

Internet Engineering Task Force  
Internet-Draft  
Intended status: Standards Track  
Expires: 2 February 2026

D. Miller  
OpenSSH  
1 August 2025

SSH Agent Protocol  
draft-ietf-sshm-ssh-agent-05

## Abstract

This document describes a key agent protocol for use in the Secure Shell (SSH) protocol.

## Note

This note is to be removed before publishing as an RFC.

In the IANA considerations section, please replace "thisRFC" with "RFC" and the assigned number, when known.

## Status of This Memo

This Internet-Draft is submitted in full conformance with the provisions of BCP 78 and BCP 79.

Internet-Drafts are working documents of the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF). Note that other groups may also distribute working documents as Internet-Drafts. The list of current Internet-Drafts is at <https://datatracker.ietf.org/drafts/current/>.

Internet-Drafts are draft documents valid for a maximum of six months and may be updated, replaced, or obsoleted by other documents at any time. It is inappropriate to use Internet-Drafts as reference material or to cite them other than as "work in progress."

This Internet-Draft will expire on 2 February 2026.

## Copyright Notice

Copyright (c) 2025 IETF Trust and the persons identified as the document authors. All rights reserved.

This document is subject to BCP 78 and the IETF Trust's Legal Provisions Relating to IETF Documents (<https://trustee.ietf.org/license-info>) in effect on the date of publication of this document. Please review these documents carefully, as they describe your rights and restrictions with respect to this document. Code Components

extracted from this document must include Revised BSD License text as described in Section 4.e of the Trust Legal Provisions and are provided without warranty as described in the Revised BSD License.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction . . . . .	3
1.1. Requirements Language . . . . .	3
2. Protocol Overview . . . . .	3
3. Protocol Messages . . . . .	4
3.1. Generic server responses . . . . .	4
3.2. Adding keys to the agent . . . . .	4
3.2.1. DSA keys . . . . .	5
3.2.2. ECDSA keys . . . . .	6
3.2.3. EDDSA keys . . . . .	6
3.2.4. RSA keys . . . . .	7
3.2.5. Other keys . . . . .	7
3.2.6. Adding keys from a token . . . . .	7
3.2.7. Key Constraints . . . . .	8
3.3. Public key encoding . . . . .	9
3.4. Removing keys from the agent . . . . .	9
3.5. Requesting a list of keys . . . . .	10
3.6. Private key operations . . . . .	11
3.6.1. Signature flags . . . . .	11
3.7. Locking and unlocking an agent . . . . .	11
3.8. Extension mechanism . . . . .	12
3.8.1. Query extension . . . . .	13
4. Connecting to an agent . . . . .	13
5. Forwarding access to an agent . . . . .	13
5.1. Advertising agent forwarding support . . . . .	14
5.2. Requesting agent forwarding . . . . .	14
5.3. Agent connection requests . . . . .	15
6. Protocol numbers . . . . .	15
6.1. Message numbers . . . . .	15
6.1.1. Reserved message numbers . . . . .	16
6.2. Constraint identifiers . . . . .	16
6.3. Signature flags . . . . .	17
7. IANA Considerations . . . . .	17
7.1. New registry: SSH agent protocol numbers . . . . .	17
7.2. New registry: SSH agent key constraint numbers . . . . .	20
7.3. New registry: SSH agent signature flags . . . . .	20
7.4. New registry: SSH agent extension request names . . . . .	21
7.5. Additions to SSH Extension Names . . . . .	21
7.6. Additions to SSH Connection Protocol Channel Request Names . . . . .	21
7.7. Additions to SSH Connection Protocol Channel Types . . . . .	22
8. Security Considerations . . . . .	22
9. Implementation Status . . . . .	23

10. References . . . . .	24
10.1. Normative References . . . . .	24
10.2. Informative References . . . . .	26
Acknowledgments . . . . .	26
Author's Address . . . . .	26

## 1. Introduction

Secure Shell (SSH) is a protocol for secure remote connections and login over untrusted networks. It supports multiple authentication mechanisms, including public key authentication. This document describes the protocol for interacting with an agent that holds private keys. Clients (and possibly servers) can invoke the agent via this protocol to perform operations using public and private keys held in the agent.

Holding keys in an agent offers usability and security advantages to loading and unwrapping them at each use. Moreover, the agent implements a simple protocol and presents a smaller attack surface than a key loaded into a full SSH server or client.

This agent protocol is already widely used and a de-facto standard, having been implemented by a number of popular SSH clients and servers for many years. The purpose of this document is to describe the protocol as it has been implemented.

### 1.1. Requirements Language

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "NOT RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in BCP 14 [RFC2119] [RFC8174] when, and only when, they appear in all capitals, as shown here.

## 2. Protocol Overview

The agent protocol is a packetised request-response protocol, solely driven by the client. It consists of a number of requests sent from the client to the server and a set of reply messages that are sent in response. At no time does the server send messages except in response to a client request. Replies are sent in order.

Agents MAY implement support for only a subset of operations or available key types, and MAY additionally refuse arbitrary operations in particular contexts. For example, an agent may allow only local clients of an agent to add or remove keys, or make particular subsets of keys available to a given client. For this reason, clients of the agent SHOULD be prepared to fail gracefully if any operation is refused.

Note that this protocol is separate to and incompatible with the one described in the similarly-named [draft-ietf-secsh-agent-02] which expired in 2004.

### 3. Protocol Messages

All values in the agent protocol are encoded using the SSH wire representations specified by [RFC4251]. Messages consist of a length, type and contents.

uint32	length
byte	type
byte[length - 1]	contents

In the sections below, the "length" field is omitted. For clarity, the symbolic names of the messages are shown; their numeric values are listed in Section 6.1 below.

#### 3.1. Generic server responses

The following generic messages may be sent by the server in response to requests from the client. On success the agent may reply either with:

byte	SSH_AGENT_SUCCESS
------	-------------------

or a request-specific success message. On failure, the agent may reply with:

byte	SSH_AGENT_FAILURE
------	-------------------

or a request-specific success message. SSH\_AGENT\_FAILURE messages are also sent in reply to requests with unknown types.

#### 3.2. Adding keys to the agent

Keys may be added to the agent using the SSH\_AGENTC\_ADD\_IDENTITY or SSH\_AGENTC\_ADD\_ID\_CONSTRAINED messages. The latter variant allows adding keys with optional constraints on their usage.

The generic format for the key `SSH_AGENTC_ADD_IDENTITY` message is:

byte	<code>SSH_AGENTC_ADD_IDENTITY</code>
string	key type
byte[]	contents
string	comment

Here "key type" is the specified key type name, for example "ssh-rsa" for a RSA key as defined by [RFC4253]. "contents" consists of the public and private components of the key and vary by key type, they are listed below for standard and commonly used key types. "comment" is an optional human-readable key name or comment as a UTF-8 string that may serve to identify the key in user-visible messages.

The `SSH_AGENTC_ADD_ID_CONSTRAINED` is similar, but adds a extra field:

byte	<code>SSH_AGENTC_ADD_ID_CONSTRAINED</code>
string	key type
byte[]	contents
string	comment
constraint[]	constraints

Constraints are used to place limits on the validity or use of keys. Section 3.2.7 details constraint types and their format.

An agent **MUST** reply with `SSH_AGENT_SUCCESS` if the key was successfully loaded as a result of one of these messages, or `SSH_AGENT_FAILURE` otherwise.

An agent **MAY** support only a subset of the key types defined here and may support additional key types as described below. If an agent does not recognise the type name in a request to add a key, then it **MUST** fail gracefully and respond with a `SSH_AGENT_FAILURE` reply.

### 3.2.1. DSA keys

DSA keys have key type "ssh-dss" and are defined in [RFC4253]. They may be added to the agent using the following message. The "constraints" field is only present for the `SSH_AGENTC_ADD_ID_CONSTRAINED` message.

byte	SSH_AGENTC_ADD_IDENTITY or SSH_AGENTC_ADD_ID_CONSTRAINED
string	"ssh-dss"
mpint	p
mpint	q
mpint	g
mpint	y
mpint	x
string	comment
constraint[]	constraints

The "p", "q", "g" values are the DSA domain parameters. "y" and "x" are the public and private keys respectively. These values are as defined by Section 4.1 of [FIPS.186-4].

### 3.2.2. ECDSA keys

ECDSA keys have key types starting with "ecdsa-sha2-" and are defined in [RFC5656]. They may be added to the agent using the following message. The "constraints" field is only present for the SSH\_AGENTC\_ADD\_ID\_CONSTRAINED message.

byte	SSH_AGENTC_ADD_IDENTITY or SSH_AGENTC_ADD_ID_CONSTRAINED
string	key type
string	ecdsa_curve_name
string	Q
mpint	d
string	comment
constraint[]	constraints

The values "Q" and "d" are the ECDSA public and private values respectively. Both are defined by Section 6.2 of [FIPS.186-5].

### 3.2.3. EDDSA keys

[RFC8709] defines Ed25519 and Ed448 with key type names "ssh-ed25519" and "ssh-ed448" respectively. These may be added to the agent using the following message. The "constraints" field is only present for the SSH\_AGENTC\_ADD\_ID\_CONSTRAINED message.

byte	SSH_AGENTC_ADD_IDENTITY or SSH_AGENTC_ADD_ID_CONSTRAINED
string	"ssh-ed25519" or "ssh-ed448"
string	ENC(A)
string	k    ENC(A)
string	comment
constraint[]	constraints

The first value is the EDDSA public key ENC(A). The second value is a concatenation of the private key k and the public ENC(A) key. The contents and interpretation of the ENC(A) and k values are defined by Section 3.2 of [RFC8032].

#### 3.2.4. RSA keys

RSA keys have key type "ssh-rsa" and are defined in [RFC4253]. They may be added to the agent using the following message. The "constraints" field is only present for the SSH\_AGENTC\_ADD\_ID\_CONSTRAINED message.

byte	SSH_AGENTC_ADD_IDENTITY or SSH_AGENTC_ADD_ID_CONSTRAINED
string	"ssh-rsa"
mpint	n
mpint	e
mpint	d
mpint	iqmp
mpint	p
mpint	q
string	comment
constraint[]	constraints

"n" is the public composite modulus. "p" and "q" are its constituent private prime factors. "e" is the public exponent. "iqmp" is the inverse of "q" modulo "p". All these values except "iqmp" (which can be calculated from the others) are defined by Section 5.1 of [FIPS.186-4].

#### 3.2.5. Other keys

Agents and their clients MAY support additional key types not documented here. Vendor-specific key types MUST use the domain-qualified naming convention defined in Section 4.2 of [RFC4251] until code-points are allocated by IANA.

#### 3.2.6. Adding keys from a token

Keys hosted on smart-cards or other hardware tokens may be added using the SSH\_AGENTC\_ADD\_SMARTCARD\_KEY and SSH\_AGENTC\_ADD\_SMARTCARD\_KEY\_CONSTRAINED requests. Note that "constraints" field is only included for the SSH\_AGENTC\_ADD\_SMARTCARD\_KEY\_CONSTRAINED variant of this message.

byte	SSH_AGENTC_ADD_SMARTCARD_KEY or SSH_AGENTC_ADD_SMARTCARD_KEY_CONSTRAINED
string	id
string	PIN
constraint[]	constraints

Here "id" is an opaque identifier for the hardware token and "PIN" is an optional password or PIN to unlock the key. The interpretation of "id" is not defined by the protocol but is left solely up to the agent.

Typically only the public components of any keys supported on a hardware token will be loaded into an agent so, strictly speaking, this message really arranges future private key operations to be delegated to the hardware token in question.

An agent MUST reply with SSH\_AGENT\_SUCCESS if one or more keys were successfully loaded as a result of one of these messages, or SSH\_AGENT\_FAILURE if no keys were found. The agent SHOULD also return SSH\_AGENT\_FAILURE if the token "id" was not recognised or if the agent doesn't support token-hosted keys at all.

### 3.2.7. Key Constraints

A number of constraints and may be used in the constrained variants of the key add messages. Each constraint is represented by a type byte followed by zero or more value bytes.

Zero or more constraints may be specified when adding a key with one of the \*\_CONSTRAINED requests. Multiple constraints are appended consecutively to the end of the request:

byte	constraint1_type
byte[]	constraint1_data
byte	constraint2_type
byte[]	constraint2_data
....	
byte	constraintN_type
byte[]	constraintN_data

If an agent does not recognise or support a requested constraint it MUST refuse the request and return a SSH\_AGENT\_FAILURE message to the client.

The following constraints are defined.



### 3.2.7.1. Key lifetime constraint

This constraint requests that the agent limit the key's lifetime by deleting it after the specified duration (in seconds) has elapsed from the time the key was added to the agent.

byte	SSH_AGENT_CONSTRAIN_LIFETIME
uint32	seconds

### 3.2.7.2. Key confirmation constraint

This constraint requests that the agent require explicit user confirmation for each private key operation using the key. For example, the agent could present a confirmation dialog before completing a signature operation.

byte	SSH_AGENT_CONSTRAIN_CONFIRM
------	-----------------------------

### 3.2.7.3. Constraint extensions

Agents may implement experimental or private-use constraints through a extension constraint that supports named constraints.

byte	SSH_AGENT_CONSTRAIN_EXTENSION
string	extension name
byte[]	extension-specific details

The extension name MUST consist of a UTF-8 string suffixed by the implementation domain following the naming scheme defined in Section 4.2 of [RFC4251], e.g. "foo@example.com".

## 3.3. Public key encoding

Keys previously loaded into an agent are referred to by their public key blob, which is the standard SSH wire encoding for public keys. SSH protocol key encodings are defined in [RFC4253] for "ssh-rsa" and "ssh-dss" keys, in [RFC5656] for "ecdsa-sha2-\*" keys and in [RFC8709] for "ssh-ed25519" and "ssh-ed448" keys.

## 3.4. Removing keys from the agent

A client may request that an agent remove all keys that it stores:

byte	SSH_AGENTC_REMOVE_ALL_IDENTITYIES
------	-----------------------------------

On receipt of such a message, an agent shall delete all keys that it is holding and reply with SSH\_AGENT\_SUCCESS.

Specific keys may also be removed:

byte	SSH_AGENTC_REMOVE_IDENTITY
string	key blob

Where "key blob" is the standard public key encoding of the key to be removed (Section 3.3).

An agent shall reply with SSH\_AGENT\_SUCCESS if the key was deleted or SSH\_AGENT\_FAILURE if it was not found.

Smartcard keys may be removed using:

byte	SSH_AGENTC_REMOVE_SMARTCARD_KEY
string	reader id
string	PIN

Where "reader id" is an opaque identifier for the hardware token and "PIN" is an optional password or PIN (not typically used), both encoded using UTF-8. Requesting deletion of smartcard-hosted keys SHOULD cause the agent to remove all keys loaded from that smartcard.

An agent shall reply with SSH\_AGENT\_SUCCESS if the key was deleted or SSH\_AGENT\_FAILURE if it was not found.

### 3.5. Requesting a list of keys

A client may request a list of keys from an agent using the following message:

byte	SSH_AGENTC_REQUEST_IDENTITIES
------	-------------------------------

The agent shall reply with a message with the following preamble.

byte	SSH_AGENT_IDENTITIES_ANSWER
uint32	nkeys

Where "nkeys" indicates the number of keys to follow. Following the preamble are zero or more keys, each encoded as:

string	key blob
string	comment

Where "key blob" is the standard public key encoding of the key (Section 3.3) and "comment" is a human-readable comment encoded as a UTF-8 string.

### 3.6. Private key operations

A client may request the agent perform a private key signature operation using the following message:

byte	SSH_AGENTC_SIGN_REQUEST
string	key blob
string	data
uint32	flags

Where "key blob" is the key requested to perform the signature (encoded as per Section 3.3), "data" is the data to be signed and "flags" is a bitfield containing the bitwise OR of zero or more signature flags (see below).

If the agent does not support the requested flags, or is otherwise unable or unwilling to generate the signature (e.g. because it doesn't have the specified key, or the user refused confirmation of a constrained key), it must reply with a SSH\_AGENT\_FAILURE message.

On success, the agent shall reply with:

byte	SSH_AGENT_SIGN_RESPONSE
string	signature

The signature format is specific to the algorithm of the key type in use. SSH protocol signature formats are defined in [RFC4253] for "ssh-rsa" and "ssh-dss" keys, in [RFC5656] for "ecdsa-sha2-\*" keys and in [RFC8709] for "ssh-ed25519" and "ssh-ed448" keys.

#### 3.6.1. Signature flags

Two flags are currently defined for signature request messages: SSH\_AGENT\_RSA\_SHA2\_256 and SSH\_AGENT\_RSA\_SHA2\_512. These two flags are only valid for "ssh-rsa" keys and request that the agent return a signature using the "rsa-sha2-256" or "rsa-sha2-512" signature methods respectively. These signature schemes are defined in [RFC8332].

### 3.7. Locking and unlocking an agent

The agent protocol supports requesting that an agent temporarily lock itself with a pass-phrase. When locked, an agent MUST suspend processing of sensitive operations (private key signature operations at the very least) until it has been unlocked with the same pass-phrase.

The following message requests agent locking

byte	SSH_AGENTC_LOCK
string	passphrase

The agent shall reply with SSH\_AGENT\_SUCCESS if locked successfully or SSH\_AGENT\_FAILURE otherwise (e.g. if the agent was already locked).

The following message requests unlocking an agent:

byte	SSH_AGENTC_UNLOCK
string	passphrase

If the agent is already locked and the pass-phrase matches the one used to lock it then it MUST unlock and reply with SSH\_AGENT\_SUCCESS. If the agent is already unlocked or if the the pass-phrase does not match it MUST reply with SSH\_AGENT\_FAILURE. An agent SHOULD take countermeasures against brute-force guessing attacks against the pass-phrase.

### 3.8. Extension mechanism

The agent protocol includes an optional extension mechanism that allows vendor-specific and experimental messages to be sent via the agent protocol. Extension requests from the client consist of:

byte	SSH_AGENTC_EXTENSION
string	extension type
byte[]	extension request-specific contents

The extension type indicates the type of the extension message as a UTF-8 string. Implementation-specific extensions MUST be suffixed by the implementation domain following the extension naming scheme defined in Section 4.2 of [RFC4251], e.g. "foo@example.com".

An agent that does not support extensions of the supplied type MUST reply with an empty SSH\_AGENT\_FAILURE message. This reply is also sent by agents that do not support the extension mechanism at all.

The contents of successful extension reply messages are specific to the extension type. Extension requests may return either SSH\_AGENT\_SUCCESS on success or an extension-specific response message:

byte	SSH_AGENT_EXTENSION_RESPONSE
string	extension type
byte[]	extension response-specific contents

Where the extension type is the same as that in the request.

Extension failure SHOULD be signaled using a `SSH_AGENT_EXTENSION_FAILURE` message:

```
byte          SSH_AGENT_EXTENSION_FAILURE
```

Extensions SHOULD NOT use the standard `SSH_AGENT_FAILURE` message. This allows failed requests to be distinguished from the extension not being supported.

### 3.8.1. Query extension

A single, optional extension request "query" is defined to allow a client to query which, if any, extensions are supported by an agent.

```
byte          SSH_AGENTC_EXTENSION
string        "query"
```

If an agent supports the query extension it SHOULD reply with a list of supported extension names.

```
byte          SSH_AGENT_EXTENSION_RESPONSE
string        "query"
string[]      supported extension types
```

## 4. Connecting to an agent

Agents are exposed to the local system using a connection-oriented endpoint. On Unix-like systems, it is typical to arrange for the agent to listen on a filesystem-based Unix domain socket. On Microsoft Windows, it is usual to use a Windows Named Pipe. Access to these endpoints should be controlled as discussed in Section 8.

In both cases, it is common to expose the name or address of the listening endpoint via an environment variable named "SSH\_AUTH\_SOCK". Clients of an agent will use this variable to locate and connect to the listening agent. Agents alternately MAY use an implicit mechanism for clients to locate their endpoint, such as a default per-user location.

## 5. Forwarding access to an agent

The agent protocol may be forwarded over a SSH connection, using the [RFC4254] connection protocol, allowing agent forwarding to be requested for any session channel, using a model that is similar to the connection protocol's support for X11 Forwarding (Section 6.3 of [RFC4254]). This feature is OPTIONAL for SSH protocol and agent implementations.

Note that the deployed integration with the SSH protocol uses vendor-specific names.

### 5.1. Advertising agent forwarding support

Support for agent forwarding may be advertised by a SSH protocol server using the [RFC8308] extension mechanism using the name "agent-forward" in the SSH\_MSG\_EXT\_INFO message.

string	"agent-forward"
string	"0" (version)

Note that this protocol substantially predates the existence of the [RFC8308] extension mechanism and several widely-deployed SSH implementations that support agent forwarding do not advertise their ability to do so. Clients MAY opportunistically attempt to request agent forwarding in the absence of an [RFC8308] advertisement using the vendor-specific names mentioned below. Likewise, servers MAY implement the vendor-specific names in addition to the one described here.

### 5.2. Requesting agent forwarding

A client may request agent forwarding for a previously-opened session (Section 6.1 of [RFC4254]) using the following channel request. This request is sent after the channel has been opened, but before a shell, command or subsystem has been executed.

byte	SSH_MSG_CHANNEL_REQUEST
uint32	channel_id
string	"agent-req" or "auth-agent-req@openssh.com"
boolean	want_reply

Where channel\_id is the identifier for an established session channel (as returned from a previous SSH\_MSG\_CHANNEL\_OPEN request, and the want\_reply flag indicates whether the server should respond with a confirmation of whether the request was successful (as specified in Section 5.4 of [RFC4254])

If a SSH server accepts this request, typically it will arrange to make a endpoint (e.g. a listening socket) available and advertise this fact to the subordinate session. Most implementations on Unix-like systems do this by providing a user-private listening Unix domain socket and recording its location in an environment variable \$SSH\_AUTH\_SOCK.

As mentioned previously, many deployed implementations only support the former, pre-standardisation "auth-agent-req@openssh.com" request name. The latter "agent-req" name SHOULD only be used if support was explicitly advertised as per Section 5.1.

### 5.3. Agent connection requests

After a client has requested that a session have agent forwarding enabled, the server later may request a connection to the forwarded agent. The server does this by requesting a dedicated channel to communicate with the client's agent.

byte	SSH_MSG_CHANNEL_OPEN
string	"agent-connect" or "auth-agent@openssh.com"
uint32	channel_id
uint32	local_window
uint32	local_maxpacket

The channel\_id, local\_window and local\_maxpacket fields should be interpreted as specified by Section 5.1 of [RFC4254].

As above, the latter "agent-connect" open type name SHOULD only be used if support was explicitly advertised as per Section 5.1.

A client SHOULD be prepared to handle multiple concurrent active agent connections. A client MAY accept agent connection requests (subject to authorisation) without a prior agent forwarding request having been made to support the situation where agent forwarding without opening a session is desired. Similarly, a client MAY continue to accept agent connection requests after the session for which agent forwarding was requested has closed.

A client MUST refuse unauthorised agent connection requests, i.e. when agent forwarding was not desired or requested but a server sends an agent connection request anyway.

Note the connection request provides no way to identify which session channel a given agent connection request relates to. This implies that a SSH connection can functionally forward access to only a single client-side agent concurrently using this protocol.

## 6. Protocol numbers

### 6.1. Message numbers

The following numbers are used for requests from the client to the agent.

SSH_AGENTC_REQUEST_IDENTITIES	11
SSH_AGENTC_SIGN_REQUEST	13
SSH_AGENTC_ADD_IDENTITY	17
SSH_AGENTC_REMOVE_IDENTITY	18
SSH_AGENTC_REMOVE_ALL_IDENTITIES	19
SSH_AGENTC_ADD_SMARTCARD_KEY	20
SSH_AGENTC_REMOVE_SMARTCARD_KEY	21
SSH_AGENTC_LOCK	22
SSH_AGENTC_UNLOCK	23
SSH_AGENTC_ADD_ID_CONSTRAINED	25
SSH_AGENTC_ADD_SMARTCARD_KEY_CONSTRAINED	26
SSH_AGENTC_EXTENSION	27

The following numbers are used for replies from the agent to the client.

SSH_AGENT_FAILURE	5
SSH_AGENT_SUCCESS	6
SSH_AGENT_IDENTITIES_ANSWER	12
SSH_AGENT_SIGN_RESPONSE	14
SSH_AGENT_EXTENSION_FAILURE	28
SSH_AGENT_EXTENSION_RESPONSE	29

#### 6.1.1. Reserved message numbers

The following message numbers are reserved for implementations that implement support for the legacy SSH protocol version 1: 1-4, 7-9 and 24 (inclusive). These message numbers MAY be used by an implementation supporting the legacy protocol but MUST NOT be reused otherwise.

The range of message numbers 240-255 are reserved for organization-local extensions to the agent protocol and MUST NOT be used by generic implementations.

#### 6.2. Constraint identifiers

The following numbers are used to identify key constraints. These are only used in key constraints and are not sent as message numbers.

SSH_AGENT_CONSTRAIN_LIFETIME	1
SSH_AGENT_CONSTRAIN_CONFIRM	2
SSH_AGENT_CONSTRAIN_EXTENSION	255



### 6.3. Signature flags

The following numbers may be present in signature request (SSH\_AGENTC\_SIGN\_REQUEST) messages. These flags form a bit field by taking the logical OR of zero or more flags.

SSH_AGENT_RSA_SHA2_256	2
SSH_AGENT_RSA_SHA2_512	4

The flag value 1 is reserved for historical implementations.

## 7. IANA Considerations

This protocol requires three registries be established, one for message numbers, one for constraints and one for signature request flags.

### 7.1. New registry: SSH agent protocol numbers

This registry, titled "SSH agent protocol numbers" records the message numbers for client requests and agent responses. Its initial state should consist of the following numbers and reservations. Future message number allocations shall occur via EXPERT REVIEW as per [RFC8126].

Number(s)	Identifier	Reference
1	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.1.1
2	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.1.1
3	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.1.1
4	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.1.1
5	SSH_AGENT_FAILURE	thisrfc, Section 6.1

6	SSH_AGENT_SUCCESS	thisrfc, Section 6.1
7	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.1.1
8	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.1.1
9	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.1.1
10	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.1.1
11	SSH_AGENTC_REQUEST_IDENTITIES	thisrfc, Section 6.1
12	SSH_AGENT_IDENTITIES_ANSWER	thisrfc, Section 6.1
13	SSH_AGENTC_SIGN_REQUEST	thisrfc, Section 6.1
14	SSH_AGENT_SIGN_RESPONSE	thisrfc, Section 6.1
15	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.1.1
16	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.1.1
17	SSH_AGENTC_ADD_IDENTITY	thisrfc, Section 6.1

18	SSH_AGENTC_REMOVE_IDENTITY	thisrfc, Section 6.1
19	SSH_AGENTC_REMOVE_ALL_IDENTITIES	thisrfc, Section 6.1
20	SSH_AGENTC_ADD_SMARTCARD_KEY	thisrfc, Section 6.1
21	SSH_AGENTC_REMOVE_SMARTCARD_KEY	thisrfc, Section 6.1
22	SSH_AGENTC_LOCK	thisrfc, Section 6.1
23	SSH_AGENTC_UNLOCK	thisrfc, Section 6.1
24	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.1.1
25	SSH_AGENTC_ADD_ID_CONSTRAINED	thisrfc, Section 6.1
26	SSH_AGENTC_ADD_SMARTCARD_KEY_CONSTRAINED	thisrfc, Section 6.1
27	SSH_AGENTC_EXTENSION	thisrfc, Section 6.1
28	SSH_AGENT_EXTENSION_FAILURE	thisrfc, Section 6.1
29	SSH_AGENT_EXTENSION_RESPONSE	thisrfc, Section 6.1

240-255	Reserved for organizational use	thisrfc,	
		Section	
		6.1	
+-----+	+-----+	+-----+	+-----+

Table 1

## 7.2. New registry: SSH agent key constraint numbers

This registry, titled "SSH agent key constraint numbers" records the message numbers for key use constraints. Its initial state should consist of the following numbers. Future message number allocations shall occur via EXPERT REVIEW as per [RFC8126].

+=====+	+=====+	+=====+	+=====+
Number	Identifier	Reference	
+=====+	+=====+	+=====+	+=====+
1	SSH_AGENT_CONSTRAIN_LIFETIME	thisrfc, Section 6.2	
+-----+	+-----+	+-----+	+-----+
2	SSH_AGENT_CONSTRAIN_CONFIRM	thisrfc, Section 6.2	
+-----+	+-----+	+-----+	+-----+
255	SSH_AGENT_CONSTRAIN_EXTENSION	thisrfc, Section 6.2	
+-----+	+-----+	+-----+	+-----+

Table 2

## 7.3. New registry: SSH agent signature flags

This registry, titled "SSH agent signature flags" records the values for signature request (SSH\_AGENTC\_SIGN\_REQUEST) flag values. Its initial state should consist of the following numbers. Note that as the flags are combined by bitwise OR, all flag values must be powers of two and the maximum available flag value is 0x80000000.

Future message number allocations shall occur via EXPERT REVIEW as per [RFC8126].

+=====+	+=====+	+=====+	+=====+
Number	Identifier	Reference	
+=====+	+=====+	+=====+	+=====+
0x01	reserved	thisrfc, Section 6.3	
+-----+	+-----+	+-----+	+-----+
0x02	SSH_AGENT_RSA_SHA2_256	thisrfc, Section 6.3	
+-----+	+-----+	+-----+	+-----+
0x04	SSH_AGENT_RSA_SHA2_512	thisrfc, Section 6.3	
+-----+	+-----+	+-----+	+-----+

Table 3

#### 7.4. New registry: SSH agent extension request names

This registry, titled "SSH agent extension request names" records the names used in the generic extension request message (SSH\_AGENTC\_EXTENSION). Its initial state should consist of the following names.

Future message number allocations shall occur via EXPERT REVIEW as per [RFC8126].

+=====+	
Extension Name	Reference
+=====+	
query	thisrfc, Section 3.8.1
+-----+	

Table 4

#### 7.5. Additions to SSH Extension Names

IANA is requested to insert the following entries into the table Extension Names [IANA-SSH-EXT] under Secure Shell (SSH) Protocol Parameters [RFC4250].

+=====+	
Extension Name	Reference
+=====+	
agent-forward	thisrfc, Section 5.1
+-----+	

Table 5

#### 7.6. Additions to SSH Connection Protocol Channel Request Names

IANA is requested to insert the following entries into the table Connection Protocol Channel Request Names [IANA-SSH-CHANREQ] under Secure Shell (SSH) Protocol Parameters [RFC4250].

+=====+	
Extension Name	Reference
+=====+	
agent-req	thisrfc, Section 5.2
+-----+	

Table 6

### 7.7. Additions to SSH Connection Protocol Channel Types

IANA is requested to insert the following entries into the table Connection Protocol Channel Types [IANA-SSH-CHANTYPE] under Secure Shell (SSH) Protocol Parameters [RFC4250].

+=====+	
Extension Name	Reference
+=====+	
agent-connect	thisrfc, Section 5.3
+-----+	

Table 7

## 8. Security Considerations

The agent is a service that is tasked with retaining and providing controlled access to what are typically long-lived login authentication credentials. It is by nature a sensitive and trusted software component. Moreover, the agent protocol itself does not include any authentication or transport security; ability to communicate with an agent is usually sufficient to invoke it to perform private key operations.

Since being able to access an agent is usually sufficient to perform private key operations, it is critically important that the agent only be exposed to its owner and their authorised delegates.

The primary design intention of an agent is that an attacker with unprivileged access to their victim's agent should be prevented from gaining a copy of any keys that have been loaded into it. This may not preclude the attacker from stealing use of those keys (e.g. if they have been loaded without a confirmation constraint).

Given this, the agent should, as far as possible, prevent its memory being read by other processes to direct theft of loaded keys. This typically include disabling debugging interfaces and preventing process memory dumps on abnormal termination.

Another, more subtle, means by which keys may be stolen are via cryptographic side-channels. Private key operations may leak information about the contents of keys via differences in timing, power use or by side-effects in the memory subsystems (e.g. CPU caches) of the host running the agent. For the case of a local attacker and an agent holding unconstrained keys, the only limit on the number of private key operations the attacker may be able to observe is the rate at which the CPU can perform signatures. This grants the attacker an almost ideal oracle for side-channel attacks.

While a full treatment of side-channel attacks is beyond the scope of this specification, agents SHOULD use cryptographic implementations that are resistant to side-channel attacks and MAY take additional measures to hide the actual time spent processing private key operations.

Forwarding access to a local agent over a SSH connection (Section 5) inherently creates a transitive trust relationship. SSH implementations SHOULD NOT forward use of an agent by default and MAY implement additional controls over key visibility and use for forwarded agent connections.

Implementation of smartcard keys requires some care too. On some systems smartcards are invoked via shared libraries that must be loaded to make use of keys hosted on the device (a path to a PKCS#11 module, for example). Loading a shared libraries on most platforms implies automatic execution of code in that library in the address space of the process that loads it. Agents that support loading smartcard keys via library path SHOULD ensure that only trusted smartcard provider libraries are loadable, SHOULD ensure that loaded smartcard library code cannot gain access to other keys loaded in the agent and MAY disallow remote clients from loading smartcard keys entirely.

## 9. Implementation Status

This section records the status of known implementations of the protocol defined by this specification at the time of posting of this Internet-Draft, and is based on a proposal described in [RFC7942]. The description of implementations in this section is intended to assist the IETF in its decision processes in progressing drafts to RFCs. Please note that the listing of any individual implementation here does not imply endorsement by the IETF. Furthermore, no effort has been spent to verify the information presented here that was supplied by IETF contributors. This is not intended as, and must not be construed to be, a catalog of available implementations or their features. Readers are advised to note that other implementations may exist.

According to [RFC7942], "this will allow reviewers and working groups to assign due consideration to documents that have the benefit of running code, which may serve as evidence of valuable experimentation and feedback that have made the implemented protocols more mature. It is up to the individual working groups to use this information as they see fit".

The following example projects maintain an implementation of this protocol:

OpenSSH OpenSSH is the originating implementation of this protocol and has supported it since 2000.

Website: <https://www.openssh.com/>

PuTTY PuTTY is a popular SSH client implementation for multiple platforms that has included a compatible agent client since 2001.

Website: <https://www.chiark.greenend.org.uk/~sgtatham/putty/>

Dropbear Dropbear is a SSH client and server implementation for Unix- like systems. It has supported the agent protocol since 2005.

Website: <https://matt.ucc.asn.au/dropbear/dropbear.html>

Paramiko Paramiko is a SSH client and server implementation in the Python programming language. It has supported an agent protocol implementation since 2005.

Website: <https://www.paramiko.org/>

Golang x/crypto/ssh/agent The Go programming language project has supported an implementation of this protocol in its external "x" repository since 2015.

Website: <https://pkg.go.dev/golang.org/x/crypto/ssh/agent>

This list is not exhaustive.

## 10. References

### 10.1. Normative References

- [RFC2119] Bradner, S., "Key words for use in RFCs to Indicate Requirement Levels", BCP 14, RFC 2119, DOI 10.17487/RFC2119, March 1997, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc2119>>.
- [RFC4250] Lehtinen, S. and C. Lonvick, Ed., "The Secure Shell (SSH) Protocol Assigned Numbers", RFC 4250, DOI 10.17487/RFC4250, January 2006, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc4250>>.
- [RFC4251] Ylonen, T. and C. Lonvick, Ed., "The Secure Shell (SSH) Protocol Architecture", RFC 4251, DOI 10.17487/RFC4251, January 2006, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc4251>>.



- [RFC4253] Ylonen, T. and C. Lonvick, Ed., "The Secure Shell (SSH) Transport Layer Protocol", RFC 4253, DOI 10.17487/RFC4253, January 2006, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc4253>>.
- [RFC4254] Ylonen, T. and C. Lonvick, Ed., "The Secure Shell (SSH) Connection Protocol", RFC 4254, DOI 10.17487/RFC4254, January 2006, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc4254>>.
- [RFC5656] Stebila, D. and J. Green, "Elliptic Curve Algorithm Integration in the Secure Shell Transport Layer", RFC 5656, DOI 10.17487/RFC5656, December 2009, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc5656>>.
- [RFC7942] Sheffer, Y. and A. Farrel, "Improving Awareness of Running Code: The Implementation Status Section", BCP 205, RFC 7942, DOI 10.17487/RFC7942, July 2016, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc7942>>.
- [RFC8032] Josefsson, S. and I. Liusvaara, "Edwards-Curve Digital Signature Algorithm (EdDSA)", RFC 8032, DOI 10.17487/RFC8032, January 2017, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc8032>>.
- [RFC8126] Cotton, M., Leiba, B., and T. Narten, "Guidelines for Writing an IANA Considerations Section in RFCs", BCP 26, RFC 8126, DOI 10.17487/RFC8126, June 2017, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc8126>>.
- [RFC8174] Leiba, B., "Ambiguity of Uppercase vs Lowercase in RFC 2119 Key Words", BCP 14, RFC 8174, DOI 10.17487/RFC8174, May 2017, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc8174>>.
- [RFC8308] Bider, D., "Extension Negotiation in the Secure Shell (SSH) Protocol", RFC 8308, DOI 10.17487/RFC8308, March 2018, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc8308>>.
- [RFC8332] Bider, D., "Use of RSA Keys with SHA-256 and SHA-512 in the Secure Shell (SSH) Protocol", RFC 8332, DOI 10.17487/RFC8332, March 2018, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc8332>>.
- [RFC8709] Harris, B. and L. Velvindron, "Ed25519 and Ed448 Public Key Algorithms for the Secure Shell (SSH) Protocol", RFC 8709, DOI 10.17487/RFC8709, February 2020, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc8709>>.

## [FIPS.186-4]

National Institute of Standards and Technology, "Digital Signature Standard (DSS)", FIPS PUB 186-4, DOI 10.6028/NIST.FIPS.186-4, July 2013, <<https://doi.org/10.6028/NIST.FIPS.186-4>>.

## [FIPS.186-5]

National Institute of Standards and Technology, "Digital Signature Standard (DSS)", FIPS PUB 186-5, DOI 10.6028/NIST.FIPS.186-5, February 2023, <<https://doi.org/10.6028/NIST.FIPS.186-5>>.

## 10.2. Informative References

## [IANA-SSH-CHANREQ]

IANA, "Connection Protocol Channel Types", <<https://www.iana.org/assignments/ssh-parameters/>>.

## [IANA-SSH-CHANTYPE]

IANA, "Extension Names", <<https://www.iana.org/assignments/ssh-parameters/>>.

## [IANA-SSH-EXT]

IANA, "Connection Protocol Channel Request Names", <<https://www.iana.org/assignments/ssh-parameters/>>.

## [draft-ietf-secsh-agent-02]

Ylonen, T., Rinne, T. J., and S. Lehtinen, "Secure Shell Authentication Agent Protocol", January 2004, <<https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/html/draft-ietf-secsh-agent-02>>.

## Acknowledgments

This protocol was designed and first implemented by Markus Friedl, based on a similar protocol for an agent to support the legacy SSH version 1 by Tatu Ylonen.

Thanks to Simon Tatham, Niels M $\ddot{H}$ ller, James Spencer, Simon Josefsson, Matt Johnston, Jakub Jelen, Rich Salz and Caspar Schutijser who reviewed and helped improve this document.

## Author's Address

Damien Miller  
OpenSSH  
Email: [djm@openssh.com](mailto:djm@openssh.com)  
URI: <https://www.openssh.com/>