



Independent Chair's Accountability Report 2020-21

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 This report formally discharges my responsibility to the Safeguarding Partners in Birmingham.
- 1.2 It is my fifth Accountability Report and once again is a personal reflection which I have prepared for the Statutory Safeguarding Partners (Birmingham & Solihull Clinical Commissioning Group (BSol CCG); West Midlands Police; Birmingham City Council/Birmingham Childrens Trust) and Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership prior to sharing at the Safeguarding Leaders' Assembly on 22nd April 2021.
- 1.3 In this report I seek to provide assurance as to my activity and to reflect on my independent view of the progress that the Safeguarding Children Partnership has made in achieving its Ambition, Purpose and Priorities. This is not a data rich Annual Report; that comes later in the year. This is a personal reflection.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 It is now two years since the introduction of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA) in Birmingham.
- 2.2 The Independent Chair role description has remained relevant and is attached as Appendix 1. We have sustained the nomenclature of Chair, rather than adopt the title "Scrutineer" favoured by some. The reason is not simply that this word is not in the English dictionary! Rather, my role goes way beyond scrutiny and assurance; it encompasses convening, supporting and challenging. I was recruited because of my experience and was given the remit to range and influence across the breadth of partnership arrangements in the interests of children, and this I have sought to do. Our purpose was improvement in partnership, services, impact and reputation.
- 2.3 I again attach a simple chart of the Partnership Sub-Groups and their connectedness (Appendix 2). This remains the essential architecture, though this year. I have met regularly with the Chair of the Health & Wellbeing Board, Cllr Paulette Hamilton, who is also a regular and supportive attender of our twice-yearly Safeguarding Leaders' Assembly.
- 2.4 This year has been remarkable for the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the whole year has been conducted virtually. I will address the impact of COVID-19 specifically and will then address progress against our Ambition, Purpose and Priorities.

3. COVID-19 - Continuing to deliver

3.1 Let me begin by paying tribute to all Leaders and Staff for their response to this dramatic turn of events last March (2020). I am truly lost in admiration for the speed with which everyone reacted to the instruction to "Lockdown" whilst retaining a complete focus on the needs and interests of children, young people and their families.



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- 3.2 For many staff this meant an overnight move to working from home. For others this meant a hybrid existence, using a base for working and still conducting face to face assessments and work with PPE, following strict guidance and making safety risk assessments on top of everything else.
- 3.3 Despite what the press conveyed, schools remained open and working. Police, Health, the Local Authority and Children's Trust remained very much in business.
- 3.4 For many Health staff there was a reprioritisation of work and changes of roles. For the Police, the work demands changed dramatically in the short term, increasing Domestic Abuse referrals and reduction in acquisition crime in the short term. Many children became less visible to services and tremendous efforts were made to reach out and provide practical and emotional support.
- 3.5 One practical and impactful development led by Jenny Turnross, Director of Practice for Birmingham Children's Trust, was the instigation of the "Partnership Operations Group" (POG). This group did what it said on the tin and in the early weeks and months of lockdown it met weekly (virtually) to oversee a new way of working together, ensuring that core concerns were addressed and necessary service developments were accelerated. The POG is still meeting, having last week stepped down from fortnightly to monthly. In common with other places and other sectors, collaboration and partnership working made strides during this past year. One example of a tangible output from the POG was the protocol for face to face meetings and visits for children and families agreed by partners.
- 3.6 Early help and support locality offer were speeded up, led by the newish Children's Partnership and its Transformation Director and team, with the Children's Trust, CCG and a valued and vibrant voluntary and community sector, re-invigorated and embraced.
- 3.7 The City Board got into its stride as a mechanism for ensuring good communication across the business, public services, community and faith sectors. I attended 11 virtual meetings across the year, each one receiving a COVID-19 situation report from Public Health and key leaders.
- 3.8 The Safeguarding Business Support Team moved to home working and we adopted the mantra that we should be a support and not an unnecessary burden. The first meeting of the year was transacted through the exchange of papers with the option of a face to face discussion only if necessary. It soon became obvious that the requirements of the pandemic were going to be sustained for sometime and we held our first virtual Executive Board meeting in July. Since March 2020 all meetings have been virtual.
- 3.9 The team led by Simon Cross, instituted a daily "keeping in touch" meeting and the feedback has been positive about the support and structure that this provides. I must once again pay tribute to the team for their support to me. Despite us not having seen each other face to face all year, we have sustained all our commitments and made progress.
- 3.10 In particular I will highlight a selection of achievements:
 - The sustained meeting of the Rapid Review target of 15 days;
 - The adoption by the whole region of our Rapid Review process and the progress in developing a commissioning framework for Independent Reviewers;



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- Provision of evidence to Independent Inquiry on Child Abuse in Religious Settings in May 2020;
- Publication of our Safeguarding Review "Four Children....two were the parents" in November 2020;
- Our successful virtual Practitioner Conference on Contextual Safeguarding held on 18th and 19th November 2020 with 839 delegates;
- Launch of the "Who's in Charge? "campaign on the lead up to Christmas, which focused on the impact of alcohol and substances on parental capacity to care for very young infants.
- The preparation for the National Learning event on Youth Violence on 17th March 2021, for which Simon Cross pulled together a full and effective Birmingham submission.
- 3.11 This year of COVID-19 saw me conducting myself entirely virtually for the whole year. Despite (perhaps because of this), I have attended more events and meetings than ever! As well as attending all the City Board and Children's Partnership Board meetings, I have chaired the quarterly Executive Board, Practitioner Forums and the Safeguarding Leaders' Assembly in October, which was addressed by Sir Alan Wood who led the National Safeguarding Review.
- 3.12 I have sustained my regular 121s with the Leads for Health, Council, Children's Trust and the Police. Through the year I have met regularly with the LA, Children's Trust and CCG Chief Executives; Council Lead Member; Scrutiny Chair and Chairs of the Community Safety Partnership and Health and Wellbeing Board and conducted induction meetings with new Board members and new Senior officers across the partnership. In October, I appeared before the Scrutiny Committee to present our Annual Report. I also met with the Director of the Violence Reduction Unit, Claire Gollop, and have encouraged links with the City and regional colleagues. I have attended the revitalised quarterly Regional Forum meetings of Safeguarding Chairs and Business Managers the West Midlands MASA Network where sharing learning, best practice and forging common approaches have been our aim. Simon Cross co-chairs that forum and provides very effective drive and offers good support to its efforts.
- 3.13 I have conducted assurance visits to the Serious Cases Sub-Group; Quality Impact and Outcomes Sub-Group and Learning and Development Sub-Group, and the Partnership Operations Group. In June 2020, I was invited to meet the Children's Trust Board to review progress. Andrew Christie, Chair of BCT has also met with me and attended the BSCP Executive Board.
- 3.14 On 12th March 2021, I attended the Police & Crime Commissioner's launch of a research report he commissioned, "Punishing Abuse" which drew on the lived experience of young people in the Youth Justice system telling their often traumatic stories of earlier neglect and abuse. Whilst not news, this was powerful, up to date evidence to support the developing agenda for early help and early intervention, being developed by the Children's partnership. The Birmingham "Local Offer" website launch on 23rd March 2021, was a moving example of this policy shift gaining practical application. Here was a co-produced development undertaken with parents and carers, responding to their needs for information and access to services and support.



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3.15 Let me end this section where I started, with recognition for the commitment and energy of the Safeguarding Partners who have continued to do the business - implementing our improvement plan, responding to the demands of events, contributing to our meetings and demonstrating their determination to improve the lot of children and families in Birmingham.

4. Our Ambition

- 4.1 It hasn't changed from April 2019:
- 4.2 "Birmingham is a family friendly city where children will flourish, feel safe, listened to, learn and grow up, able to actively contribute to society".
- 4.3 Last year marked an improvement signalled by OFSTED and endorsed by those of us close to the service improvement agenda in Birmingham. We recognised there was still a way to go, and there still is. However, as I say above, COVID-19 has been a catalyst for collaborative and co-productive progress. Is there any evidence?
- 4.4 Well yes, let me give a few examples.
 - Birmingham's Children's Partnership (Board, Exec and POG) has driven progress in the development of the "Local Offer" website, especially designed for those children with special needs including educational needs.
 - Birmingham's Children's Partnership has also developed the Early Help offer delivered through 10 designated localities, partnering with community and voluntary organisations.
 - The Children's Partnership's Vision and plan has been shaped with the direct input of "Young Researchers" who have garnered the views of Children and Young people to inform it safety, opportunity, diversity, leisure and open space all scored highly.
 - The Empower-U Hub hosted by the Children's Trust and involving a wide range of partners is developing its practice in the face of a local and national priority tackling exploitation and violence; recognising children as victims.
 - The NHS are listening to the voices of the young and are acting on research, an example being the commissioning of "RedThread" and "St Giles" in Emergency units to enable those "reachable" moments to be found with the victims and perpetrators of violence.
 - The numbers of children excluded from primary schools is reducing, though still too high. There is a consensus that this requires a "team around the school" as well as a "team around the child". An issue highlighted by Quality Impact and Outcomes and the Executive Board last year, is getting the partnership attention it requires.
 - This year saw the launch of the powerful and timely "Who's in Charge" campaign
 initiated by the Birmingham Community Healthcare Trust and supported by the BSCP.
 The release of this set of videos and advice materials during lockdown, reminding



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parents of the dangers of alcohol and substance misuse whilst caring for children, gained a good reach and was picked up in other places. Sadly, we have still had some injured infants.

- BSCP have initiated a development programme with the Birmingham Council of Faiths
 with the aim of raising awareness, developing Safeguarding Leads and a programme
 of training. An effective bid to the DfE will help to resource this.
- A partnership Neglect Lead Manager is in the process of being recruited. This person
 will be a key driver behind bringing the Neglect Strategy launched at the 2019
 Practitioner Conference, to practical fruition.
- West Midlands Police with partners has thrown its weight behind "making every conversation count", ensuring training and reinforcement of this important message.
- 4.5 All this said, there are still real issues for children and young people in Birmingham and the BSCP priorities reflect these: tackling neglect, exploitation and violence to name but three.

5. Our Purpose

- 5.1 At the outset of the new arrangements, we agreed that our purpose was to:
- 5.2 Convene the four lead safeguarding partners and their staff to work in close and effective collaboration with "relevant agencies" to "safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in Birmingham".
- 5.3 Specifically, our partnership purpose was to provide "system leadership, challenge, and to hold organisations to account".
- 5.4 We committed to creating a "learning culture, sharing good practice and driving improvement in partnership working to deliver better outcomes".
- 5.5 This year has been all about doing this, and doing it against a back cloth of COVID-19 and lockdown. This year has not been about structural change for the partnership, rather it has been about delivery, delivering together.
- 5.6 The Sub-Groups have delivered on their work programmes.
- 5.7 David Passley, the new L&D Programme Manager, has led the effective move to online courses and the online learning offer has gained good traction, evidenced by quality assurance observations, user feedback and good attendance. The online Conference was a success, increasing our reach and impact.
- 5.8 The Serious Cases Sub-Group has continued to divide its time between conducting reviews and ensuring identification of improvements in practice.
- 5.9 Three learning bulletins have been produced reflecting key themes identified in reviews. In turn, these themes are picked up in training and provide lines of enquiry for audit and review.



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- 5.10 The Quality Impact and Outcomes Sub-Group have sustained their audit and deep dives programme and are seeing progress against a number of highlighted issues: discharge planning; school exclusions; and homeless provision for children at risk.
- 5.11 The Practitioner Forums have increased attendance whilst online, the most recent seeing 53 participants valuing the presentation on Domestic Abuse from the Lead Manager in the Children's Trust.
- 5.12 By participating in both the City Board and the Children's Partnership Board I seek to bring independence, challenge, support and the voice of safeguarding to these agendas. For these bodies, the determinants of safety and well-being are and should be the focus secure homes and places for inclusive communities; effective education; opportunities for work and fulfilment; physical and emotional health; equality and diversity valued and respected.

6. **Our Priorities**

6.1 Let's consider now the progress we have made against our specific BSCP priorities:

6.2 Strong Leadership and Strong Partnership Demonstrating Effective Accountability

- 6.2.1 I had hoped to be able to celebrate new stability in the managerial leadership of the Council. Unfortunately, after just under a year in the Interim role, Chris Naylor returned to his substantive post as CEO of Barking & Dagenham Council. Whilst in Birmingham his impact was positive, and his legacy is a commitment to structuring the Council around the Early Intervention that should lead to better more responsive services for citizens and savings on higher cost provision that should not be needed. That Graham Betts has been able to step into the role temporarily for a second time is reassuring. That there will be yet another recruitment and subsequent change at the top is regrettable. I have worked with six CEOs in my five years in Birmingham. That as much has been achieved as can be seen is testimony to many people, but there is a need for senior officer stability and continuity.
- 6.2.2 There is also now a change at the top of Education and Skills Department in the Council. Fortunately, Andy Couldrick has stepped in to cover in the interim, providing much needed sustainability for the significant agenda of change, improvement and a collective response to COVID-19. The Education function in particular requires support and recognition, enabling them to become fully engaged in partnership priorities especially the reduction of exclusions. The "Team around the School" initiative appears to be a really positive development.
- 6.2.3 Beyond the Council, there has been commendable stability. And it shows. The role of the Children's Trust has been pivotal in sustaining momentum behind the improvement and collaboration agendas that this report reflects.
- 6.2.4 The leadership team from the CCG has forged respectful and effective working relationships across the breadth of the partnership. The new Head of Public Protection from West Midlands Police has built his team and begun to establish purposeful relationships.
- 6.2.5 The open exchanges between senior partners can be properly challenging and are also supportive and noticeably un-defensive. Displaying curiosity and learning from elsewhere, as



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well as evaluating local practice has become the norm. All this is encouraging and reflects a commitment to accountability.

- 6.2.6 Leadership and partnership do not reside just at the top, and this year has seen positive behaviours at all levels of the safeguarding system. I have already highlighted a number of examples the POG, the Children's partnership programme, and the work of the Sub-Groups of the BSCP. There is evidence that the partnership is empowering colleagues to work together with purpose, to review and learn, to listen to the voices of young people, and to have a positive impact.
- 6.2.7 This report is testimony to my accountability on a personal basis. Additionally, I have outlined above my attendance at Council Scrutiny, the Children's Trust Board and in one to ones with Executive Leads and Chief Executives.

6.3 Continuous Improvement of Child Protection Practice across the System and all Agencies

- 6.3.1 Despite COVID-19, the agenda for improving practice has remained. The commendable move of Learning and Development courses online, with an extension of the reach, is an example. So too was the virtual Practitioner conference in November 2020. We had hoped that moving it from the Summer might allow a real time offering, but that was not to be. But again, the reach was increased and the feedback positive.
- 6.3.2 It is clear that whenever we resurge or re-emerge after the pandemic, there will not be a complete return to the way we were. Instead we are likely to blend approaches, and it's clear that virtual online learning resources will remain on the menu.
- 6.3.3 This full year of the new arrangements for Rapid Reviews and Safeguarding Practice Reviews, has demonstrated the benefits of the new national approach. We are benefitting from regular feedback from the "National Panel" on their distillation of messages for practice from themed reviews and trend analysis. We have speedier identification of learning from Rapid Reviews, allowing faster action. And we have recently received endorsement for our recommendation not to carry out a Safeguarding Practice Review, because of the full programme of work emanating from a similar review and a national piece of work. This is sensible pragmatism allowing for a focus on improvement.
- 6.3.4 Our year has highlighted a number of areas for practice awareness and system improvement and it is encouraging to see specific action underway on Neglect; Exclusions; Exploitation; and Serious Youth Violence where the lead accountability rests with the Community Safety Partnership, but we have a key assurance role to play.
- 6.3.5 As I indicated earlier, our Practitioner Forums have continued virtually, quarterly, and have achieved increased attendance.
- 6.3.6 We continue to produce Learning Bulletins from serious cases, relevant rapid reviews and interesting audits. We sustain our website as the home for these materials and we hope that all practitioners and their managers avail themselves of the useful resources available. Anecdotally, colleague Chairs regularly tell me that they use our website as a good source of information.



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- 6.3.7 Our virtuous learning circle across the Sub-Groups requires that reviews identify learning; the training offer reflects these up to date themes; and the audit programme tests the effectiveness of their practice.
- 6.3.8 The one published Serious Case Review this year November 2020. We refer to it as "Four Children....two were the parents" because the parents were teenagers and unprepared for care of two children under one, one with significant health concerns and needs. This was a case from 2015, which had taken 5 years to conclude in a criminal conviction of the mother. By then both the young children had been adopted and were settled. The key learning from this sad case focussed on discharge planning and neglect. Given the passage of time, the key findings from the review had been acted upon and key improvements made.
- 6.3.9 Finally, in the light of the developed consensus over the need to embrace early intervention and early help, the BSCP Executive in its March 24th meeting, concluded that the wording of this priority should be adjusted to read: "Continuing Improvement of Safeguarding practice across the system and all agencies". This word change is to signal the importance of collaborative working with all children requiring a plan of work whether it be "early help", "child in need "or indeed "child protection". Our shared approach is to help families as early as possible and to work together with them to prevent need or significant harm. Collaboration is key and should not start when a "child protection" concern is raised.

6.4 Developing an effective multi-agency response to Child and Adolescent Neglect;

- 6.4.1 This priority has probably suffered as a result of COVID-19.
- 6.4.2 The requirements for all agencies to change their ways of working overnight from March 2020, and the impact on individuals, organisations and the communities they served, cannot be underestimated.
- 6.4.3 In practice, the focus had to be on prioritising practice, the delivery of basics, and essential safeguarding.
- 6.4.4 In recognition for the relative lack of capacity to address turning the Neglect strategy of 2019 into a deliverable programme of work, the partners concluded that investing in Programme Management would be vital. The BSCP have provided funding for the first year of this key post.
- 6.4.5 The post is being recruited to now. I expect to report on progress next year.

6.5 Evaluating and Addressing the consequences of COVID-19 on Safeguarding Children

- 6.5.1 When we set this priority, we did not expect to end the financial year 2020/21 in lockdown. So in some ways it's too early to conclude the assessment of this priority. That said, there are already some very obvious impacts from COVID-19 on Safeguarding.
- 6.5.2 Firstly, the upsurge of Domestic Abuse referrals has been dramatic. The police have seen a 50% increase. In December 2020 alone the Police had 6000 call outs. 25% of referrals to Birmingham Children's Trust had Domestic Abuse as the primary reason, and 3400 assessments were completed by Social Work Teams between May 2020 and March 2021. The



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impact on children is significant and the presentation to the March 2021 Practitioner Forum was very sobering and timely. There is increasing recognition of the potential for children to suffer both directly and indirectly and for this trauma to have a lasting impact, especially if not addressed.

- 6.5.3 Secondly, children, whilst the least affected by COVID-19 in a medical sense, have been the most affected educationally and socially by the pandemic. The welcome return to school for all children in March 2021 is as important to address social isolation as educational attainment. The return also provides for visibility of most children, a safeguarding factor in its own right. However, there is an significantly increasing number of Birmingham children for whom "home education" is being selected.
- 6.5.4 Thirdly, the last year has seen a surge in case of youth on youth violence and gang related exploitation. A recent case of two teenagers (one murdered, one seriously injured) has led to a review which will be published under the title "Reachable Moments", before long. The recent murder of Keon Lincoln led to a Rapid Review whose actions are being dovetailed with those of the serious case review (above) and a national review. A significant body of partnership work is underway to recognise, divert from, and where necessary, respond to, developing threats. The role of the Empower-U Hub and the contribution of the West Midland Violence Reduction Unit will be vital. I welcome the opportunity to co-host with the Community Safety Partnership chair, a summit on Child Criminal Exploitation and Serious Youth Violence to develop a citywide strategy.
- 6.5.5 Fourthly, the changes in practice occasioned by lockdown, have brought some benefits as well as challenges. I've charted the catalysing effect that the pandemic had on the partnership and collaborative working. The Partnership Operations Group is a good example.
- 6.5.6 I have noted myself the improved attendance at some regional meetings, in particular. The West Midlands MASA Network meeting has opted to sustain virtual meetings for three out of its four in the year, introducing a fourth face to face development session annually.
- 6.5.7 The Children's Trust has undertaken a though piece of research with parents and professionals as to the effectiveness of "hybrid" Child protection conferences. The results were very positive and must suggest that there is some maintenance of this option. Attendance from some professionals has improved significantly; unsurprisingly GPs are one example.
- 6.5.8 It seems highly unlikely that there will be a wholesale return to office-based working. More likely, is a blended approach or a "work from anywhere" policy being introduced for many parts of public services. The flexibility, the rejection of "presentism", and the freeing up of space will be some of the benefits. If that improves recruitment, retention and work-life balance, then it should also have a beneficial impact on safeguarding and the capacity and capability of the system to sustain its pursuit of improvement.



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7. Conclusions

- 7.1 The past year has been unlike any other. My overriding assessment is that the Safeguarding Partnership rose to the challenge and made real tangible progress.
- 7.2 I would like to end by thanking everyone who has contributed to that collective effort.
- 7.3 The leaders I know and can thank personally when we meet.
- 7.4 Some practitioners I meet in Forums, meetings, or in the old days, on visits. To them and the countless numbers that I do not know, I want to say a big admiring "thank you". Your efforts are not unnoticed even if they are unseen.
- 7.5 It is the collective effort of so many in all the organisations, disciplines and communities that ensures that the City's safeguarding duty is fulfilled.

Thank you.

Penny Thompson CBE Independent Chair

Appendices

Appendix 1: Role of BSCP Independent Chair – Leadership of Assurance, Learning, Partnering

Appendix 2: BSCP Structure Chart

Safeguarding Children PARTNERSHIP

Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership

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Appendix 1:

Role of BSCP Independent Chair – Leadership of Assurance, Learning, Partnering

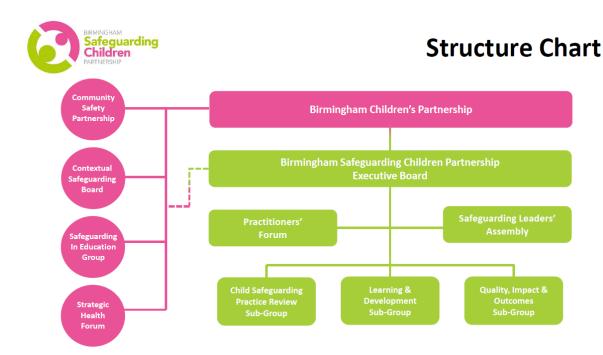
Key Functions:

- a) Independent convener of all those charged with the wellbeing, including safeguarding, of children and young people in Birmingham;
- b) A champion for children and best practice;
- c) Independent Chair of the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership Executive Board and Safeguarding Leaders' Assembly.
- d) Supporting and challenging the Birmingham leadership in their quest to achieve a sustainably
- e) safe city for children and young people, in the context of family, community and wellbeing;
- f) Modelling openness, challenge, support, mutual respect, professionalism and learning for application by leaders in Birmingham;
- g) Ensuring political and managerial leaders are demonstrably accountable for the resourcing and strategic priority given to the safeguarding and wellbeing of children and young people;
- h) Ensuring the Safeguarding Partners' leadership role is understood, valued, respected and fulfilled;
- i) Demonstrating a robust approach to evaluation, practice audit & research whose dissemination will support valuable learning for multi-agency leaders, managers and practitioners in their critical roles;
- j) Through robust independent support and challenge, contribute to developing confidence of citizens and the state in the city of Birmingham.



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Appendix 2:





Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership PO Box 17340 Birmingham B2 2DR

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