

**HTTP Browser Hints**  
**draft-nottingham-http-browser-hints-04**

Abstract

Over time, Web browsers have adapted how they use HTTP based upon common server configurations and behaviours. While this is necessary in the common case, it can be detrimental for performance and interoperability.

This document establishes a mechanism whereby origin servers can make available hints for browsers about their preferences and capabilities, without imposing overhead on their interactions or requiring support for them.

This is intended to allow browsers to safely optimise connections to servers.

Note to Readers

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## **1. Introduction**

HTTP [[RFC2616](#)] clients -- especially browsers -- typically use hardcoded values or heuristics to determine how many TCP connections to use to a server, based on common-case server behaviours and limitations.

Likewise, they often send voluminous request headers (e.g., in User-Agent and Allow) because they fear that changing those headers' values will break some sites that depend upon specific values.

These are just two examples of common, conservative behaviour by browsers that is good for interoperability, but potentially bad for performance in certain circumstances.

This document specifies a mechanism whereby a HTTP server can advertise hints for browsers (and other clients), so that communication with them can be optimised.

It does so by defining a file format for such Browser Hints [Section 3](#), and defining how clients can discover it for a given Web site [Section 4](#). Finally, an extensible vocabulary of hints is defined [Section 5](#).

## **2. Requirements**

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in [[RFC2119](#)].

## **3. A file format for Browser Hints**

Browser hints are conveyed in a JSON [[RFC4627](#)] formatted file, containing a single object whose member's names are browser hints, as defined by the registry [Section 7.3](#).

For example;

```
{
  "max-conns": 5,
  "small-hdrs": true
}
```

By their nature, all browser hints are optional; i.e., browsers are free to ignore them.

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### **3.1. The 'prefixlist' Value Type**

Each browser hint is defined to have a JSON-derived value type; e.g., 'string' or 'array'. This section defines a special value type, 'prefixlist' that is an array containing one or more arrays, each containing a path prefix followed by either 'true' or 'false' to indicate whether the hint applies to that path.

Prefixlists are evaluated in order, with the first case-sensitive, character-by-character prefix match for a given URI's path determining whether the hint applies.

For example, given the following hint document:

```
{
  "omit-cookies": [
    ["/images/users/", false],
    ["/images/", true]
  ]
}
```

We can tell that "omit-cookies" applies to resources under the "/images/" path (such as "/images/123.jpg"), except for those under "/images/users/" (such as "/images/users/bob.jpg").

If a value specified to be a prefixlist is either 'true' or 'false' that indicates that the hint applies to the whole site, or does not apply to the whole site, respectively.

For example,

```
{
  "omit-cookies": true
}
```

Indicates that the "omit-cookies" hint applies to the entire site.

Prefixlists can only be used when the browser hint's registration nominates their use.

## **4. Discovering Browser Hints for a Web site**

The hints relevant to a given site can be determined by fetching the URI path `"/.well-known/browser-hints"` for that site.

Typically, clients (especially browsers) will not block other requests to a site while fetching the browser hints (because they're

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optional); instead, it will usually be done concurrently with other requests, or on idle connections for future use.

In this specification, "site" is scoped by the URI scheme and authority. As such, all of the following are considered to be different sites, and therefore have different browser hints:

- o <http://foo.com/>
- o <https://foo.com/>
- o <http://foo.com:8000/>
- o <http://www.foo.com/>

Clients SHOULD follow HTTP 3xx redirects when retrieving hints.

A successful response is valid for its associated site for as long as it can be cached in HTTP.

If the response has a 200 status code but no explicit freshness (e.g., a Cache-Control: max-age or Expires: header), clients SHOULD cache the response heuristically for a generous fixed period (e.g., 14 days).

If the response has a 404 status code but no explicit freshness, clients SHOULD cache the response heuristically for a generous fixed period (e.g., 14 days).

#### **4.1. Notifying Clients with the BH Response Header Field**

It is anticipated that Browser Hints will be used by some, but not all, Web sites. Because clients might be reluctant to optimistically request the well-known URI, this document defines a new HTTP response header field, BH, to indicate that hints are available on a site.

For example,

```
HTTP/1.1 200 OK
Content-Type: text/html
Content-Length: 324
BH: 1
```

The presence of the BH header field in a response indicates that the origin associated with the effective request URI has a Browser Hints resource available at the well-known URI.

The header field value MAY be "0" or "1".

Origin servers that wish to indicate to clients that Browser Hints are available SHOULD include a BH header in all responses with a





value of "1".

Proxy servers that wish to suppress the use of certain Browser Hints MAY set (or reset) the BH header's value to "0".

#### **4.2. Interaction with HTTP Proxies**

Browser Hints are intended to optimise the connection between a client and the origin server. However, HTTP allows proxies to be interposed between browsers and origin servers, meaning that careless use of some hints -- especially those that are connection-oriented -- might not be applicable, and might even be harmful to the proxy.

To mitigate these risks, some hints identify additional requirements for clients consuming browser hints when there is evidence of a proxy in use.

A proxy is considered to be in use if:

- o A proxy is explicitly configured by the client, or
- o The BH response header field has a value of "0".

Note that the presence of the Via header is not considered, because it can also be generated by intermediaries working on behalf of the origin server ("reverse proxies").

Proxies MAY modify the value of the BH header field to be "0", or insert a BH header field with the value "0" if it is not present. Proxies MUST NOT modify a response so that the BH header field is "1" where it was previously not.

### **5. Pre-defined Browser Hints**

#### **5.1. max-conns**

- o Browser Hint Name: max-conns
- o Description: When present, this hint indicates the maximum number of concurrent persistent connections that the site would like clients to use.
- o Value Type: number
- o Contact: mnot@mnot.net
- o Notes: Not to be used when there is evidence of a proxy.

#### **5.2. pconn-ip**

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- o Browser Hint Name: pconn-ip
- o Description: When true, this hint indicates that the site allows clients to reuse persistent connections keyed by IP address, rather than by hostname. Note that all sites that are sharing the connection MUST declare this hint for it to be used, and if a transport-layer certificate is in use (e.g., for TLS [[RFC5246](#)]), it MUST be valid for all sites.
- o Value Type: true | false
- o Contact: mnot@mnot.net
- o Specification: [this document]
- o Notes: Not to be used when there is evidence of a proxy.

In other words, if both `www.example.com` and `foo.example.org` resolve to the address `192.0.2.5`, and indicate this hint, then clients can send a request to `www.example.com` and then a request to `foo.example.org` on the same TCP connection to that address.

If any of the sites grouped together for the purposes of `pconn-ip` declare a `max-conns` hint, the `max-conns` value for that address is considered to be the maximum of the declared `max-conn` hints present.

### **[5.3.](#) ip-balance**

- o Browser Hint Name: ip-balance
- o Description: When present, this hint indicates a preferred policy for clients to handle a DNS lookup that return multiple IPv4 addresses for the site.
- o Value Type: string
- o Contact: mnot@mnot.net
- o Notes: Not to be used when there is evidence of a proxy.

Defined values include:

- o `round-robin` - Use each IP address in succession, using the next address each time a new connection is opened.
- o `random` - Use a random IP address from the list for each new connection.
- o `failover` - Use the first IP address, falling back to the following address upon failure, and so forth.
- o `fastest` - Attempt to connect to all IP addresses, using the fastest for this and subsequent connections.

### **[5.4.](#) connect-timeout**

- o Browser Hint Name: connect-timeout
- o Description: When present, this hint indicates how long the site wishes browsers to wait for a connection to be established, in seconds, before considering that connection unresponsive.

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- o Value Type: integer
- o Contact: mnot@mnot.net
- o Notes: Not to be used when there is evidence of a proxy.

### **5.5. read-timeout**

- o Browser Hint Name: read-timeout
- o Description: When present, this hint indicates how long the site wishes browsers to wait before considering a connection unresponsive, when data is outstanding (either a response or part thereof), in seconds.
- o Value Type: integer
- o Contact: mnot@mnot.net

Note that requests on timed-out connections can be retried, subject to the constraints of HTTP.

### **5.6. max-pipeline-depth**

- o Browser Hint Name: max-pipeline-depth
- o Description: When present, this hint indicates the maximum number of pipelined requests per connection that the site would like clients to use.
- o Value Type: number
- o Contact: mnot@mnot.net
- o Notes: Not to be used when there is evidence of a proxy.

### **5.7. small-hdrs**

- o Browser Hint Name: small-hdrs
- o Description: When true, this hint indicates that clients can omit the Accept and Accept-Charset request headers when communicating with the resource, and that they can use a shortened version of the User-Agent header.
- o Value Type: prefixlist
- o Contact: mnot@mnot.net

### **5.8. relative-referer**

- o Browser Hint Name: relative-referer
- o Description: When true, this hint indicates that servers prefer a relative URI in the Referer request header.
- o Value Type: true | false
- o Contact: mnot@mnot.net



### **5.9. chunk-req-bodies**

- o Browser Hint Name: chunk-req-bodies
- o Description: When true, this hint indicates that the server can successfully process a request with a chunk-encoded body; i.e., that it should not return a 411 Length Required status. Note that clients may still encounter a 411 response status, even in when this hint is present (e.g., a proxy). When false, the server may or may not require a Content-Length on requests with bodies.
- o Value Type: true | false
- o Contact: mnot@mnot.net

### **5.10. omit-cookies**

- o Browser Hint Name: omit-cookies
- o Description: When true, this hint indicates that cookies [[RFC6265](#)] can be omitted in requests.
- o Value Type: prefixlist
- o Contact: mnot@mnot.net

### **5.11. cookie-whitelist**

- o Browser Hint Name: cookie-whitelist
- o Description: When present, indicates that the browser can omit any cookie [[RFC6265](#)] whose cookie-name is not a member of the value array.
- o Value Type: array
- o Contact: mnot@mnot.net

## **6. Security Considerations**

TBD

## **7. IANA Considerations**

### **7.1. The 'browser-hints' Well-Known URI**

This document defines the "browser-hints" Well-Known URI [[RFC5785](#)].

- o URI suffix: browser-hints
- o Change controller: mnot@mnot.net
- o Specification document(s): [this document]
- o Related information:





### **7.2. The BH HTTP Response Header Field**

This document defines the "BH" HTTP header field, and registers it in the Permanent Message Headers registry.

- o Header field name: BH
- o Applicable protocol: HTTP
- o Status: Informational
- o Author/Change controller: Mark Nottingham, mnot@mnot.net
- o Specification document(s): [this document]
- o Related information:

### **7.3. The HTTP Browser Hints Registry**

This document establishes the HTTP Browser Hints Registry.

New hints are registered First Come First Served (see [[RFC5226](#)]), by sending e-mail to <<mailto:iana@iana.org>> (or using other mechanisms, as established by IANA).

Registration requests MUST use the following template:

- o Browser Hint Name: [name of hint]
- o Description: [description of hint]
- o Value Type: [JSON value type]
- o Contact: [e-mail address(es)]
- o Specification: [optional; reference or URI to more info]
- o Notes: [optional]

New hints MUST be optional; they cannot place requirements upon implementations.

Likewise, new hints MUST be relevant to browser use cases; other non-browsing hints and metadata would make the hints response undesirably large. However, note that non-browser clients MAY use them.

Finally, new hints MUST NOT make communication non-conformant with HTTP itself; i.e., this is not a mechanism for changing the HTTP protocol in incompatible ways. For example, if a hint indicates that browsers can compress request headers using GZIP, intermediaries that are interposed are likely to fail.

The initial contents of the registry are defined in [Section 5](#).

## **8. References**



### **8.1. Normative References**

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- [RFC5226] Narten, T. and H. Alvestrand, "Guidelines for Writing an IANA Considerations Section in RFCs", [BCP 26](#), [RFC 5226](#), May 2008.
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### **Appendix A. Acknowledgements**

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