



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

25TH FEBRUARY 2021

**REVIEW OF SPECIAL SCHOOL PROVISION IN RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Cabinet with information on a data gathering exercise that has been undertaken in order to facilitate a detailed review of special school provision throughout the County Borough.
- 1.2 This review also considers the impact of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act (2018) from a national and local perspective.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that Cabinet:
 - i. Note the content of this report.
 - ii. Acknowledge the pressures on our special schools and the need for a detailed review of special school provision throughout the County Borough.
 - iii. Agree to additional scoping work being undertaken including feasibility studies where appropriate, to inform potential proposals for change.
 - iv. Agree to receive a further report presenting the outcome of the review including recommendations for potential future investment.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To address the demand for additional capacity in special schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf to accommodate the growth in learner numbers.
- 3.2 To acknowledge that the statutory duties placed upon the Council to deliver the obligations of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (ALNET Act), which will compound the pressures placed on capacity pressures in the special school sector.

4. BACKGROUND

Current position

- 4.1 As at January 2020, the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) data indicates there were 577 learners accessing four special schools across the County Borough of Rhondda Cynon Taf, an increase of 89 learners with a range of complex needs over a 5 year period. Rhondda Cynon Taf currently has four special schools:
- Maesgwyn Special School, Cwmdare, Aberdare
 - Park Lane Special School, Trecynon, Aberdare
 - Ysgol Hen Felin, Ystrad, Rhondda
 - Ysgol Ty Coch, Tonteg, Pontypridd
 - Buarth y Capel, Ynysybwl, Pontypridd – satellite site of Ysgol Ty Coch.
- 4.2 Information on each special school is provided later in the report, including information on the educational provision, the age range of the learners and an overview of the school site, including property condition information and suitability ratings.
- 4.3 The capacity of each special school isn't included within the data below as unlike other schools, special schools don't have a capacity calculation. Learners are placed in the schools based on an assessment of their needs and so special schools can never be classed as 'full'. Measuring the Capacities of Schools in Wales – October 2011 confirms that the capacity assessment method for calculated school capacities applies to all community, voluntary aided, voluntary controlled and foundation schools in Wales. The method does not apply to nursery or special schools or pupil referral units.
- 4.4 Unlike other schools, there is no formal guidance in Wales which specifically deals with the construction of special schools. Where new special schools have been built in Rhondda Cynon Taf, an occupancy area per learner has been used, in conjunction with data available at that time in terms of the numbers of learners that will be attending the provision and the range of needs of the learners. Even though this is a recognised industry standard for designing purposes, this is fraught with issues as very quickly the local demographic of the learners using the provision can change.
- 4.5 It should be noted that it is very difficult to project demand for special education. Projections are dependent on a number of factors and historical trends and birth rates are sometimes not a reliable indicator. Variations in individual need and the complexity of the provision required can develop and vary over time. Nevertheless, settings have seen a significant growth in the complexity of needs in our special school settings.

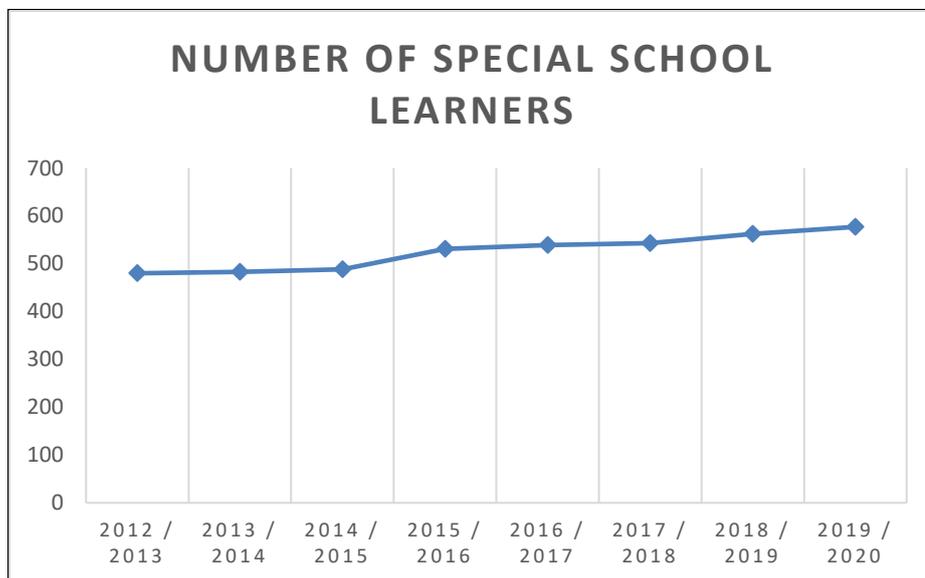
Data Analysis

- 4.6 The following data analysis is based on data derived from the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) unless otherwise stated. This analysis gives an indication of the children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) in Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- 4.7 The following table outlines the total number of children and young people who accessed their education in one of the four special schools (including the Buarth y Capel satellite) from the academic year 2012/13 to 2019 /20 (PLASC). The data shows the steady rise in numbers, while the graph illustrates the year on year gradual increase.

Table 1: Special School Pupil Numbers

Trend Data Between Academic Year 2012/2013 to Academic Year 2019/2020								
Special School	Academic Year (PLASC)							
	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Total	480	483	488	531	539	543	562	577

Graph 1: Trend Data: Number of Special School Learners



- 4.8 The following table outlines the total number of children and young people who accessed special schools broken down into each of the four special schools (including Buarth y Capel) from the academic year 2016/2017 to 2019/2020 (PLASC).

Table 2: Trend Data between Academic Year 2016/2017 to Academic Year 2019/2020

Trend Data Between Academic Year 2016/2017 to Academic Year 2019/2020				
Special School	Academic Year (PLASC)			
	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Maesgwyn Special School	132	130	127	130
Park Lane Special School	101	93	97	88
Ysgol Hen Felin	169	178	179	186
Ysgol Ty Coch	126	134	153	159
Buarth y Capel	11	8	6	14
Total	539	543	562	577

- 4.9 The PLASC data comparison demonstrates that there has been a consistent increase in learner numbers, year on year since 2016, in both Ysgol Hen Felin and Ysgol Ty Coch. From 2017 to 2020 the increase in both schools has been significant with 17 additional learners attending Ysgol Hen Felin and 33 additional learners attending Ysgol Ty Coch.
- 4.10 The increase in Buarth y Capel is due to its recent establishment with learner numbers steadily increasing since its formation in 2014. It should be noted that this discrete provision is for learners with severe to profound autism in key stages 4/5 and was established to meet the need of up to 15 learners.
- 4.11 Based on the overall growth in number of pupils requiring special school placements in the last 4 years, it seems inevitable that the number of pupils will continue to grow over the next 5 to 10 years. In recent years, there have been more learners with significant needs who need a place in special schools settings than there have been places. To assist with this and to minimise out of county placements, the Education Directorate has sought creative solutions to address need, e.g. extended the buildings, forged partnerships with Coleg Y Cymoedd and developed off-site provision, repurposed specialist rooms into generic classrooms to increase capacity. Options for further expanding special schools sites are becoming increasingly limited and unless there is significant investment in expanding provision increasing out of county costs are likely in future to enable the Council to fulfil its statutory duties.
- 4.12 In 2019/20, 95 children attended out of county or independent special school places at a cost of £2.4M. A proportion of this funding would be better used to enhance special school provision in County to both deal with higher demand and to reduce any potential reliance on the independent sector. Growth in the special school sector is needed to ensure that we can retain our learners in County and can continue to educate our children in their local communities.

National Curriculum Year

- 4.13 The following table outlines the national curriculum year of the learners who access their education in each of the four special schools (five including Buarth y Capel). This data was correct as at 6th November 2020 and is not taken from the PLASC.

Table 3: National Curriculum Year of Learners that Access their Education at Special School

National Curriculum Year of Learners who Access their Education at Special School									
Key Stage	National Curriculum Year	School				Total		Percentage	
		Maesgwyn Special School	Park Lane Special School	Ysgol Hen Felin	Ysgol Ty Coch (Ysgol Ty Coch and Buarth y Capel Combined)				
Foundation Phase	Pre Nursery	0	2	4	1	7	86	1.2%	15.1%
	Nursery	0	5	7	7	19		3.3%	
	1	0	6	15	12	33		5.8%	
	2	0	7	13	7	27		4.8%	
Key Stage Two	3	0	3	11	24	38	151	6.7%	26.6%
	4	0	7	15	15	37		6.5%	
	5	0	9	19	10	38		6.7%	
	6	0	9	14	15	38		6.7%	
Key Stage Three	7	12	1	18	9	40	130	7.0%	22.8%
	8	19	5	10	19	53		9.3%	
	9	11	5	11	10	37		6.5%	
Key Stage Four	10	9	7	8	9	33	81	5.8%	14.3%
	11	24	4	7	13	48		8.5%	
Key Stage Five	12	21	8	18	9	56	120	9.9%	21.2%
	13	20	5	5	7	37		6.5%	
	14	4	7	8	8	27		4.8%	
Total		120	90	183	175	568		100.0%	

The data indicates:

- The national curriculum year with the highest number of learners was year twelve with 56 (9.9%) learners.
- This was closely followed by national curriculum year eight with 53 (9.3%) learners.
- Key Stage Two was the key stage with the highest number of learners with 151 (26.6%) learners.

Area of Residence

4.14 The following table outlines the area of residence (Rhondda, Cynon or Taf or Out of County) of the learners who access their education in each of the four special schools (including Buarth y Capel). This data was correct as at 6th November 2020 and is not taken from the PLASC.

Table 4: Area of Residence of Learners who Access their Education at Special School

Area of Residence of Learners who Access their Education at Special School										
School	Area								Total	
	Rhondda		Cynon		Taf		Out of County			
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Maesgwyn Special School	37	30.8%	55	45.8%	26	21.7%	2	1.6%	120	100.0%
Park Lane Special School	3	3.3%	86	95.6%	1	1.1%	0	0.0%	90	100.0%
Ysgol Hen Felin	151	82.5%	6	3.3%	25	13.7%	1	0.5%	183	100.0%
Ysgol Ty Coch (including Buarth y Capel)	11	6.3%	14	8.0%	144	82.3%	6	3.4%	175	100.0%
Total	202	35.6%	161	28.3%	196	34.5%	9	1.6%	568	100.0%

4.15 The data indicates:

- There is a fairly even split in the area of residence in the percentage of learners who attend each of the four special schools between Rhondda (35.6%), Cynon (28.3%) and Taf (34.5%).
- When analysing each school, the highest percentage of learners residing in the area in which the school is located is summarised as follows:
 - Maesgwyn Special School – Cynon area – 55 (45.8%) – (this figure is lower in comparison to the other schools as this setting provides a specialist provision for the whole of RCT.
 - Park Lane Special School – Cynon area – 86 (95.6%).
 - Ysgol Hen Felin – Rhondda area – 151 (82.5%).
 - Ysgol Ty Coch and Buarth y Capel Combined – Taff area – 144 (82.3%).

School Information

Maesgwyn Special School

4.16 Maesgwyn Special School is located in Cwmdare, Aberdare. It is a school for learners aged 11 to 19 with a range of complex educational needs including severe learning difficulties, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and autistic spectrum disorders.

4.17 Learners are taught through a bespoke curriculum with a balance between academic, vocational and life skills options that enables learners to mature into adult life.

4.18 The school is graded as B for condition and B for suitability and has a backlog maintenance figure of just £11,850. A significant amount of work has been undertaken at Maesgwyn Special School over the last few years including extensive remodeling of the external area, providing a new MUGA, the addition of a skill centre for teaching construction skills, an allotment for horticulture and an animal care centre. Over £600k has been invested in the last 3 years.

- 4.19 A separate provision for learners at Maeswgyn Special School opened on the Coleg Y Cymoedd Campus, Aberdare, in 2019. This modern provision is well used and frees up some much needed space on the school site and provides opportunities for learners to gain experience of college life and a possible pathway to pursue when they leave college.

Park Lane Special School

- 4.20 Park Lane Special School is located in Trecynon, Aberdare. It is a school for learners aged 3 to 19 with a range of special educational needs including: autistic spectrum disorders; severe learning difficulties; profound and multiple learning difficulties; social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and sensory impairments. There are a range of specialist rooms including a music therapy room, sensory room and hydrotherapy pool. These are used effectively and make a significant contribution to the wellbeing and development of learner skills.
- 4.21 Learners are taught a wide and varied curriculum, enabling them to experience a range of skills, the emphasis being on life and vocational skills. Learners are regularly taken into the community where they apply the skills they learn to real life situations. Learners gain accreditation and qualifications from their vocational studies.
- 4.22 The school building consists of a CLASP type construction main block together with a new small extension that was created to provide much needed space for post 16 pupils. The school is graded as C for condition and B for suitability and has a backlog maintenance figure of £28,800. The site itself is very constrained with access and onsite parking very limited. The new extension was constructed in 2011, but given the lack of available space on the site there is no further option to increase the footprint any further.

Ysgol Hen Felin

- 4.23 Ysgol Hen Felin is located in Ystrad, Rhondda. It is a school for learners aged 3 to 19 with a range of special educational needs including: autistic spectrum disorders; severe learning difficulties; profound and multiple learning difficulties; social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and sensory impairments.
- 4.24 It is a single storey building situated in a residential area in the same grounds as a leisure centre. The school has an astro turf within a large sensory garden along with a polytunnel. There is a multi-sensory room, kitchen, hydrotherapy pool and trampoline.
- 4.25 Learners are taught a wide and varied curriculum, enabling them to experience a range of skills, the emphasis being on life and vocational skills. Learners are regularly taken into the community where they apply the skills they learn to real life situations. Learners gain accreditation and qualifications from their vocational studies.

- 4.26 There is a satellite provision for Ysgol Hen Felin at Coleg Y Cymoedd's Llwynypia campus, however it is proving increasingly difficult for the school to encourage parents to send their children to this provision given the limited on-site specialist facilities in comparison to those available at the school itself. As a result only a small number of year 12, 13 and 14 learners currently attend.
- 4.27 There are also a number of learners at Ysgol Hen Felin that would meet the criteria to attend Buarth y Capel, but the travelling distance and the established relationships with current school staff discourages parents from sending their children to this specialist provision.
- 4.28 The school is graded as B for condition and A for suitability and has a backlog maintenance figure of £171,608. The school was built in 2004, and at that time welcomed 90 pupils. Although relatively new, a number of adaptations have had to be undertaken to allow more teaching spaces to be created, this unfortunately has been to the detriment of the specialist teaching areas. Over £100k has been spent at the school over the last 3 years contributing to these much needed alterations.
- 4.29 The increase in numbers on this school site are a cause for immediate concern and a short term solution is needed to create more space on site for learners. There is room at the rear of the site to accommodate a 2-classroom modular build, which can be located on the school site relatively quickly. Approval to implement this short term solution will be brought before Cabinet in next month's Capital Programme Cabinet Report.

Ysgol Ty Coch

- 4.30 Ysgol Ty Coch is located in Tonteg. It is a school for learners aged 3 to 19 with a range of special educational needs including: autistic spectrum disorders; severe learning difficulties; profound and multiple learning difficulties; social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and sensory impairments.
- 4.31 The original site, which is a brick built, single storey building is situated in a residential area. The facilities available to learners include a fully functioning kitchen, hairdressing salon, workshop, horticulture training, café and car washing.
- 4.32 Learners are taught a wide and varied curriculum, enabling them to experience a range of skills, the emphasis being on life and vocational skills. Learners are regularly taken into the community where they apply the skills they learn to real life situations. Learners gain accreditation and qualifications from their vocational studies.
- 4.33 The school is graded as B for condition and B for suitability and has a backlog maintenance figure of £259,026. The school has received a significant investment with a classroom extension completed last year which increased the size of the school but reduced the amount of outside play area. Although a short term solution, this additional classroom has bought some time until a long term plan for the site has been identified. The school site is in a residential area and again there are limited opportunities to extend the school further. There are also

limited parking areas outside of the school and the space is very constrained during drop off and collection times.

Buarth y Capel

- 4.34 Buarth y Capel is a satellite site of Ysgol Ty Coch and is located in Ynysybwl, approximately seven miles away from Ysgol Ty Coch. It was established in September 2014 to meet the needs of learners aged 14 to 19 with a diagnosis of severe/profound autistic spectrum disorder who had previously met generic special school criteria and who required highly specialist and bespoke provision.
- 4.35 The site is a single story building, set in grounds, which has been completely refurbished to suit the needs of older learners with autism. Even though this is a satellite school of Ysgol Ty Coch, learners throughout Rhondda Cynon Taf can attend as it is a specialist provision for key stage 4 and 5 with highly complex ASD.
- 4.36 Learners are taught a wide and varied curriculum, devised from 14 to 19 Pathways, enabling them to experience a range of skills. The emphasis of these skills includes life and vocational skills. Learners gain accreditation and qualifications from their vocational studies.
- 4.37 Since Buarth y Capel opened in 2014 there has been little spend as there has been no requirement for further investment.

5. WIDER CONTEXT

- 5.1 Considerable changes are planned in Wales in relation to the statutory provision required to meet the needs of learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN)/Additional Learning Needs (ALN) with the implementation of new legislation, the ALNET Act (2018), in September 2021. The ALNET (Wales) Act 2018¹ received Royal Assent in January 2018.
- 5.2 The new statutory framework is underpinned by three overarching objectives, these are:
- A unified legislative framework to support all children of compulsory school age or below with additional learning needs (ALN) and to support young people with ALN who are in school or further education (FE);
 - An integrated, collaborative process of assessment, planning and monitoring of the support provided to ALN learners which facilitates early, timely and effective interventions; and
 - A fair and transparent system for providing information and advice, and for resolving concerns and appeals.
- 5.3 These objectives are in turn supported by a further eleven core aims within the Act:

¹ [The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal \(Wales\) Act](#)

- The introduction of the term ‘additional learning needs (ALN)’;
- A 0 to 25 age range;
- A unified, single statutory plan;
- Increased participation of children and young people;
- High aspirations and improved outcomes;
- A simpler and less adversarial system;
- Increased collaboration;
- Avoiding disagreements and earlier disagreement resolution;
- Clear and consistent rights of appeal;
- The ALN Code;
- A bilingual system.

5.4 The Act will be supported by the implementation of a new statutory ALN Code which will be laid before the Senedd in February 2021. Until this time, Welsh Government has published a draft version of the Code to support local authorities and other relevant stakeholders to plan towards implementation.

5.5 The transformed system will:

- Ensure that all learners with ALN are supported to overcome barriers to learning and achieve their full potential;
- Improve the planning and delivery of support for learners from 0 to 25 with ALN, placing learners’ needs, views, wishes and feelings at the heart of the process;
- Focus on the importance of identifying needs early and putting in place timely and effective interventions which are monitored and adapted to ensure they deliver the desired outcomes.

5.6 It is expected that the new ALN system set out in the Act will be fully implemented over a three-year period. The implementation period is expected to run from September 2021 to August 2024. However, Welsh Government is yet to publish its revised implementation timetable following its decision to delay its original implementation from September 2020.

5.7 In the meantime, local authorities and all those who work with children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) must ensure that they continue to comply with the duties placed upon them by the Education Act 1996 and continue to have regard to the SEN Code of Practice for Wales (2002).

5.8 A separate report providing more detail on the ALNET Act will also be brought before Cabinet providing more details on the local authority’s statutory duties to ensure full compliance with the new legislation. For the purpose of this report however, the rationale for including this information is to highlight how these statutory obligations will compound an already stretched special school provision. Most avenues for expanding existing capacity for special school provision on existing sites have been exhausted and there is now a need to consider a more sustainable option that will future proof provision for our learners with the most complex needs.

6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Welsh Language, Equality, and Community Impact Assessments are not required for the purpose of this report.
- 6.2 Each of these Impact Assessments however will be prepared if approval is granted to progress with any proposal as a result of any future detailed review of the special school provision in the County Borough.

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 If approval is granted to progress with any proposals as a result of this review of special schools in the County Borough, where appropriate, the consultation process in respect of the proposals will be undertaken under the arrangements outlined in the Welsh Government's Statutory Code – School Organisation Code (011/2018)².

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 If the above proposals to undertake a detailed review of special schools in the County Borough are to proceed, the associated costs will be met from existing 21st Century Schools budgets.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 9.1 Section 316 of the Education Act 1996³ specifies that children and young people with SEN should normally be educated in mainstream schools so long as this is compatible with them receiving the special educational provision that their learning difficulty calls for, the efficient education of other children and young people and the efficient use of resources.
- 9.2 Section 315 of the Education Act 1996 also requires Local Authorities to ensure that SEN/ALN provision is kept under review. Sections 1:20 and 1:21 of The Code of Practice also requires Local Authorities to evaluate the effectiveness of school funding arrangements in supporting and raising the achievements of children and young people with SEN.

10. LINKS TO CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT 2015

- 10.1 The proposals will ensure that two of RCTCBC's three key priorities will be met. These include:
- Economy: Building a strong economy.
 - People: Promoting independence and positive lives for everyone.

² [Welsh Government's Statutory Code – School Organisation Code \(011/2018\)](#)

³ [Education Act 1996](#)

- 10.2 The proposals will ensure that some of RCTCBC's most vulnerable learners will have the best chance of achieving positive outcomes. The proposals will ensure more efficient and effective use of resources which promotes the development of social inclusion and positive outcomes for learners. This will also have a beneficial impact on transport costs and on carbon emissions.
- 10.3 Organising services so that they are focussed on early intervention and prevention is a key statutory requirement of the Wellbeing and Future Generations Act 2015⁴ and a key element of RCTCBC's Corporate Plan.

11. CONCLUSION

- 11.1 The Welsh Government and legislation requires local authorities to regularly review arrangements for supporting learners with SEN and to ensure that provision is sufficient and meets the needs of its communities.
- 11.2 The priority for RCTCBC's Directorate of Education and Inclusion Services is to continue to focus on driving up standards in schools and early years settings, and to improve the outcomes for all children and young people. If the cycle of deprivation and underachievement is to be broken, a top quality education that meets the needs of all children and young people is essential. There are considerable benefits to be gained from this review of special schools in the County Borough in ensuring the SEN of all children and young people are met and outcomes for all learners are improved. It is also hoped that by investing in our special school provision in Rhondda Cynon Taf we would further reduce the need for out of county placements for our learners with the most complex medical and health needs.
- 11.3 Given the increase in the numbers of learners accessing our special schools, the restrictions of the existing school sites, and the imminent implementation of the new ALNET Act, there is a need to urgently review our special school to ensure that these will meet the needs of our future residents. Despite ongoing investment in provisions, the report highlights the need for a detailed review of special schools throughout the County Borough so that we can ensure that future cohorts of vulnerable learners can access special school provision that meets their complex needs in Rhondda Cynon Taf. Without expanding the capacity of existing provision in Rhondda Cynon there is a risk that we will be unable to meet any future increase in demand for special school placements.
- 11.4 It is recommended therefore, that additional work be undertaken including feasibility studies where appropriate, to facilitate the detailed review of provision across the board and possible proposals for change and future investment in the special school sector.

⁴ [Wellbeing and Future Generations Act 2015](#)

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972
AS AMENDED BY
THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985
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Background Papers

None