.

The NFU does not advocate arbitrary targets for reducing or eliminating regulation. But there are areas where current regulation needs to be reviewed, with a view to reforming and improving specific pieces of regulation.

### **Asks:**

- The principles the NFU believes government should follow in devising smarter regulatory frameworks and approaches are:
  - Promote and enable innovation and fair competition;
  - Delegate discretion to regulators to achieve regulatory objectives;
  - Enable feedback and iterative improvement;
  - Use full impact assessments at an early stage;
  - Undertake meaningful and independent post-implementation reviews;
  - Use earned recognition and data sharing to reduce regulatory burden and improve targeting;
  - Support industry-led and voluntary initiatives;
  - Base regulation on the most robust available scientific evidence.
  
- A systematic review of regulation, assessing the effectiveness of specific legislation and regulation relating to agriculture, building on the work it undertook in response to the Retained EU Law Bill (REUL) in 2022 (including relating to plant protection, water quality and habitats) to ensure regulatory protections meet their aims without unnecessarily burdening farm businesses.

## **Regulatory Impact Assessment**

Current guidance from the Cabinet Office requires Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIAs) to be carried out when new regulations are being proposed. But RIAs do not require new regulations to be assessed for their impact on our food production or food resilience.

They also do not assess the cumulative impact of regulation on confidence in the supply chain, our domestic productive capacity, food inflation, agricultural input cost inflation, or the risk of exporting our food production needs or their negative impacts to other countries.



Reforming the approach to RIAs, and the government's approach to impact assessments more generally, is crucial to ensuring farmers and growers, and our food security, are not undermined by decisions made in isolation without considering the bigger picture.

For example, many environmental targets have been set without any clear consideration of the impact on trade or compromises to domestic food production and our productive capacity.

There has also been a failure to evaluate the individual and cumulative impacts these statutory targets will have on the country's ability to produce food.

Many of these policy drivers are particularly challenging for the tenanted sector to respond to because, as land managers but not landowners, they do not have the necessary land tenure to deliver the required outcomes.

**Ask:**

- All new policies and regulations that impact agricultural and horticultural businesses undergo a food security impact assessment.

## Planning and infrastructure

Too often, the planning system can act to make farming and the rural economy less sustainable – preventing modernisation, diversification and house building for farm workers.

In some cases, blanket environmental requirements mean that development is refused: a perverse outcome when development would make a farm business more sustainable, reduce its environmental footprint, create jobs, and promote green growth across the sector – all of which are national priorities.

At the same time, many farmers and growers have found themselves increasingly subject to major infrastructure projects on their land – such as the roll out of HS2, overhead and underground electricity cables, and road improvements schemes – with limited consultation and communication on the detail.

The NFU recognises and supports the need for national infrastructure projects to deliver energy security and transport links. But a significant improvement is needed in how operators engage with farmers and landowners to better mitigate the impact of these projects.

Agriculture must not be left behind, negatively impacted, or forgotten by reforms to the planning system that aim to drive economic growth and infrastructure development.

The government needs to ensure that any changes proposed to how land is allocated for development are accompanied with a suitable level of protection for agricultural land, especially Best and Most Versatile Land (BMV), to ensure that we maintain sufficient agricultural land for food production.

The planning system also needs to allow farm businesses to build the right buildings and infrastructure, in a way that is sympathetic to the local environment, so they can reduce the impacts of production and help achieve our collective goal of net zero greenhouse gas emissions.

For instance, new space-efficient glasshouses could help produce more fruit and veg, boosting the nation's food security.

### **Asks:**

- A planning system that is adequately funded and resourced.
- Reduce the use of Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land for non-agricultural developments.
- An expansion to the definition of 'agriculture' in the Planning Act 1990 so that applications for agricultural ancillary buildings are not disregarded.
- Recognition in the planning system of the need for agricultural infrastructure such as reservoirs, farm tracks and slurry stores, including streamlining of planning processes where they support government grant funding and other priority policies.
- Non-agricultural planning applications on productive agricultural land should be subject to a food security impact assessment.
- Agricultural land in the green belt should be protected and not included in reforms for the new grey belt.
- Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) exemption for development relating to agriculture, and development considered ancillary to agricultural operations.
- Food production should have greater explicit recognition in the National Planning Policy Framework 2024, so that an increase in sustainable food production receives proper weighted support in the planning process.

# Livestock Information Transformation System

A new livestock information service is needed to replace outdated existing services, such as the Cattle Tracing System (CTS), and to incorporate other species into a single multi-species service, to help reduce disease costs and improve traceability, supporting trade and consumer confidence.

The new service will drive improvements including paperless processes and more timely reporting. A new service should also improve data sharing to enable improvements in animal health and welfare, productivity and competitiveness.

A new digital service which allows the use of bovine electronic identification (EID) tags will improve traceability, accuracy and farmer safety when reading official tags. The benefits of bovine EID will reduce transcription errors, improving the health and safety for those who handle cattle.

A new system must allow data sharing that includes reports based on the statutory information already collected, genetic performance and productivity information (such as age at slaughter, carcase weight and grade) which in turn will drive better breeding decisions, boosting efficiency, of particular importance as government looks for productivity gains that can help farming contribute to its net zero ambitions.

## Asks:

- The government should continue with the development and long-term funding of the Livestock Information Transformation Programme. It should be a multipurpose platform for all livestock species that will:
  - Provide livestock information for all livestock species;
  - Enable the smooth transition away from paper passports alongside the introduction of bovine EID and facilitate paperless (digital) reporting for sheep movements;
  - Provide technical (added value) data to producers and the supply chain, with the appropriate permissions that helps inform management decisions to improve productivity, health and welfare, and competitiveness;
  - Improve and simplify the inspection regime reducing the burden on both keepers and government;
  - Create a national herd register to support the UK view to ensure disease risk is managed and support export markets.
- Due to the complexity of the system, there will need to be a period of implementation and the dual running of the new and existing systems.

## Rural crime

Rural crime is unique in its nature and there is evidence that organised criminal groups are increasingly operating in rural areas, targeting vulnerable remote communities. We share the government's ambition to reduce serious crime and raise confidence in the police and criminal justice system.

Policing rural areas is challenging given the range of different crime types including fly-tipping, dog attacks on livestock, and hare coursing, as well as thefts of vehicles, machinery and livestock.

Policing costs are higher among rural forces as they cannot benefit from economies of scale due to the need to serve more dispersed, low-density populations. The scale, cost, social impact and other effects of crime in rural areas are underestimated, under-reported and not fully understood.

Rural theft cost the UK approximately £49.5 million in 2022, according to NFU Mutual's Rural Crime Report 2023, with quad bike and ATV theft rising by 34% and livestock theft increasing by 8.7%.

The exceptional aspect of rural crime is that farm businesses are often also the houses and private spaces of the business owners. This means that rural crime can often leave farmers and growers feeling scared and unsafe in their own homes, a place where they should feel secure.

A concerted effort is needed to ensure rural Britain is not left as the poor relation in the government's commitment to tackle crime.

### Asks:

- Chief Constables and Police & Crime Commissioners must provide a dedicated rural crime team in every police force in the country.
- The Home Office must ensure the police allocation formula delivers fair funding for rural policing.
- Government must create a cross-departmental rural crime task force to address the failures in dealing with rural crime.
- Adoption of the National Rural Crime Network 10 Point Plan to tackle rural organised crime, including buy-in from local forces, Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU) and the National Crime Agency.
- Secondary legislation to the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 must be tabled to bring in the provisions of the Act on ATV security and to also include security measures for GPS equipment.

- Maintain funding for the National Rural Crime Unit Livestock Theft Coordinator, allowing the collection of livestock theft-related intelligence, spotting and sharing trends, and helping to build prosecutions and secure convictions.
- Legislation (as contained in the previous Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill and subsequently the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Bill) giving police more extensive powers for dealing with dog attacks on livestock.
- Continued monitoring of the effectiveness of measures included in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 to ensure an effective deterrent is in place to curb hare coursing activities.
- A single reporting mechanism for fly-tipping to be developed so farmers and land managers only need to report an incident once.
- Additional guidance for those with prosecution powers so they can deliver more effective punishments for fly-tipping.

## Investment

### Industrial Strategy

The government has stated that growth is its number one mission and has set out a new Industrial Strategy which is central to this mission.

While agriculture, horticulture and food production are not directly mentioned, they remain important elements for a number of the key growth sectors and can play a role in stimulating investment and growth.

Acknowledging the supporting role agriculture and food production can play in the Industrial Strategy will provide the positive signal to drive additional investment and inspire confidence, generating jobs and allowing agricultural businesses to improve productivity and efficiency.

#### Asks:

- Agriculture, horticulture and the agri-food sector to be recognised within the Industrial Strategy as having the potential to make a vital contribution to the government's growth mission.
- Agriculture and food production to be recognised as one of the few sectors whose economic growth potential applies in both rural and urban communities in every corner of the UK.

## Research and development, knowledge exchange and agri-tech

Agricultural research is a long-term endeavour. Funding arrangements, financial sustainability and a well-functioning research, development, innovation and knowledge exchange infrastructure are critical aspects of the science community's ability to deliver what farming and government needs for productivity growth and environmental sustainability.

The UK is good at science and has a world-leading agri-science sector recognised across the globe. But it is much less good at adoption and commercialisation – a problem across many sectors, not just farming. The market for agri-tech is relatively undeveloped and confidence to invest is a limiting factor, so de-risking and demonstration are important roles for government.

Upskilling and making agri-tech more affordable and accessible, as well as encouraging investor interest for scale-up (including inward investment), would support broader commercial adoption. Similarly, the knowledge exchange ecosystem is fragmented and does not effectively drive adoption.

Research activities do not fully align with what is needed by businesses, and not enough farmers can access evidence drawn from research in a practical format. When productivity and performance are not optimised in this way, return on investment in research is limited.

With the right R&D and knowledge exchange landscape, the majority of farmers should be able to engage at some level with robust, scientific evidence to inform and improve decision making.

A system is needed to turn scientific knowledge into practical insights, to drive adoption and achieve greater return on investment from government-funded research. This must be for farming practices, and not just for technologies.

Successful agri-tech integration on farm can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase yield, optimise inputs, make farming safer, reduce workforce needed, and increase overall efficiency. All of this underpins net zero aspirations for the industry and supports business resilience.

### **Asks:**

- Sustained government funding for pre-competitive applied agriculture and horticulture research, and investment in key independent UK research organisations that directly deliver solutions for both industry growth and government policy on innovation, environment, industrial strategy and place.

- Fully implement the Accelerating Development of Practices and Technologies (ADOPT) fund of the Farming Innovation Programme and make it accessible to all farm businesses.
- Set up a What Works-type system to enable all practitioners on farm to access robust evidence in a format they can use to make better decisions for driving growth and performance.
- New developments in agri-tech must be affordable and more widely applied on farm. This includes grant support and other measures for agri-tech so that the cost is not prohibitive to investment on farm and to de-risking.

## Data

Data is an increasingly central aspect of farming operations and, handled properly, can be harnessed to improve the productivity and competitiveness of farm businesses.

However, there is a power imbalance between farmers and the data and tech services sector, leaving some farmers vulnerable to oversharing of data while receiving insufficient value in return. At the opposite end of the scale, there are those with low trust and skills who will not share data or use digital tools.

Farm businesses are also being encouraged to share environmental data with supply chains with insufficient transparency surrounding the value this data may go on to generate. This further erodes trust in the principle of data sharing.

A more responsible and engaged approach is needed by all parties, including supply chain actors, regulators, and the data services sector, focusing on the needs of farm businesses.

If farmers receive proper value from generating and sharing data, the whole supply chain, as well as the public, can benefit from the efficiencies produced. In particular, where environmental and animal health data generates value, it should highlight price incentives for sustainably produced farm outputs.

### Asks:

- Drive uptake of Farm Data Principles certification by companies using farm data, to deliver transparency in ownership and value and thereby increase farmer trust in data sharing and use of digital tools.
- Government to deploy the Farm Data Principles as the underpinning guiding principles for transparency and responsibility for all initiatives using farm data, to empower farmers to realise the benefits of the digital revolution.

## Digital access

Digital connectivity is vital to nearly every aspect of farming, from health and safety to improving productivity.

Farming businesses lag behind urban businesses because of slow broadband speeds and a lack of access. Sometimes even basic business tasks, including emails or online marketing, are impossible.

Good connectivity is also critical to aspects of worker safety, as well as to the adoption of new technologies on farm, such as those involved with precision farming and data provision.

Farm businesses are also often homes, and farming families should be afforded the same amenities as everyone else in terms of access to online services and general connectivity. In remote and secluded areas, this can be crucial to ensuring people remain connected and in touch with friends, family and critical services.

### **Asks:**

- The Shared Rural Network to remain a priority and to be entirely complete by 2025.
- All government schemes aimed at increasing and improving broadband coverage and access must be applicable to all types of broadband, not just fibre.
- Rural and agriculture-specific digital skills training must be offered widely and supported in government skills initiatives.
- Government must adhere to its manifesto pledge of gigabit broadband and 5G coverage by 2030, including delivery of connectivity in the hardest to reach rural areas.

## Employment, skills and training

### **Seasonal Worker Scheme**

Access to labour is key for the seasonal poultry and horticulture sectors and access to a migrant seasonal workforce is likely to be needed for many years to come. Despite the industry's best efforts, it has proved impossible to recruit domestically, and automation of many tasks is still some years away.

Without a migrant seasonal workforce horticulture and seasonal poultry businesses would be increasingly unviable, and UK food security would be at risk. This issue was acknowledged by the Migration Advisory Committee in its 2024 review of the seasonal worker visa scheme.



Ongoing access to migrant seasonal workers will give food producers confidence to invest in maintaining and growing UK production of fruit and vegetables and seasonal poultry.

**Ask:**

- There should be ongoing access to a migrant seasonal workforce, with a minimum of five years notice of any substantive changes to the Seasonal Worker Scheme.

## **Employment rights and pay**

The Employment Rights Bill (ERB) will significantly change the way farm businesses manage their workforce. Planned, phased implementation, with plenty of time to help industry to adapt, is vital to keep businesses running smoothly.

The production of food and demand for labour by farming and horticulture businesses can be very variable. Factors such as crop conditions, weather conditions and customer demand all contribute to the unpredictability inherent in food production and, by extension, the demand for inputs such as labour. There should be flexibility within the ERB to accommodate these fluctuations.

The National Living Wage (NLW) not only protects the low paid but also acts as a benchmark against which other wage rates are referenced. Nevertheless, the rise in the NLW, and the changes to National Insurance rules announced in the 2024 Autumn Budget, will have a huge impact, especially on businesses in sectors like horticulture that rely on large workforces.

In light of these huge additional costs growers are having to accommodate, it is vital that government does not make a bad situation worse by heaping additional cost and pressure on employers.

**Asks:**

- Reforms introduced by the ERB must be implemented sensibly and within reasonable timeframes to allow farming and growing businesses to adapt.
- The ERB must allow flexibility to accommodate the uncertainty of food production and minimise administration costs.
- Changes to Statutory Sick Pay must strike a balance between offering a level of financial support to workers and protection against abuse for employers.
- Changes in employment rights must not lose the flexibility needed by food producers, where demand for labour can vary at short notice.

- New rights to reasonable notice in relation to shifts must retain the flexibility needed to accommodate the inherent uncertainty of food production. A 52-week reference period would be an easier, fairer and more effective solution for seasonal work.
- The right to notice of shifts, and compensation for cancellation and changes to shifts, must have flexibility to allow farmers and growers to call on a workforce when work is available and not be penalised for factors outside their control.
- There should be improved signposting of rate changes, and adequate data on projected NLW rates and other costs of employment, such as National Insurance contributions, to help businesses plan effectively.

## Education and skills

Research shows that, despite an ongoing demand for workers across all roles and all sectors, there is a lack of awareness among young people, parents, teachers and careers advisers of the range and variety of career opportunities in food and farming and the wider land-based sector.

Promotion of career opportunities is vital to raise awareness of the range of careers available and increase the pool of labour working in the sector.

Greater exposure to food and farming earlier in the curriculum would help enhance children's preconceptions about food and farming as a viable and varied career with a wide range of opportunities.

The development of vocational education for learners aged 16 and over will help provide an entry path into the sector for young people with an interest in food and farming.

In particular, T levels are intended to streamline and improve qualification at level 3, which is the equivalent of A-level standard. Although initial feedback has been positive, there has been a lack of flexibility in the T level curriculum, which should be addressed.

Agricultural businesses are complex and varied enterprises which arguably require a greater diversity of skills, both for employers and employees, compared to other industrial sectors in the UK.

There needs to be appropriate provision for training and education to attract new entrants and upskill existing workers as new technologies are introduced.

### Asks:

- Greater government support of industry initiatives to increase sector awareness, improve skills and encourage new entrants.

- A review of careers information by the Department for Education to ensure that agriculture and horticulture is accurately represented and promoted by the careers services.
- A food and nutrition curriculum that includes the same level of detailed knowledge and skill progression as other curriculum subjects.
- Every school to have a food lead and a whole school food plan.
- The roll out of T levels is monitored and curriculum adjusted to reflect real world teaching, with more promotional activity to raise awareness of the new qualification with students, parents and employers.

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