

# RAT LAND

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## LONDON'S GROWING RODENT PROBLEM



GLA CONSERVATIVES  
GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY

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# RAT LAND – LONDON’S GROWING RODENT PROBLEM

## Executive Summary

London’s rodent population is on the rise. Evidence presented in this report shows local authorities and pest control firms in the capital received over 186,000 complaints relating rodents over the past five years. That’s more than 100 per day - and the problem is getting worse.

It came to a head in July 2017 when Harrow became the focus of an unfortunate viral video that served as a warning to other London boroughs of the risks of poor environmental health.

This report examines the extent of London’s rodent problem and the issues surrounding pest control in London boroughs. It looks at the possible consequences for local authorities who do not address the problem, as well as looking at what other cities have done about similar issues in Europe.

It assesses the Mayor of London’s role in protecting the capital’s reputation as a clean and attractive city and looks at why he should be concerned with limiting the spread of rodents.

**Ultimately, the report puts forward a case for the Mayor to lead local authorities in tackling what appears to be a growing issue in London – the spread of rodents. Below is a summary of the report’s recommendations:**

#### RECOMMENDATION #1

The Mayor of London should build on the work of the previous administration and set a new target of creating more Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in London boroughs by 2020. BIDs encourage businesses to work collaboratively to improve the cleanliness of their area.

#### RECOMMENDATION #2

The Mayor of London should kick-start a public awareness campaign about nuisance rodents and outline how individuals and businesses can help prevent their spread. He should also outline what work is being done to eradicate rats and mice on the London Underground.

#### RECOMMENDATION #3

The Mayor of London should write to borough council leaders outlining the extent of London’s rat problem and urge them to take proactive action, including reassessing fortnightly bin collections.

#### RECOMMENDATION #4

The Mayor of London should urge boroughs to publish data on the number of rodent sightings they receive at least once a year.



# Introduction - Rats in London and why they thrive

As long as people have lived in London, so have rats. However, the rodents' propensity to carry and spread diseases has meant their co-existence alongside humans has not historically been a popular one.

They have been roundly blamed for a series of major public health disasters. The black death in 1348, which is believed to have killed almost one third of the population in Britain, is widely blamed on rats who are believed to have spread the disease.<sup>1</sup> The outbreak forced people to think very drastically about street cleanliness in order to stop the rodents, and therefore the disease, from spreading.

Centuries later, between 1665 and 1666, a further outbreak known as the Great Plague of London killed an estimated 100,000 people – almost a quarter of London's population.<sup>2</sup> The disease was most commonly transmitted through the bite of an infected rat flea and the rodents were once again public enemy number one.

Whilst the health risk to the public today is not as great as many centuries ago, the fact remains that rats still carry many serious diseases. These include Weil's disease, salmonella, tuberculosis, cryptosporidiosis, E.Coli and foot and mouth disease. There is no question that rat populations must be contained in densely populated areas like London, and that a failure to do so represents a public health risk. Aside from the physical dangers, many people suffer emotional problems. A fear of mice and rats, often referred to as musophobia, is one of the most common specific phobias and can cause sufferers a large amount of distress.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, as populations grow and people live closer together, living conditions for rats get better. London especially - a sprawling urban infrastructure with a rapidly growing density - is a place where rodents can, and do, thrive. Street cleanliness, more formally referred to as 'environmental health', is a major factor in the ability of rodent populations to breed and thrive.



1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/northwest/series1/rats.shtml>
2. Great Plague - <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/great-plague/>
3. Musophobia - <https://www.allaboutcounseling.com/library/musophobia/>

Analysis provided to this report by national pest control firm Rentokil outlined why rats and mice might find conditions in London so appealing<sup>4</sup> :

*'While there are a host of natural places for rodents to seek shelter, food and water in our cities, they may be more prevalent in certain areas because of issues around rubbish, or less apparent problems such as drainage defects.*

*'With access to a warm nesting area, food and water, rodents can breed extremely quickly. They reach sexual maturity after four to five weeks, meaning that an undetected population could swell from two rats to around 1,250 in just one year.'*

It is clear then that many of the conditions in which rats thrive can be eliminated with proper management of urban areas, including efficient waste collection and operational utilities. Some elements, including unseasonably warm weather such as those seen in England towards the end of 2016, can also contribute to growths in populations.

Rentokil found residential rodent infestations across the UK increased by 19 per cent in 2017 compared with the previous year.

They added:

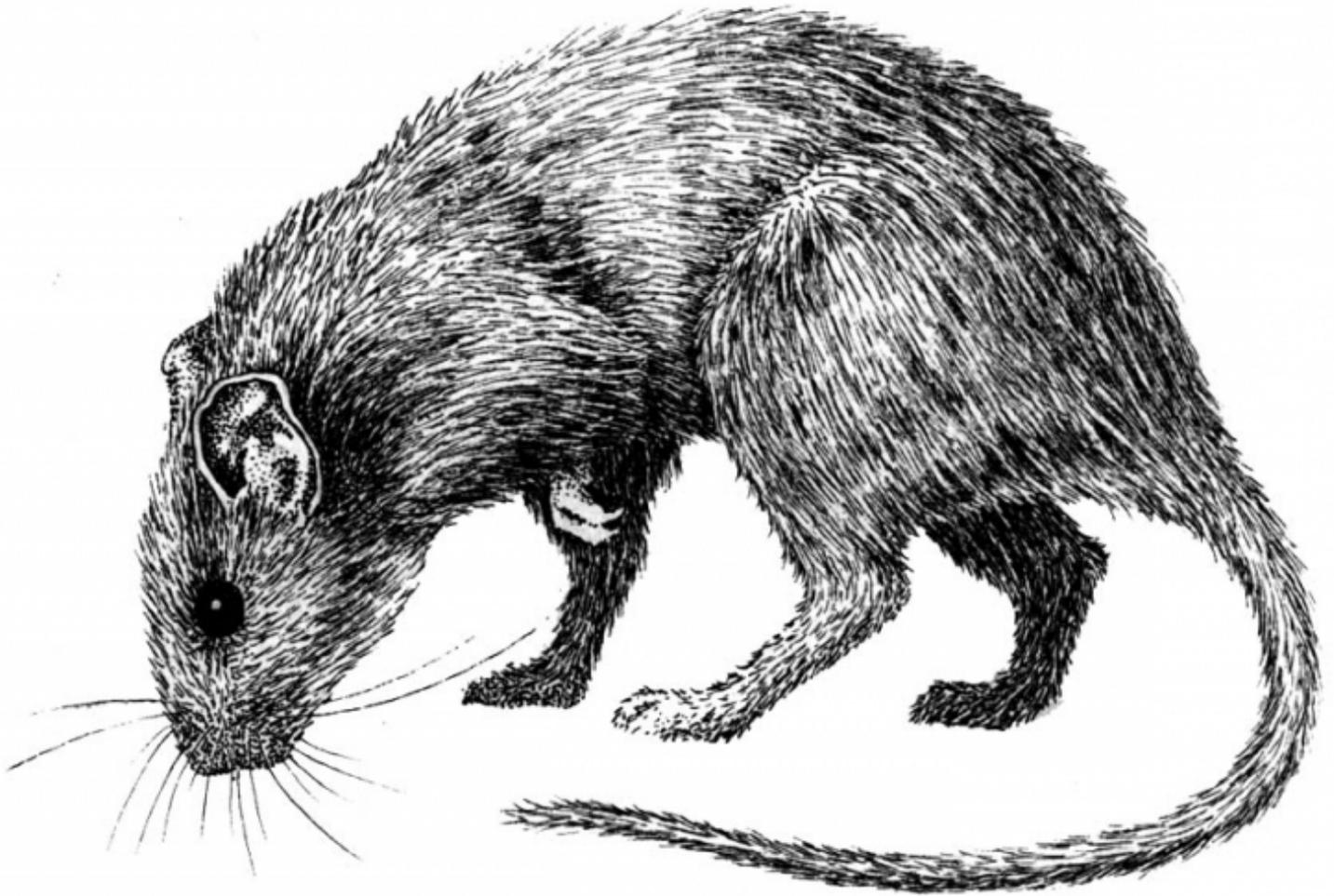
*'As the weather starts to cool down and we experience more rainfall, rodents are more likely to make their way into homes and businesses to seek warmth, shelter and a food source. For residents and businesses, prevention is certainly better than a cure when it comes to rodents. Denying them access to a premises or food can go a long way to preventing a problem.'*

London-based rodent experts MG Pest Control also identified <sup>5</sup> several reasons why rats and mice thrive in London. These include the vast sewer systems which provide a constant temperature, regular food and water and shelter them from predators. They also note they are 'finding the number of rat calls is slowly increasing', pointing to fast food, excess rubbish on the streets and the fact people are living closer together as possible causes.

4. Information provided to Susan Hall by Rentokil via email

5. MG Pest Control - <https://mgpestcontrol.co.uk/2017/02/13/rats-in-london/>





# The number of rats in London

Through freedom of information (FOI) requests, all 32 London boroughs were asked how many rodent complaints (mice, rats and squirrels) had been reported to them by members of the public over the past five years.

Four London boroughs were only able to provide the information for the past three years and three were unable to provide any information. The rest provided the information in full. The numbers gathered showed that 186,329 rodent complaints have been logged with local authorities in London since 2012 – an average of 102 per day.

Table 1. Rat Complaints

The fullest information – of incidents recorded over the past three years – shows the number of recorded complaints is on the rise. There were 30,119 reports recorded in 2016/17, an increase of 9.6 per cent on the previous year, when 27,239 complaints were logged. The 2016/17 figures also 3.3 per cent up on the number of complaints recorded two years ago in 2014/15.

Where the information provided was broken down by type of rodent, mice proved to be a bigger pest than rats. Mice made up 58 per cent of complaints, with 53,079 recorded, whilst rats made up 40 per cent, with 37,395. Squirrels made up just one per cent of complaints, with 986 in total.

Rank	Council	Complaints
1st	Tower Hamlets	30,000
2nd	Brent	19,978
3rd	Camden	13,558
4th	Lambeth	13,357
5th	Ealing	12,240
6th	Redbridge	9,859
7th	Newham	9,331
8th	Hackney	8,896
9th	Islington	8,741
10th	Wandsworth	7,898
11th	Haringey	6,807
12th	Greenwich	6,637
13th	Harrow	5,887
14th	Hillingdon	5,284
15th	Westminster	5,179
16th	Enfield	4,709



Tower Hamlets handled the most number of rodent complaints, dealing with 30,000 reports since January 2012 – 16 per cent of the total number across London.

Among the top five worst boroughs, Brent dealt with nearly 20,000 complaints, whilst Camden and Lambeth both received over 13,000 each. Ealing handled over 12,000.

Where some councils provided additional data, it provides a glimpse of the amount of time authorities spend responding to these complaints. Tower Hamlets' pest control team for example has carried out 62,316 residential visits since 2012, with over half - 33,887 – relating to council-owned properties. In most cases the number of visits carried out is greater than the number of complaints received due to re-visiting of problem areas and pro-active visits.

Rank	Council	Complaints
17th	Bark and Dag	4,096
18th	Lewisham	3,709
19th	Hounslow	3,343
20th	Richmond	1,718
21st	Barnet	1,054
22nd	Bromley	986
23rd	City of London	940
24th	Ken and Chelsea	845
25th	Merton	546
26th	Hammersmith & Fulham	271
27th	Sutton	227
28th	Kingston	200
29th	Havering	33
30th	Bexley	(no data)
31st	Waltham Forest	(no data)
32nd	Croydon	(no data)
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>186,329</b>



# The Paris example

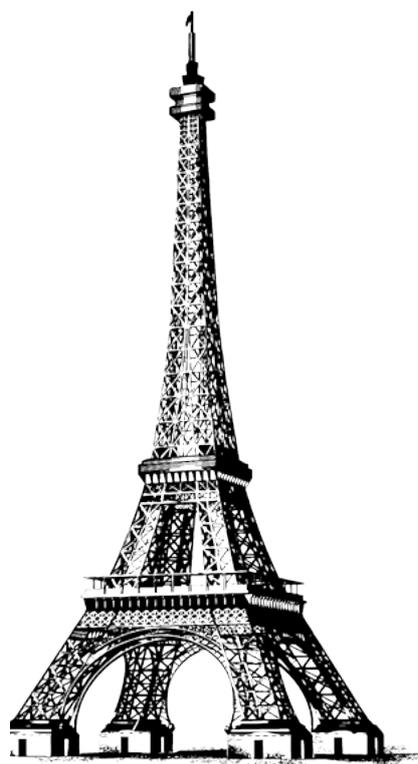
One of London's closest neighbouring capital cities, Paris, has experienced its own rat problems that in many ways mirror London's own. The French capital attracted international attention after the publication of a series of pictures showing packs of rats scavenging for food among picnickers in the gardens of The Louvre. In December 2016, Paris officials temporarily closed many of the city's public parks while hundreds of rat traps were laid in what was described as a 'war' against the rodents<sup>6</sup>. Rats are now estimated to outnumber people in the French capital by two to one, with around four million scavenging in the city's streets and parks.

The Telegraph noted that, as well as the public health hazard, the rodents were beginning to cause an embarrassing reputational issue for the city. As the newspaper wrote:

*'It's the sort of bad press it can ill afford. The number of tourists visiting the City of Light fell by 13 per cent between January and August 2016 compared with the same period in 2015, resulting in a loss of €1billion (£0.9bn) in monthly tourism revenue.'*

Whilst the decline in tourism cannot be entirely, or even largely, attributed to the proliferation of rodents, clearly it is a factor that can affect the international reputation and desirability of a major city. In a bid to act, Paris officials hired private experts to deal with the problem. Measures included introducing rat-proof bins and revised rubbish collection timetables for street cleaners, to prevent waste being left out for too long. Paris officials also ran a public awareness campaign warning residents and tourists against feeding the city's pigeons and stray dogs – leftovers of which were providing the rodents with a regular source of food.

The issue became a major problem for Paris and its reputation as a leading international city. The image of the city being awash with dirty, disease-spreading rats is one the city is still battling to erase.



6. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/news/the-city-of-paris-has-declared-war-on-rats/>



# Harrow's 'Rat Land' episode - a warning for London?

In July 2017 a video showing hordes of rats invading piles of abandoned rubbish on a street in Harrow went viral. The footage captured dozens of the rodents diving in and out of refuse from their nest in a council flower bed. News outlets quickly picked up on the clip and the subsequent coverage sparked a London-wide debate about the state of our streets and the capital's allegedly growing rat problem.

The story led to Harrow being dubbed 'Rat Land' in one BBC report <sup>7</sup> and caused immense embarrassment for the local authority, which hurriedly sent in its environmental health team to clean up the area. Although the video captured just one isolated incident, the manner in which it grabbed the public's attention highlighted a wider problem on London's streets. Fortnightly bin collections, fly-tipping and poor waste disposal by businesses were among reasons given for what people anecdotally said was a worsening issue.



Actual footage of Harrow rats video

The video received local, London-wide and national press attention. Titles including the Daily Mail, BBC London, GetWestLondon and the Harrow Times all picked up on the story. As a result, the video was viewed many thousands of times. As attention on the borough grew, Harrow Council sent in its environment team to completely remove the flower bed where the rodents were nesting. The excavation led to further local media coverage, and a further video of rats dashing for cover as the digger pulled up the contents of the bed.

The fallout led to a public and political outcry. Harrow West MP Gareth

Thomas called for 'urgent measures' to deal with the issue, writing to the local authority and even Communities Secretary Sajid Javid <sup>8</sup>. One councillor spoke about the need to 'bring some pride back to Harrow' <sup>9</sup>, whilst online campaign group #FixItHarrow continued to pressure the council into action. The authority has since promised to install 2,000 new rat-proof bins across the borough<sup>10</sup>, as well as pledging to empty them twice a day. It has also laid rat traps in problem areas.

7. BBC report - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJEXozUuD80>

8. MP writes to council - <http://www.getwestlondon.co.uk/news/west-london-news/harrow-rat-problem-mp-calls-13414293>

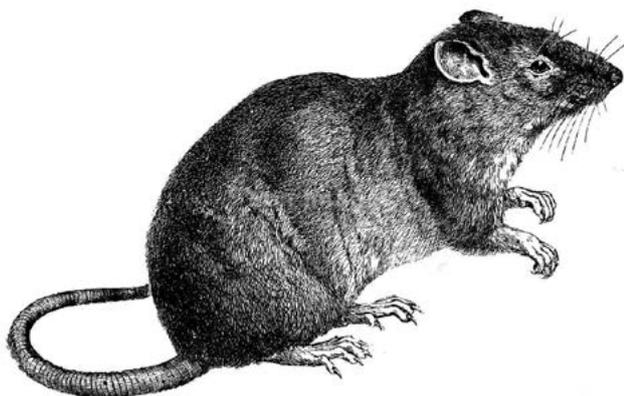
9. 'We need to bring pride back to Harrow' - <http://www.getwestlondon.co.uk/news/west-london-news/we-need-bring-pride-back-13382735>

10. Council announces litter bin revolution - [http://www.harrowtimes.co.uk/news/15561327.Council\\_announces\\_litter\\_bin\\_revolution\\_to\\_tackle\\_rubbish\\_issue/](http://www.harrowtimes.co.uk/news/15561327.Council_announces_litter_bin_revolution_to_tackle_rubbish_issue/)



Whilst these measures have been welcomed by residents, the reputational damage done to the borough could have been avoided with a more proactive approach to street cleanliness. The council's experience in Harrow somewhat mirrors what happened in Paris. Public officials were left embarrassed and extensive work has been required to try and restore public faith in the cleanliness of the town.

The episode should serve as a warning to other London boroughs where rat populations are beginning to become an issue. Proactive work is required before there is a repeat of the scenes in Harrow, but boroughs should not be expected to tackle the problem alone.



# How can the Mayor of London help?

## Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)

The Mayor clearly should have an interest in limiting the spread of rats and mice across London. Not only does it limit the public health risk, it minimises the potential for serious borough and city-wide reputational damage and there are added benefits to the local economy.

Cleaner town centres and public areas improve the attractiveness of an area and encourage people to visit and spend money with local businesses – improving the overall prosperity. Whilst the Mayor cannot demand that councils take proactive measures, he can encourage a more co-ordinated approach to cleanliness in towns through initiatives like Business Improvement Districts (BIDs).

Waste collection is one area where BIDs can help, with businesses encouraged to work together to improve the cleanliness of their area – a key factor in halting the spread of rodents. According to london.gov.uk, BIDs ‘give local businesses a vote to collectively contribute to improve services, boost trading conditions and enhance their towns and public areas.’ It adds that ‘this could include extra safety, cleaning or environmental measures.’<sup>11</sup>

In the town of Winchester, Hampshire, a local BID has worked with the local authority to spearhead a drive to clean up alleyways and high streets previously littered with poorly-kept industrial rubbish bins – a prime attraction for rodents. A report published about the scheme explained<sup>12</sup> :

*“A well-presented city is an attractive one for visitors and encourages them to spend time and money in local shops and eateries.*

*“A combination of collaborative approaches and enforcement [will be] undertaken to encourage behaviour by businesses that will bring about an improved environment in the city centre.”*

Boris Johnson established 50 BIDs in his time in office, though the scheme appears to have stalled with the change of administration. The current Mayor should kick-start a new round of BIDs to incentivise local businesses to better look after their local area.

11. Business Improvement Districts - <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/business-and-economy/supporting-business/about-business-improvement-districts>

12. Hampshire Chronicle - [http://www.hampshirechronicle.co.uk/news/15566235.Businesses\\_warned\\_they\\_could\\_face\\_full\\_extent\\_of\\_council\\_powers\\_if\\_bins\\_aren\\_\\_39\\_t\\_removed/](http://www.hampshirechronicle.co.uk/news/15566235.Businesses_warned_they_could_face_full_extent_of_council_powers_if_bins_aren__39_t_removed/)



## RECOMMENDATION #1

The Mayor of London should build on the work of the previous administration and set a new target of creating more Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in London boroughs by 2020. BIDs encourage businesses to work collaboratively to improve the cleanliness of their area.

### Public awareness campaign

It is clear that conditions in many places around London make it easier for rodents to thrive and, therefore, a sensible approach is to change those conditions. A public awareness campaign around the kinds of conditions which allow rodents to live could engender a collective understanding about what needs to be done. The campaign should include information for households about how best to keep mice and rats away with proper food and waste storage.

Businesses could be advised how to tidy up back areas of their shops or alleyways used for storage. Importantly, the campaign should highlight that rats and mice are a growing nuisance around London and emphasise that this is a genuine issue. The Mayor has the infrastructure through TfL to advertise across the transport network. He should also write to council leaders across the borough, highlighting the information shown in this report and urge them to take proactive steps, like introducing rat-proof bins and clearing council waste land.

The Mayor should also ask local authorities to think again about fortnightly bin collections and increase the frequency of town centre collections, particularly for industrial and food waste.

## RECOMMENDATION #2

The Mayor of London should kick-start a public awareness campaign about nuisance rodents and outline how individuals and businesses can help prevent their spread. He should also outline what work is being done to eradicate rats and mice on the London Underground.

## RECOMMENDATION #3

The Mayor of London should write to borough council leaders outlining the extent of London's rat problem and urge them to take proactive action, including reassessing fortnightly bin collections.

### Incentives for local authorities

Whilst increasing public awareness would have a positive impact on improving



street cleanliness, local authorities will also need to get on board. Councils may in some cases need to prioritise budgets for improving street scenes over other areas of work, and that will require incentives. One straightforward way of making sure it is on their agenda is the regular publication of rodent sightings data for each borough.

Councils should be asked to publish the data at least once a year in order to inform the public of the state of rodent populations in their area. Authorities that are taking effective action should be proud of a reduction in rodents in their borough, whilst the scheme would equally name and shame those who are not taking the issue seriously.

In being open and transparent with this information, councils will also be able to better persuade businesses, community groups and the public get on board with measures introduced to improve the situation.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #4**

The Mayor of London should urge boroughs to publish data on the number of rodent sightings they receive at least once a year.



# Conclusions and recommendations

London's rodent population is on the rise and, as the city continues to grow and its density increases, that trend could well continue. The Mayor of London and local authorities across the capital have a responsibility to ensure the prevalence of rats and mice in the city does not get out of control.

The incentive for acting is clear. Authorities will want to avoid increasing rodent populations from a public health perspective. As budgets tighten, there can be a temptation to withdraw resources from areas like rubbish collections, refurbishments and improving cleanliness. However, as the example of Paris shows, a lack of action can lead to a widespread issue that is far costlier to deal with afterwards. As well as the public health aspect, the example in Harrow showed how local authorities might come under fire for a perceived lack of cleanliness on the streets, causing reputational damage that could take years to fix.

In taking proactive action, local authorities will not only take a big step towards eliminating the risk of major rodent issues, they will be delivering a message that they are serious about keeping their town centres and public spaces clean. Not only will residents benefit, local businesses can make the most of the economic boost a clean, attractive town centre can bring.

The Mayor of London has a role to play in preventing the spread of rodent populations and he can lead from the front with policies on street cleanliness. If London is to avoid a Paris scenario, the Mayor must start taking a proactive approach to dealing with rodents now. And as this report has shown, if local authorities ignore the problem or refuse to get on board, it won't be long before they are the next 'Rat Land' of London.

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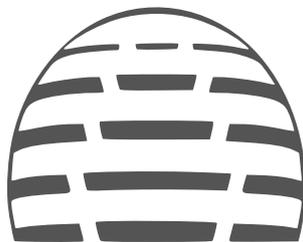
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