



WALES AUDIT OFFICE

SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

**A report on the quality of local authority
education
services for children and young people**

in

**Torfaen County Borough Council
The Civic Centre
Pontypool
Torfaen
NP4 6YB**

October 2011

by

**Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

During each inspection, inspectors aim to answer three key questions:

Key Question 1: How good are the outcomes?

Key Question 2: How good is provision?

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?

Inspectors also provide an overall judgement on the provider's current performance and on their capacity to improve.

In these evaluations, we use a four-point scale:

Excellent

Good

Adequate

Unsatisfactory

The report was produced in accordance with section 38 of the Education Act 1997, the Children Act 2004 and the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

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Publication Section

Estyn

Anchor Court

Keen Road

Cardiff

CF24 5JW or by email to publications@estyn.gov.uk

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Context

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Torfaen is located in the south east of Wales. It borders the city council of Newport, the county of Monmouthshire and the county boroughs of Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent. The total population is 90,720.

In Torfaen, 20% of people over the age of three say they can speak Welsh compared to the Wales average of 25.6%.

The employment rate in Torfaen is 64.8%, compared to the Wales average of 66.7%. There are 25.4% of children living in workless households. Of the working population in Torfaen, 16% have no qualifications, which is higher than the Wales average of 13.7%. Ethnic minorities account for 1.2% of the population, lower than the Wales average of 3.6%.

In 2011 the percentage of pupils entitled to free-school-meals in Torfaen was lower than the Wales average and the 10th lowest in Wales compared to other local authorities, where first is the lowest free school meals (FSM) figure and 22nd is the highest (PLASC 2011). Only seven of the 60 areas in Torfaen are now in the 10% most deprived areas in Wales.

As of 31 March 2010, Torfaen had 235 children being looked after by the authority. There were 115 children on the Child Protection register.

Funding

The Welsh Government's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per head of population (based on 2010 mid-year population figures) for Torfaen for 2011-12 was £1,752 slightly above the Wales average of £1,697.

The Council set its overall budget at 100.3% of SSA, almost at the Wales average of 100.2% and it set the education budget at a level of 101.3% of its indicative budget allocation (IBA), above the Wales average of 99.5%. It should be noted that the IBA is not a spending target, but a mechanism for determining the allocation of Welsh Government support for individual authorities. The net education budget per pupil was £4,665 compared with the all Wales average of £4,770. The budget delegated to primary schools is £3,752 per pupil and that for secondary schools is £4,051 per pupil. Both are below the respective all Wales averages of £3,821 and £4,272.

Summary

Overall judgement: Unsatisfactory

- Performance in secondary schools has not improved, particularly in key stage 4 which is among the lowest in Wales on four of the five main indicators set by the Welsh Government;
- too many schools are in the bottom quarter for performance when compared to similar schools on the free school meal benchmarks;
- the percentage of 16-year-olds not in education, employment or training is too high;
- although overall exclusions are reducing significantly, fixed term exclusions of five days or less are increasing and among the worst in Wales; and
- a secondary school and a PRU have been identified as requiring significant improvement in the last year.

However:

- performance in key stages 1 and 2 has improved significantly in recent years and attendance in secondary schools has also improved;
- the authority has started to improve its processes to challenge, monitor and intervene in schools;
- safeguarding procedures have improved and are given appropriate priority by the authority; and
- scrutiny arrangements have improved and elected members are beginning to hold schools and their governing bodies to account, which is already having a positive impact.

Capacity to improve: Adequate

- Performance management is not yet consistent across all education services;
- the authority does not gather and analyse information from all agencies to help the Children and Young People's Partnership (CYPP) manage and measure performance well enough; and
- the impact of the CYPP on provision and outcomes for children and young people in Torfaen is not good enough.

However:

- elected members give education a high priority;
- there has been strong leadership from the Chief Executive and the Chief Education Officer to bring about change and improve relationships with schools and partners; and
- strategic managers are aware of the areas for improvement in schools and are using the authority's full powers to improve a school requiring significant improvement.

Recommendations

In order to secure the improvements that are needed, the local authority should:

- R1 raise standards in secondary schools, particularly in key stage 4;
- R2 take action to reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET);
- R3 improve the quality and consistency of the evaluation of services to inform planning more effectively;
- R4 improve the performance management of services to ensure a consistent approach in delivering improvements; and
- R5 implement effective governance arrangements for the work of the CYPP to ensure that all services for children and young people in Torfaen are managed appropriately.

What happens next?

Torfaen local authority will produce an action plan to show how it will address these recommendations within 50 working days of receipt of the report.

Estyn is of the opinion that the authority falls into the follow-up category of significant improvement.

During all core inspections, the inspection team considers whether a local authority needs any follow-up activity.

There are five types of follow-up activity:

- 1 Good practice case study
- 2 Link inspector monitoring
- 3 Estyn monitoring visit
- 4 Significant improvement
- 5 Special measures

Any follow-up inspection work will be planned in consideration of other inspection and regulatory activity within an authority. All follow-up inspections will be fed into the Local Authority Regulatory Calendar to avoid duplication and take advantage of any opportunities to work more closely with the Wales Audit Office (WAO) and the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW).

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes? Unsatisfactory

Standards: Unsatisfactory

Performance in key stages 1 and 2 has improved significantly in recent years. The percentage of learners gaining the core subject indicator (the expected performance in English or Welsh, mathematics and science, the core subjects of the National Curriculum) in both key stages is now above the average for Wales and compares well to performance levels in other authorities.

However, performance in secondary schools has not improved at the same rate. In key stage 3, the percentage of learners gaining the core subject indicator improved in 2011 although it remains below the average for Wales.

Performance in key stage 4 declined compared to that in other authorities in 2011 and is among the lowest in Wales on four of the five main indicators set by the Welsh Government.

When compared to the performance of similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks, performance in 2011 is well above average in key stages 1 and 2. At key stage 3, 70% of schools are below average and too few schools are in the top quarter for performance.

In key stage 4, well over half of schools are in the bottom 25% on four indicators, with nearly three-quarters in the bottom 25% in one of these. No school is above average on the level 2 threshold (indicating the proportion of pupils achieving the equivalent of five GCSEs at grade A* to C). There are no schools in the top 25% except for one school on one indicator.

There is a declining picture against the Welsh Government's benchmarks for performance based on free-school-meal entitlement. In 2008, Torfaen met two of the three benchmarks. It has not met any benchmarks over the past three years.

Progress between primary and secondary schools is below average overall although the level 1 threshold (indicating the proportion of pupils achieving equivalent to five GCSEs at grade D to G) and the average wider points score (comprising all qualifications approved for use in Wales at the age of 16) are above average in key stage 4.

In 2010, the percentage of learners leaving full-time education without any recognised qualification improved and is better than the Wales average.

In 2011, in key stage 2, the gap in performance on the core subject indicator between boys and girls is the same as that across Wales. However, in key stage 1, key stage 3 and three of the five main indicators in key stage 4, the gap is larger than average. The performance of groups of vulnerable pupils and those with additional learning needs (ALN) is mixed. Learners with English as an additional language perform well

compared to national norms. The gap in performance between learners entitled to free school meals and other learners is wider than across Wales as a whole.

Torfaen has now introduced a standardised reading test across all of its schools in Years 6, 7 and 9. Most learners who receive support to improve their literacy and numeracy skills in primary schools make good progress while on an intervention programme. Many maintain these improvements to the end of the key stage. The results of reading tests place Torfaen's readers as below the national average at local authority level, but this also conceals wide variations in performance across schools. In response, the authority has redrafted its literacy strategy and is developing a revised action plan.

Performance in Welsh first and second language is good in primary schools. However, in key stages 3 and 4, Welsh as a second language performance remains among the lowest in Wales. Too few learners are entered for qualifications in Welsh as a second language at the end of key stage 4.

There are good examples of young people achieving well in non-formal settings such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award and the Children's University. However, there is not enough data available to enable the authority to judge achievement across all such provision.

Wellbeing: Adequate

Attendance in the primary sector is below the Welsh average in every measure and standards in this area fall short of what might be expected. There is little evidence of sustainable progress in improving this.

In contrast, attendance in secondary schools has recently improved sharply and it is now at or above what might be expected. This has been achieved through a significant reduction in unauthorised absence.

The attendance of vulnerable groups of children and young people is close to the Wales average for pupils in Torfaen. Officers monitor this data carefully and provide supportive intervention where necessary.

The number of pupils permanently excluded from schools is around the average for Wales. Fixed term exclusions of six days or more have reduced at a much faster rate than for Wales as a whole. The number of days lost to fixed term exclusions is relatively few and reducing. Performance in this indicator is close to the best in Wales. However, the number of fixed term exclusions of five days or less has been increasing and is now significantly worse than might be expected in comparison with numbers in other authorities.

The percentages of Year 11 leavers not in education, training or employment (NEET) or continuing in full-time education are not as good as Wales averages. The percentages do not compare well to those of other similar authorities.

All schools are engaged in delivering Sport Wales activities and good numbers of girls and boys participate equally. The number taking part compares well to those in

other areas in Wales. However, girls rarely engage in similar community-based sports.

Children and young people, through the Youth Forum and school councils, contribute well to consultation. Their contributions have had an impact on change management, strategic partnership planning, the remodelling of school provision and school organisation.

Key Question 2: How good is provision? Adequate

Support for school improvement: Adequate

The authority has recently restructured the school improvement service and has made appropriate improvements to its processes to support, challenge, monitor and intervene in schools. It has produced a clear and comprehensive partnership guide for schools. This categorises schools appropriately and clarifies school and local authority responsibilities to bring about improvement. Because this has yet to be communicated effectively to all headteachers, it has yet to have an impact. The authority rightly places a strong emphasis on challenging its schools to analyse performance data robustly.

The authority has recognised that it has not challenged schools effectively enough in the past. As a result, one primary school, one secondary school and the pupil referral unit (PRU) have been placed in a category of concern by Estyn in recent years. The authority was not aware of the issues that led to the PRU being placed in significant improvement. The authority has since improved its practice and its knowledge of schools mainly through the newly appointed systems leaders. These officers make good use of performance data and have improved the level of challenge to schools but it is too early to see the impact on outcomes for learners. The performance data presented to schools does not contain enough comparative analysis with similar schools to ensure that the analysis prompts robust challenge to schools.

Secondary school profiles are comprehensive and accurately identify areas for improvement. Notes of visit by school improvement advisers for their schools have suitable detail and contain appropriate recommendations for improvement. School improvement officers and those from ALN and inclusion services have recently been organised into multi-disciplinary teams to improve their work with schools. However, they do not collaborate effectively enough in their work to have an impact on the outcomes for all learners or to convince all headteachers that this is an effective approach.

Professional learning communities focusing on raising standards have already had an impact on improving performance in primary schools. The authority has learned from this good practice and used it to improve the focus of other groups.

The authority's evaluation of its literacy strategy identified that it was not effective enough in improving pupils' reading ages. As a result, officers have redrafted this strategy and are updating the action plan. The authority has commissioned consultants to work with secondary schools to improve standards in English and

mathematics. However, the full impact of this work on standards has yet to be demonstrated. The authority has provided good support for the implementation of the Foundation Phase. It does not do enough to make sure that children and young people have enough options to study at 14-19 at the appropriate level.

The authority supports school governors well but governors have only recently become aware of the poor attainment of Torfaen's schools since the authority provided more information. The training that is provided for governors is of good quality but attendance at governor training sessions, although improving, remains poor.

There is strong support to improve the performance of middle leaders in secondary schools.

Support for additional learning needs: Adequate

Torfaen has worked effectively to increase the numbers of pupils receiving support without going through statutory processes. This has resulted in a reduction in the number of statements of special educational needs (SEN) year on year since 2004. Only two authorities have fewer pupils with statements. Officers work well with headteacher and SNAP Cymru representatives to ensure that schools receive consistent and equitable responses to requests for additional support.

There are clear procedures and well-understood criteria for providing and ceasing additional support to meet the broad range of pupils' additional needs. However the diagnosis of need is slow for some pupils and this means that pupils do not always receive support in a timely manner.

Effective consultation with headteachers has resulted in the delegation of the authority's additional support budget to schools. This is beginning to have a positive impact as schools now meet a broader range of pupils' additional needs without having to request further support.

However, early assessment and intervention do not always occur. Some primary schools do not always communicate their concerns about pupils' development to parents early enough. Sometimes this means that pupils' needs are not being met early enough. Even for pupils whose needs are identified before they start school, the services that could help are not always available.

The recently improved data management system is yet to have impact, and systematic monitoring of pupils' progress and outcomes is underdeveloped. This leaves the authority unclear about the impact of some services on pupils' achievement.

The service provides good support and training to schools. Along with the devolved resources, this means that schools can develop their confidence and skills in meeting the needs of more pupils without needing to ask for further advice. Effective outreach support from the special school has supplemented the authority's range of specialist services. However, the sustainability of this outreach support is not guaranteed.

Torfaen has consulted well with pupils in two schools as part of its pilot of individual development plans.

Generally, good and timely support is provided for parents and carers. Well-informed officers are responsive to parental concerns. Support for parents of pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorder and for parents from the Gypsy and Traveller community is particularly effective. However, the authority does not do enough to ensure that all parents are aware of the range of support and advice available to them. This sometimes leads to delays in accessing important support, even in the early years where support is generally good.

The service has a clear vision for school improvement based on the national priority for inclusive education. However, strategic planning and delivery between ALN and school improvement services are not coherent enough and this hampers the ability of the authority to be effective in meeting the needs of all its young people.

Overall, the local authority has a good understanding of what it wants to introduce to make some of the required improvements to the service. However, there is little evidence of how these improvements will be implemented locally, or any evidence of a needs analysis for these improvements. Planning to cover the financial implications of meeting these aspirations is weak.

Promoting social inclusion and wellbeing: Adequate

Pupils from vulnerable groups including looked-after children (LAC) are supported extensively. The developing multi-agency, partnership approach is starting to benefit from the new system for sharing data. However, this has yet to impact on standards. In 2009-2010, the performance of LAC pupils at level 2 was 17%, below the performance of their same age peers in Torfaen and 27% below that for all Welsh pupils.

The authority has appointed a specialist educational psychologist to lead improvements in behaviour management. It is too early to judge the impact of this on the relatively small number of schools where issues have been unresolved for too long.

Torfaen has restructured its PRU management team and clarified roles and responsibilities in order to secure improved performance. It has recruited additional teaching staff and strengthened planning for learning and teaching.

Improved support for attendance has had a recent positive impact in secondary schools as a result of a restructured and refocused education welfare officer (EWO) service. However, these improvements are not yet fully embedded or consistently applied across all primary schools.

Torfaen is working well with the police and the Community Safety Partnership to engage with problem families effectively. These strategies have helped to improve attendance and reduce incidents of anti-social behaviour across the county borough.

The authority facilitates good access for children and young people to services that they need such as counselling and the Duke of Edinburgh Award. However, youth service officers do not know if children and young people have access to a suitable range of appropriate youth support services. The youth service was restructured some five weeks prior to this inspection so it is too soon to judge the contribution that it will make to Torfaen's youth support services.

There is good partnership work with the youth offending service to identify those at risk of either disengagement or involvement in the youth justice system. This is used to inform schools and target interventions where necessary.

The authority uses a range of strategies to reduce the percentage of NEETs or those at risk of being NEET. However, these strategies are not always coherent, are not well co-ordinated and have not, as yet, had the desired impact on making a significant reduction in the number of young people categorised as NEET.

Arrangements for safeguarding have improved in Torfaen. The local authority places great emphasis on the protection of children and young people and makes it a priority at every level of practice. Officers, services and schools have a good record of compliance.

Access and school places: Adequate

Overall, the authority has enough capacity in its schools and early years settings to meet the needs of learners and parents, including the growing need for Welsh-medium places. The authority has detailed information on the places available in its schools and the future demand for these places. There is a high percentage of surplus places in a number of primary schools and two secondary schools. The authority has taken action to reduce surplus places through amalgamations and closures, but the overall progress since the last inspection in 2006 has been slow.

The authority knows the condition and suitability of its school buildings well. There is a £17 million backlog of school repairs and too many buildings that are not fit for purpose. There are good strategic plans in place to address these issues and these are communicated well in the 21st Century schools and post-16 transformation documents. These plans are dependent on substantial funding from the Welsh Government and there is uncertainty over their future of these plans.

Admissions procedures for schools are clear and communicated well to parents. They meet statutory requirements, and the Admissions Forum is effective. Torfaen works well with neighbouring authorities on admissions procedures and preferences, particularly with regard to Welsh-medium provision. Almost all parents have their choices of schools met, particularly for Welsh-medium provision, and the few appeals received by the authority are dealt with quickly. Children transferring to schools within the authority and children excluded from school are managed effectively and without delay. The authority has good strategic plans to make sure that demand for early years and play is met.

Although there is a range of youth support services available to young people in Torfaen, the authority and the CYPP do not have a clear strategic overview of these services to be sure that they meet the needs and entitlements of young people and their families.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management? Adequate

Leadership: Adequate

Elected members across political parties give education a high priority. They have set an appropriate vision. In addition they have taken a few difficult decisions in line with their priorities. For example, they closed a swimming pool to benefit other services including education. The links between the vision and strategic, business and action plans are well mapped. However, the details in action plans are not always clear enough to help officers see what they need to do to bring about improvements.

There has been good leadership from the Chief Executive Officer and the Chief Education Officer to initiate and manage change. They have improved relationships with elected members, between departments of the authority and with the authority's schools. The authority has recently shifted its focus to increase the challenge to schools. This good leadership has led to improvements in service provision and to improvements in school performance at key stages 1 and 2. The authority has an appropriate focus on improving outcomes at key stage 4 although there is still progress to be made here. There has not been enough focus on the CYPP nor on how wider youth support services can help children and young people achieve.

Elected members know that standards must continue to improve. Through their core aim groups, they are aware of the general performance of Torfaen's schools. Members are beginning to hold schools to account. For example, headteachers and the Chief Education Officer jointly present secondary school profiles to inform evaluation. However, they do not receive enough analysis of information to help them see the full picture. For example, relevant members were not aware enough of the significant underperformance of pupils in the PRU.

The local service board (LSB) is beginning to work well to make sure that good inter-agency work helps the most challenging families. For example, in Thornhill, joint work between the police, housing and the community has contributed to a reported decrease of criminal activity by 70% in that ward. The LSB executive's work is subject to scrutiny by a panel of elected members and co-opted senior officers from other relevant agencies. This is a good development but has not included looking at the impact of its work on children and young people.

Scrutiny of services to children and young people has improved and challenge to officers is more effective. The scrutiny committee has made good use of external expertise from education and business, for example to place focus on community and learner needs.

There is an appropriate level of maturity in the relationship between officers and the scrutiny committee. Officers challenge the decisions and recommendations of the

committee and refer issues for its attention. Good work has been done to improve the presentation of data on school performance to the scrutiny committee. However the data is not used enough to inform comparative analysis of the outcomes of similar schools or analysis of the performance of vulnerable groups.

Quality improvement: Adequate

The authority's self-evaluation report identified accurately areas for improvement in performance, particularly in key stage 4. However, in other places, the report lacks detail and does not pay enough attention to strategies to improve literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) and their impact on outcomes. In these sections, it does not recognise well enough the progress the authority has made and neither does it identify areas for further development. Elected members, officers and other agencies were appropriately involved in the preparation of the self-evaluation report. The authority has good arrangements for consulting young people and the wider community.

The authority has improved its data management system to collect, analyse and report performance data. Senior officers and elected members now understand the performance of schools, although not all services use data consistently enough. The authority does not gather and analyse information from all agencies to help the CYPP measure performance well enough.

Strategic managers have reviewed performance across the authority's schools and correctly identified important areas for improvement. As a result, safeguarding procedures and secondary school attendance rates have both improved, although progress on performance at key stage 4 remains too slow. The Chief Education Officer has recently restructured the school improvement management team following reviews of the authority's practice. Officers now have a sharper focus on challenging schools to improve and have set out clearly in the new partnership guide how the service will hold schools to account. This guide demonstrates that the authority understands what it needs to do to improve schools. The authority has recently used its statutory powers in order to improve a school causing concern and is one of only a few authorities in Wales to have done so. However, it is too early to identify the effects of these initiatives on raising standards.

Initiatives such as the literacy strategy and the work of consultants in secondary schools are evaluated thoroughly to identify areas for further improvement. However, self-evaluation is not consistent enough across the work of all education services. Performance management arrangements have improved since the last inspection, although these are not consistent across all teams. Team plans underpin the service improvement plan well, although a few lack clear performance targets.

The authority has addressed most of the recommendations from previous inspections of education services although it has not fully formalised its medium-term financial strategy.

Partnership working: Unsatisfactory

The authority understands how important partnership working is in delivering improvements in services and outcomes for learners. The strong focus and priority

given to strategic partnerships in Torfaen, from the LSB through to regional and local partnerships, reflect this clearly. All strategic partners have appropriate plans that comply with requirements of the Welsh Government, and they use national and local priorities well to inform their plans. Torfaen's Children and Young People's Plan sets out the overarching vision and strategic direction for children and young people clearly. However, the impact of strategic partnerships, particularly the CYPP, on the provision of services and outcomes for children and young people in Torfaen is not good enough.

There are good examples of partnerships with other local authorities and other agencies in south east Wales. These have an appropriate focus on collaboration so that service delivery increases capacity and improves efficiency. Examples include the South East Wales Consortium (SEWC) for school improvement, where all three neighbouring authorities have recently approved a joint outline business case, the 14-19 Learning Partnership and the developing work with companies such as CISCO and Microsoft for improving IT as a learning resource across the authority.

Self-evaluation of the work and impact of the various partnerships by its partners is very recent and so the authority and its partners are not sure how well they are operating.

Resource management: Adequate

In 2011-2012, the Council protected its delegated schools budgets from cuts and intends to increase this budget by 1% for the next two years. This is significant given the reduction in funding levels for the Council and reflects its commitment to education.

The Council is developing a medium-term financial plan to formalise its priorities and funding strategies. The authority understands the pressures on its budget and has produced a five year financial forecast which projects funding gaps, savings required and future pressures on the service.

The Council has aligned its workforce planning to financial planning well and has in place a corporate framework to reduce workforce costs in a measured and proportionate way. The authority has produced appropriate guidance to assist schools in managing staff levels in a fair, transparent and consistent manner.

The authority has allocated and realigned resources to some of its priorities such as ICT, schools modernisation, literacy initiatives and additional posts in some key areas. It has used external funding well to resource elements of its schools capital programme.

The Schools Budget Forum (SBF) is used effectively to discuss school-related financial matters and to bring about change. Its role has usefully been extended to undertake value for money reviews.

Service Level Agreements provide clarity on the extent, cost and quality of support services which, overall, are well rated by schools and reviewed annually. The authority does not compare its costs with those of other local authorities but it is

undertaking some value-for-money reviews in areas such as procurement management.

The authority monitors school balances well and challenges schools appropriately. Maximum levels of surplus balances have been established and any amount in excess will be clawed back from 2012-2013 in order to ensure that learners benefit from these resources.

Although there is shared understanding in Torfaen of the priorities for education, the links between the strategic vision and business plans in all service areas and across the CYPP are not always clear. This, together with inconsistent evaluation of impact, means the authority does not always know where its resources and services should be targeted to meet the needs of learners and to bring about sustained improvement. Work has begun to improve this but it is too soon to judge its effect.

Torfaen has achieved significant cost savings, which it has re-invested in services for children. It has ended reliance on expensive out of county placements and developed cost-effective, multi-agency support. The authority has successfully realised substantial capital receipts from local authority property sales, which are ring-fenced for re-investment in education projects. However, as the judgement for standards is unsatisfactory, value for money is unsatisfactory.

Appendix 1

The inspection team

Stephen Lamb HMI	Reporting Inspector
Mererid Stone HMI	Team Inspector
Susan Roberts HMI	Team Inspector
Huw Collins HMI	Team Inspector
Farrukh Khan HMI	Team Inspector
Angharad Reed HMI	Team Inspector
Jane Taylor HMI	Team Inspector
Louise Fleet	WAO
Gareth Morgans	Peer Inspector
Dermot McChrystal	Nominee

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