

Engaging parents and families

A toolkit for practitioners

Section 9: Home-school link worker/service

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Contents

	Page
1. Background	3
1.1 Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act (2006)	3
1.2 National Parenting Strategy (2012)	4
1.3 Education Governance Next Steps / National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan for Scottish Education (2017)	4
1.4 Learning together: Scotland's national action plan on parental involvement, parental engagement, family learning and learning at home (2018)	5
2. Home-school link worker/service.....	6
2.1 Role and responsibilities of the home-school link worker/service	7
2.2 Home visits.....	10
2.3 Creating a 'space'	12
2.4 Partners	12
2.5 Impact of the home-school link worker	13
2.5.1 Feedback on the impact of the home-school link worker/service	15
Activity 1: Developing or reviewing a home-school link service	16
Reflective questions	16
3. Workforce Development	18
3.1 Qualifications, experience and skills.....	18
Activity 2: Continuous professional development	19
Reflective questions	19
Reading list	21
Further Information.....	23

1. Background

This section provides an overview of the key national policies and guidance for practitioners in relation to the home-school link worker or service. Practitioners across Scotland who undertake the role of a home-school link worker have varying job titles and functions. Throughout this section, information has been collated on the roles and responsibilities that home-school workers might have within their remit. However, the role of the home-school worker/service will vary by local authority and no individual practitioner will undertake the full range of roles and responsibilities outlined.

Care should be taken not to confuse the role of the home-school link worker or service with home-school partnerships as discussed in section 5 of this toolkit.

1.1 Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act (2006)

Section 2(1) of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 requires every local authority to prepare a strategy for parental involvement and engagement (see section 6 of the Toolkit). The strategy should recognise the needs of different groups of parents and consider the challenges/barriers that prevents them from becoming involved and engaged in their child's learning and the life of the school. Local authority staff and practitioners may need to work closely with colleagues from other services such as home-school link workers to help support the work of the strategy or those who are working with families.

The time taken to understand the individual needs of families and community demographics is a key starting point. Allowing time and space to develop and build home-school relationships will help create a foundation upon which they can grow (Hunt et al, 2011). In the early days of building trust and relationships, practitioners should ensure that assumptions about parents and families are not made without firstly obtaining a holistic overview of their individual circumstances and needs.

Ensuring families feel valued, understood and listened to is a vital component to developing and maintaining effective collegiate relationships.

1.2 National Parenting Strategy (2012)

‘The National Parenting Strategy has one clear purpose: to act as a vehicle for valuing, equipping and supporting parents to be the best that they can be so that they, in turn, can give the children and young people of Scotland the best start in life’.

(National Parenting Strategy, 2012, p7)

Valuing and building the capacity of parents along with strengthening the practical help and access to support on offer, is a key priority in the National Parenting Strategy (2012).

Importance is also placed within the strategy on helping ensure parents get the support they need to prevent problems from arising or escalating. The aim of the National Parenting Strategy is to:

- ensure all parents have easy access to clear, concise information on everything from pregnancy to the teenage years and beyond
- offer informed, co-ordinated support to enable parents to develop their parenting skills, whatever their need, wherever they live, whether they live together or apart
- take steps to improve the availability of – and access to – early learning and childcare and out-of-school care, taking into account parents in rural areas and those who work irregular hours
- provide targeted support to families facing additional pressures that impact on day-to-day parenting
- acknowledge and address the wider issues that can affect parents’ abilities to provide a nurturing environment and care for their child

1.3 Education Governance Next Steps / National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan for Scottish Education (2017)

Scottish Government made a commitment in the [Governance Review Next Steps](#) to ‘boost support to those parents who do not currently engage as much as they would want to through enhancing the availability of home-school link workers and extending family learning’ (p4).

Within the [National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan](#), the Scottish Government is to work with partners to ensure that ‘every school has access to a home-school link worker to support parents and families who find it challenging to engage in their child’s learning and feel excluded from the work and life of their child’s school’ (2018, p37).

1.4 Learning together: Scotland's national action plan on parental involvement, parental engagement, family learning and learning at home (2018)

This [national action plan](#) follows on from the [Review](#) of the impact of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 (National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017). It sets out the Scottish vision for parental involvement and engagement, family learning and learning at home from pre-birth to age 18. At the heart of this plan is relationships based on trust, mutual respect and collaboration.

The aim of the plan is to:

- ensure that parents are supported to be fully involved in the life and work of their child's early learning and childcare setting or school
- encourage and support collaborative partnerships between practitioners, parents and families
- get the right support in place so that parents can engage in their child's learning
- expand access to family learning opportunities which meet the needs of participants
- improve the quality of all communication between practitioners, staff, parents and families
- improve the skills of leaders, front-line practitioners and support staff



The plan contains 13 goals and 52 national actions and provides a national vision while also allowing for local and community innovation and flexibility. Action 16 of the plan states:

'The Scottish Government will work with local authority partners to increase access to home-school link workers and similar roles by the end of 2019. The government's investment in Pupil Equity Funding will continue to provide schools with opportunities to employ their own workers where the school concludes that a link worker will support the school's aims. Work will be undertaken with local authorities to widen access to home-school link workers, to monitor progress and to evaluate impact' (p16).

2. Home-school link worker/service

‘Interventions designed to support parental involvement must....begin by building on families’ strengths and, in so doing, account for the diversity inherent in the ways in which parents interact with their children’.

(Hartas, 2011, p911)

A home-school link worker/service can help support parents and families who find it challenging to engage in their child’s learning and feel excluded from the work and life of their child’s early learning and childcare (ELC) setting or school. Supporting and encouraging parents and families through all stages of their child’s learning journey is important. When parents, families, home-school link workers, partners, staff in ELC settings/schools work and learn together, this helps build relationships, fosters positive attitudes, makes a difference and improves outcomes.



Developing relationships and building the capacity of Scotland’s parents to improve the life chances of children and young people is key to raising attainment. Practitioners from a range of backgrounds and sectors including home-school link workers, community learning and development, colleges, third sector, ELC settings, schools, local authorities, family support workers, health professionals and social workers can help

build parental capacity. Establishing and maintaining positive and effective relationships between parents, families, ELC settings and schools, along with involving and engaging parents is everyone’s responsibility.

Working with parents to build relationships, identify needs, establish support and services at a universal level is a key first step before extending this to targeted or additional interventions and parenting support. The importance of, and time required, to build relationships and establish trust with families should not be underestimated. Additionally, relevant, effective and timely communication with parents and families through disseminating information will help them progress to more targeted interventions.

2.1 Role and responsibilities of the home-school link worker/service

‘Home school link workers provide a service working with pupils and their families which often addresses specific issues, such as physical/mental health, attendance and family circumstances that may hinder or disrupt a pupil’s learning’.

(Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act Guidance, 2006, p55)

Practitioners in local authorities across Scotland who undertake the role of home-school link worker can have varying job titles and responsibilities in line with the needs of parents and families. They work across ELC, primary, secondary, special and communities and can be employed by either the local authority or third sector organisations. Home-school link workers may be part of the school pastoral team or linked to a wider ‘team around the child’ and have a specific focus e.g. support needs of individual pupils or on learning. Although some practitioners are in full-time permanent positions, others can be part-time, on temporary contracts and/or employed through specific funding approaches such as the Scottish Attainment Challenge or Pupil Equity Funding. Home-school link workers are located in varying places such as schools, community centres, shared service facilities, council offices or within third sector organisations.

The home-school link worker plays a crucial role as they can often become the ‘human face of the school’ and someone who ‘embodies a real expression of interest in the lives of the children entrusted to the setting/school’ (Department of Education and Science, 2006, p22). A key element of the home-school worker/service is focused on supporting and enhancing positive relationships with parents and families.

Home-school link workers will typically provide support, advice to children and families, share information on a range of matters (see table below) to improve outcomes and help parents engage in their child’s and their own learning. Information sharing between parents, families and the home-school link worker should be two-way to enable greater partnership working. Home-school link workers liaise closely with schools, partners and other agencies to support families. Support can be defined as ‘a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate. This implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability’ (Department of Education and Science, 2006, p10). Recording service user information and measuring impact of support is a key part of the role and responsibility of a home-school link worker.

The types of support provided by the home-school link worker/service, topics covered, roles and responsibilities will all vary across Scotland but may include the following:

Types of support	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acting as a referral route to other professionals and services • advice, support and guidance to deal with developmental needs of children • advocacy • building the capacity and empowering parents, instilling confidence, encouraging active parenting, providing support and reassurance • coaching • co-ordination/attendance at multi-agency meetings • disseminating best practice • encouraging positive attitudes, behaviour, reducing fear and anxiety • family nurture • helping parents to develop their own skills and potential through involvement in the wider life of the ELC setting or school • home visits • home-link initiatives • improved family relationships • individual or group work with children in school or in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • liaison with practitioners, teaching staff • motivating children and engaging them in learning activities • offering strategies for personal and social development • operating as an agent of change • parenting programmes • promoting co-operation between home, school and the community • resilience workshops • retaining young people in the education system • supporting children, families and schools to address issues at an early stage • supporting children's participation in learning activities • supporting marginalised children and young people • supporting parental engagement in their child's learning • supporting parents to develop positive home-school relationships, links and communications

Topics	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anxiety • attendance • barriers to learning • behaviour • bereavement • bullying • domestic violence • emotional and physical wellbeing • exclusions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • healthy lifestyles • illness • learning at home • parental separation or divorce • parenting issues • peer relationships • self-esteem in children and young people • transitions

Aspects of the home-school link service may be available after school and outwith school term times. The service is normally aimed at children from age 3 to 18 years. Families may be referred to a home-school link service through participation in an assessment of needs. Schools can discuss the role of the home-school link service with parents, where appropriate, before making a referral, should agreement be given.



As a key point of contact, home-school link workers can:

- work with individual or groups of children, parents and families to deliver a service aimed at providing early interventions
- provide assistance in short or long term problems through specific temporary support interventions or longer term interventions
- provide generic or enhanced support as well as continuity across transition stages for children, young people and their siblings through working across clusters, home-school link workers
- attend integrated team meetings, planning meetings for children and young people
- prepare reports
- support the implementation of an agreed plan

Children and families who need support during a specific period of time can benefit from the home-school link service depending on needs and vulnerabilities. However, it may be more appropriate to signpost children and families to other support services who have specific expertise and can help. Examples of support services could include: community based groups; counselling and support services; buddies; health; and social work.

Home-school link workers can help contribute to the development, review and evaluation of services, support and approaches within their ELC setting, school or organisation. This can include the review and development of policies and procedures to support pupils and families. Working in partnership with teaching staff will not only help strengthen the links between home-school it can also develop a deeper awareness across the ELC setting or school, of children and families' circumstances and provide opportunities for parent-teacher interactions (Department for Education and Science, 2006).

2.2 Home visits

‘Home visits are an enriching experience for all involved. The school community gains by having parents as active partners in the education of their children’.

(Department for Education and Science, 2006, p25)

There are a variety of circumstances and reasons why parents and families may not engage with ELC settings and schools. These could include: previous negative experiences of school; lack of confidence to speak with teaching staff; feelings of inability or inadequacy to support their child's learning. Barriers to parental involvement and engagement are discussed in more detail in section 3 of this toolkit. Home visits can be an opportunity to break down the barriers between home and school.

Home-school link workers may meet children, young people and their families in the home, at their ELC setting/school or in an appropriate venue to learn from each other, identify needs and provide appropriate support. This can be a crucial element to help establish a two-way partnership and ‘bonds of trust’ with families (Department of Education and Science, 2006). As well as establishing a relationship with families, home visits can help support continuing work in the home learning environment between visitations and retain the involvement of parents in the home-school link service (Sylva et al, 2018).

Home visits can bring new perspectives and can help transform the ways of connecting and working with families (Department of Education and Science, 2006). The visits should be part of a purposeful outreach aspect as well as ‘a symbolic and real expression of interest in families, many of which have been alienated from the education system in the past’ (Department of Education and Science, 2006, p12). Discussing their child’s learning at home can feel less intimidating than attending a meeting at school. Home-school link workers can then in turn, ensure that the views of children and families are communicated to the ELC setting or school and any support required can be put in place. This approach helps build bridges between home, ELC settings, schools and partner agencies which result in a co-ordinated approach and better communication.

Encouragement and partnership are key words in home visitations. There should be a deep awareness and understanding by everyone involved that the home-school link worker/service is there for the good of the family and to offer genuine help and support (Department of Education and Science, 2006). Home visits should support the role of parents as the first and ongoing educators of their child.

During visits, home-school workers may:

- support parents in their child’s learning
- seek to establish a rapport with parents and families
- offer information about services available in the community
- encourage parents to become involved with the community
- work with community needs and harness community energy
- act as an intermediary between home and school
- direct parents and families towards relevant training, further education, support
- help parents discuss their concerns and anxieties about approaching the ELC setting/school
- endeavour to break down negative attitudes towards ELC settings and schools
- develop empathy with families as they begin to engage with the education system
- build bridges between home-school, seek parents views and opinions
- learn from families

Maintaining a positive profile in the home and community helps workers gain access to families, build relationships and be welcomed into homes (Department of Education and Science, 2006).

Practitioners employed in the role of home-school link workers must comply with the required safeguarding and/or lone working procedures as set out by the relevant local authority, ELC setting, school or organisation.

2.3 Creating a 'space'

'...parental involvement work can be developed in schools at low cost and through simple measures'.

(Dyson et al, 2007, p4)

The importance of parental involvement/engagement and effective home-school links is widely acknowledged and accepted by practitioners who are keen to build on existing practice. Creating a 'space' in which to develop home-school links can be an important starting point (Dyson et al, 2007, p27).

Having a dedicated space can also allow practitioners to explore new approaches, develop new ideas and network with other ELC settings or schools. Furthermore, it allows parents to take ownership and work in partnership with practitioners to develop a sense of belonging and take forward some planned actions and activities.

2.4 Partners

Home-school link workers liaise with staff and practitioners in their ELC setting, school or organisation. Where agreement has been given, they will also liaise and communicate with partners and other agencies, organisations or sources of support and advice who may or may not already be involved with the child or family. Partners are likely to include:

- education
- social work
- housing
- community learning and development
- health
- third sector



2.5 Impact of the home-school link worker

'We can't begin to explain how grateful we were for our home link worker. Without her my daughter wouldn't be where she is now, a happy, confident and content girl. Our daughter had very bad anxiety, low confidence and depression and would not attend 1st year at the academy.....When the home link worker got involved, she worked wonders with our daughter, we couldn't have done it without her support and knowledge. Not only did she help our daughter get back on her feet she always helped us by explaining a lot of things and giving us the support we needed also to cope with the situation....It's all down to the support and hard work from our home link worker. These people are amazing and do a fantastic job with kids.....we are forever grateful of the service'.

(Parent)

The short term impact of the role of the home-school link workers and home visits is evident across a range of areas. Home visits in particular have shown an increase in children's self-esteem and confidence, progress in literacy and increased parental engagement (Sylvia et al, 2018).

Other impacts of the home-school link service have included:

- improved attendance, behaviour, attachment, language, communication
- resolution of issues at an earlier stage
- improved contact and engagement of parents and communities
- increased capacity and confidence of parents
- greater parental knowledge of what was happening in school and how to help their child with their learning
- reduced feelings of isolation
- development of social networks
- greater awareness of teaching staff accessibility
- stronger connections between home and school
- reduction in duplication of services through a more co-ordinated approach
- a more community engagement approach
- an increased number of families engaging in activities and visiting the school
- an increased number of parents enrolling in adult learning
- increased parental expectations and aspirations for their child's and their own future



Longer term impacts of the home-school link worker/service show 'clear evidence that achievement in reading and mathematics' had increased (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Department of Education and Skills, TUSLA Children and Family Agency, 2016, p4). Although the difference was 'statistically significant and was found at all grade levels', it was 'most marked among

pupils with lower levels of achievement' (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Department of Education and Skills, TUSLA Children and Family Agency, 2016, p4).

Findings in other studies indicate that 'home visiting programmes, or those interventions which have a home-visiting element, as well as interventions that provide support to parents in groups.....were considered as having high or medium impact' (Clark and Younas, 2017, p39) or positive effects on academic performance (See and Gorard, 2013). Home visits combined with group activities not only helped ensure that the individual needs of parents and families were recognised, it enabled them to build additional support networks in the community and reduced feelings of isolation (Clark and Younas, 2017).

Having dedicated staff to work in partnership and liaise with parents can be particularly beneficial. They can help families from a range of backgrounds, cultures, varying levels of literacy and speakers of other languages to gain knowledge about the 'school curriculum and what their child will be learning, and can introduce and explain the language of.....education' (Emerson et al, 2012, p42; Bull et al, 2008).

Success of the home-school service is however, dependent on dedicated staff with 'expertise or status in the community who can act as intermediaries between school and the home' and who are able to form and maintain successful relationships with parents (Bull et al, 2008, p8; Emerson et al, 2012). This is particularly evident in areas of deprivation and with families from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bull et al, 2008). Involving practitioners from the 'parents' own communities, has the potential to increase the confidence and skills of minority group parents to participate in more equal relationships with teachers' (Bull et al, 2008, p21).

2.5.1 Feedback on the impact of the home-school link worker/service

The following feedback on the impact of the home-school link worker/service has been reproduced with permission, from South Ayrshire Council's '2016-17 Home-link self-evaluation'.

The 'Home link worker has supported my daughter to return to school. She has arranged meetings in school and supported me to attend the meetings to discuss my concerns about my daughter....Communication with school has improved and I feel we are getting somewhere now'.

(Parent)

'This service was brilliant in both supporting our child within school and to access further support for mental health issues. We would not have known where to turn to address these issues without our home link worker. This service is essential for children and families'.

(Parent)

'Having no knowledge of this service despite our other two children going through school, we can honestly say that without this support our child would not have managed to access further supports from various agencies, which we were also not aware of. Our home link worker supported us to attend meetings, provided individual sessions to our child and worked closely with staff from school and other agencies. This service was invaluable to our family'.

(Parent)

'The home link service is a vital part of the Team around the Child. I have nothing but high praise for the 'above and beyond' attitude of this team'.

(School staff)

'I think that home link has been a very effective service as part of the integrated supports for young people with complex barriers to learning, particularly around anxiety, school phobia and home issues'.

(School staff)

'The contribution to the pupil's wellbeing from Home link worker is second to none. The pupil maintains good attendance at school as a result of her excellent relationship with home link worker and the corresponding communication with school. Home link worker's strategies have been invaluable'.

(School staff)

'My home link worker supported me to attend school, gain qualifications, and help me to talk about my feelings. Supported my family through a very hard time. Was always there to listen to me, even when I was really annoyed at them at times when going to school. They came to my meetings and helped get support with my education and mental health. My family were really lucky to have this service....Unless you need help you don't know how hard it can be at school'.

(Pupil)

My home link worker ‘gave me the strength and encouragement to wake up every morning and face going to school, anytime I was struggling I would turn to her and she would be there. I am a young person who has suffered trauma and she gave me loads of support and because of that I am more confident and feel safe. My home link worker always reminds me how worthy I am and encourages me to do well. From school meetings to children's panels she has been there and fought for more support to keep me safe’.

(Pupil)

‘Home link services are a really crucial link to support work between home and school. Often when there are barriers and difficulties to be addressed, relationships can become fraught, so home link can have a role in maintaining connections and communication between stakeholders. There are lots of instances of positive relationships being established in this way’.

(Partner agency)

‘This is a very committed and professional service which impacts positively in the lives of families and young people in all aspects of their coping strategies’.

(Social Worker)

Activity 1: Developing or reviewing a home-school link service

Purpose

To work in partnership with relevant stakeholders to develop or review a home-school link service in your local authority, ELC setting or school.

Reflective questions

- How do you currently engage with families?
- Is the ELC setting or school a welcoming and supportive environment for parents and families? How do you know?
- Are the individual needs of families being considered along with effective engagement strategies?
- How does your parental involvement/engagement strategy link with wider policies for supporting and building the capacity of children and families?
- Do you have access to a home-school link worker/service?
- Do you currently work in partnership or co-deliver on a home-school link service to maximise resources and reduce duplication across your cluster or local authority?

- How do you use data and a range of relevant intelligence as a basis to take forward the home-school link worker approach?
- What are your intended outcomes and expected impacts of developing or reviewing your home-school link service?
- Have you undertaken a scoping exercise to identify what universal services/provisions are currently available for all parents?
- How do you link with other services, agencies, partners to build universal parental capacity?
- What is your approach to family nurture?
- Do you have a shared language or glossary of terms across ELC settings, schools and services to avoid confusion or misinterpretation?
- Is the home-school link worker/service effective? How do you know?
- What are the impacts of the home-school link worker/service on children, families, their learning and health and wellbeing?
- How do you ensure that provision of a home-link worker/service is responsive to the needs of families?
- In what ways do you actively promote equality, fairness and diversity?
- What evaluation methods are we using to demonstrate that the home-school link worker/service is improving the life chances of the children and families involved?



3. Workforce Development

Where early learning and childcare, schools or organisations opt to buy-in the services of a home-school link worker, they will want to be sure that practitioners have the appropriate competencies. This is important to ensure that families have a positive experience and engagement with the home-school link worker/service and the ELC setting or school. Importance must be placed on firstly developing positive relationships. Individual needs of families must be considered along with effective engagement strategies. ELC settings and schools should be welcoming and inviting to parents both in terms of how it looks when parents come in and in the way staff greet people. A welcoming culture in ELC settings and schools which is open to innovation and relationship building with parents and families will help enable home-school link workers to develop this further as part of their role and responsibility.

Families who engage with the home-school link worker/service may look for and/or require the following:

- practitioners who: are able to work with and engage children, parents and families; have a sound knowledge base; are friendly, non-threatening; can communicate effectively; are confident and show a sense of fun and energy; are flexible, adaptable, and tireless; develop effective group work skills; use play and space to help parents/families be successful learners; are responsive and sensitive to needs; respond to emerging needs as children and families move on through the various stages of their education
- opportunities for practical learning
- confidentiality
- referral to local services

3.1 Qualifications, experience and skills

Examples of possible qualifications, experience and skills of home-school link workers are provided below for illustrative purposes only. Other models of home-school link workers or services will vary by job title and according to local context as well as source of funding e.g. local authority, Pupil Equity or Scottish Attainment Challenge Funding.

- Educated to SCQF level 7, which includes HNC or Advanced Highers or equivalent, in one of the relevant fields of Childcare, Social Work, Health or Community development.
- Experience of working with: children under 3 years of age; vulnerable children, young people and families; parents and adult learners
- Experience of supporting or leading parenting programmes and interventions which demonstrate impact and improve outcomes.
- Ability to build positive relationships with children, young people, families, staff and partners.
- Knowledge of practice and theory in relation to child development.
- Ability to work creatively and flexibly to meet varying needs of parents and families.
- Ability to engage and work with parents and families who have complex needs and difficulties engaging with services.
- Knowledge of care and welfare procedures.
- Registration with relevant body e.g. Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), Standards Council.
- Ability to work on own or as part of a team.
- Knowledge of Curriculum for Excellence and other relevant national guidelines including child protection policies.
- Ability to develop supportive professional relationships with families which identify and build on strengths.
- Highly developed communication skills.
- Advocacy and/or mediation skills.
- Demonstrate a positive attitude and enthusiasm.

Activity 2: Continuous professional development

Purpose

To build the capacity of staff who work with parents and families.

Reflective questions

- Have staff developed positive relationships with families built on trust and honesty?
- Are staff confident in establishing and maintaining positive relationships with parents and families?

- Do staff require training to help them in their work with parents and families?
- How do staff keep up-to-date with research and changes? How does this affect current and future work or practice with parents and families?
- Do staff work in partnership with the home-school link worker/service to share information and help improve outcomes for children?



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Further Information

Family and community engagement (FaCE) toolkit for schools – Welsh Government
<https://www.gov.wales/family-and-community-engagement-face>

Renfrewshire Council – The Home Link Service
<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/re/homelink/>

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