

Ruth Perry Coroners Report into Prevention of Future Deaths 2023



OFSTED REPORT CAVERSHAM
PRIMARY SCHOOL 2023



Summary

BACKGROUND TO THE INQUEST

OFSTED INSPECTION

The school had previously been celebrated with an "outstanding" rating but was unexpectedly downgraded to the lowest category, "inadequate," primarily due to safeguarding issues. Despite this significant downgrading, other aspects of the school's provision were still deemed to be "good," indicating that the issues were specific rather than widespread.

IMPACT OF THE INSPECTION

The inspection process proved to be exceptionally distressing for Mrs. Perry. As the inspection unfolded, she became visibly more distressed and emotional, with the coroner later reporting that she felt utterly "broken" and "humiliated" by the entire experience. This emotional turmoil was compounded by the pressure of the inspection and the fear of its consequences.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE RATING

Receiving an "inadequate" rating triggered a requirement for the school to transition into an academy, a process that was both daunting and unwelcome for Mrs. Perry. She was deeply apprehensive about this change, primarily because she feared it would lead to her losing her job. Moreover, she was worried about the associated public disgrace and the potential impact on her professional reputation and personal life.

SECRECY SURROUNDING THE REPORT

During this challenging time, Ofsted regulations imposed a strict confidentiality requirement. Headteachers were obligated to keep the results of the inspection confidential until the official report was released. This restriction left Mrs. Perry unable to discuss her circumstances openly with her support network or seek advice from medical professionals. The coroner noted that this lack of communication "assisted Ruth greatly," implying that the ability to share her concerns could have provided her with much-needed support.

HER DEATH

Tragically, before the official publication of the inspection report, Mrs. Perry took her own life in January 2023. Her death was a profound loss, highlighting the severe emotional impact the inspection process had on her and underscoring the importance of support systems during such challenging times.

THE STORY OF RUTH PERRY

Ruth Perry grew up in Caversham, a suburb of Reading, where she attended Caversham Primary School alongside her older sister, Julia.



CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Ruth began her professional journey in East London but returned to Reading in 2009 when she was appointed as the deputy head of her former school. A year later, she was promoted to head teacher.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Deeply integrated into the local community, those who knew Ruth described her as carefree, confident, and passionate about her work. Her husband, Jon, also hailed from Caversham. During the week of the Ofsted inspection, the family moved into Jon's childhood home, with plans to renovate it into their "forever home."

THE OFSTED INSPECTION

The evening after the two-day Ofsted inspection, Julia visited Ruth and found her looking dejected and pale. "I'm broken," Ruth confessed, breaking into tears. Julia recalled, "I gave her a hug. She just leaned into me and cried. There was nothing I could do to comfort her—I had never seen her like that."

In the days that followed, Ruth wrote notes rehearsing how to announce that the school had been rated "inadequate." She expressed her deep distress in a letter to parents dated November 18, 2022:

"I write to you as parents to say how utterly broken I am by the Ofsted inspection. I have dedicated my life to CPS [Caversham Primary School] and have only ever wanted the children to leave happy and confident. I am devastated by how I have failed the community."

STRUGGLES WITH MENTAL HEALTH

Shortly after the inspection, Ruth confided in Jon about her "dark thoughts." She worried that property values would plummet if the school was deemed inadequate and feared backlash from the community. Ruth told Jon they might have to relocate and confided in the school's business manager about having considered taking her own life.

Despite having no prior mental health issues, Jon grew increasingly concerned and took Ruth to a local psychiatric hospital. However, they were advised to return home until she could see her own doctor.

When Ruth finally visited her GP five days post-inspection, he expressed concern over her suicidal thoughts and referred her to a mental health crisis team. After a phone assessment, she was discharged on December 8, 2022.

Ruth had researched what head teachers do after failing an Ofsted inspection and found disturbing examples of suicide, forced removals, and "resignation in shame." Her notes reflected her turmoil, detailing how close she had come to ending her life and how she had talked herself "in and out of doing it."

<https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50211729>



https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a95ff2ed27ca001327b27d/DfE_response_to_Ruth_Perry_coroner_report.pdf



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THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

According to her sister-in-law, Anna Perry, Ruth was typically resilient and capable, but the fear of shame and humiliation began to chip away at her as she awaited the Ofsted report. Anna stated, "This was going to be the end of her career, and she didn't know what she could do. This was her passion, and she felt she could not hold her head up—she was so distraught."

As Christmas approached, Ruth's mental health deteriorated further. She wrote, "Every space is filled with my feelings of wretchedness and desperation." Tragically, fifty-four days after the Ofsted inspection, Ruth Perry took her life on January 8, 2023.

AFTERMATH AND REFLECTION

On March 21, 2023, Ofsted published its inspection report, rating Caversham Primary as "inadequate" but describing it as welcoming and vibrant, with exemplary pupil behaviour and high expectations. Ruth Perry's name appeared in the report, with a footnote noting leadership changes due to her passing.

Despite offers for a meeting, no one from Ofsted reached out to her family. Caversham Primary School was reinspected in June 2023, and later that month, MPs initiated an inquiry into school inspections in England, which led to some changes.

In July, Ofsted released a new report rating Caversham Primary as "good." The coroner confirmed that Ruth's GP, the school's chair of governors, and two deputy head teachers believed the Ofsted inspection contributed to her death. The inquest revealed that no children at the school had come to harm.

The coroner concluded that the Ofsted inspection lacked "fairness, respect, and sensitivity." She noted that Ruth felt unable to discuss her feelings with mental health professionals and believed she had to "bear this burden alone."

Speaking on behalf of Ofsted, Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman apologised to Ruth Perry's family for the distress caused by the inspection, stating, "It's right that we inspect first and foremost in the interests of children, their parents, and carers. However, in light of Mrs. Perry's tragic death, it's essential that we minimise stress and anxiety during inspections."

Anna, Ruth's sister-in-law, shared that the family is still grappling with the shock of what occurred, saying, "The future looks very different."

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE CORONER

The coroner, Heidi Connor, ruled that the Ofsted inspection had likely contributed to Mrs. Perry's death. During the inquest, she raised several critical issues with the inspection system:

The "brutal inhumanity" and "imbalance of power" in the inspection process.
An oversimplified one-word grading system that failed to provide sufficient nuance.

The lack of formal training for inspectors on how to identify and support distressed school leaders.

The absence of a clear procedure for pausing an inspection when a headteacher is visibly unwell.

The negative impact of the confidentiality rules, which isolated Mrs. Perry from her support network.

ON CHRISTMAS DAY 2022, RUTH AND HER FAMILY GATHERED TO CELEBRATE, TAKING A WALK BEFORE SITTING AROUND THE KITCHEN TABLE TO DISCUSS HOW TO HELP HER SEE A WAY FORWARD. THIS WOULD BE THE LAST TIME JULIA SAW HER YOUNGER SISTER ALIVE. "RUTH DIDN'T WANT TO SPOIL THE CHILDREN'S CHRISTMAS," JULIA SAID, "BUT SHE WAS HAUNTED."

HER LEGACY

Ruth Perry's tragic story has left a profound impact on her community and the broader educational landscape. Her death has sparked critical discussions about the pressures faced by headteachers and the support systems available to them. In the aftermath, many have called for a reevaluation of the inspection process, emphasising the need for more compassionate and supportive measures to prevent similar tragedies.

ADVOCACY FOR CHANGE

In the wake of Ruth's passing, her family and friends have become advocates for change, pushing for reforms in how educational assessments are conducted and how mental health is addressed within the profession. They argue for increased transparency, better mental health support for educators, and a more holistic approach to evaluating schools that considers the well-being of staff and students alike.

HONOURING RUTH'S MEMORY

To honour Ruth's dedication to education, her family has set up a foundation in her name, aiming to provide resources and support for educators experiencing similar challenges. The foundation also seeks to raise awareness about mental health in the teaching profession and advocate for policy changes to ensure the well-being of all educators.

CELEBRATING RUTH'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Ruth Perry will be remembered not only for her contributions to Caversham Primary School but also for her unwavering commitment to the children she served. Her passion for education and her desire to see her students thrive remain a testament to her character and dedication. Her story serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of compassion, understanding, and support in all walks of life.



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