

Independent Learning Review into the role played by Reading Borough Council in providing support, advice and guidance for Ruth Perry, the Caversham Primary School leadership team, school staff and governors before, during and after the Ofsted inspection of November 2022

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Introduction

1. This report was commissioned by Reading Borough Council in January 2024 and in doing so fulfilled the Coroner's direction in her regulation 28 ruling (see below).
2. The Council engaged two recently retired senior leaders from within the local authority children's services sector in order to provide an independent review with recommendations for learning and improvement for the council and its services.

About the authors

3. Steve Crocker was previously the Director of Children's Services for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Prior to that he had a long career in local government children's services. Steve was elected as President of the Association of Directors of Children's Services for 2022/3.
4. Brian Pope worked as the Assistant Director for Education and Inclusion for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Before this he had a long career in local authority education services and prior to this was a Primary Headteacher.

Terms of Reference

5. The terms of reference were set out as follows:
 - *The Review will consider the role played by the Local Authority in providing support, advice and guidance for Ruth Perry, the Caversham Primary School leadership team, school staff and governors:*
 - *before the inspection*
 - *during the inspection*
 - *after the inspection – including the role played by the LA in providing support, advice and guidance to the family following the death of Ruth Perry.*
 - *The Review will identify lessons learnt, lessons to learn and recommendations.*
 - *The Review will consider the context of local and national policy, guidance and funding structures in both its findings and recommendations.*
6. As authors we were assisted by a reference group of senior officers from the Council and Brighter Futures for Children who assisted in co-ordinating interviews and providing information. The analysis and conclusions are the authors' own.
7. The terms of reference relate to Reading Borough Council, and we have sought to frame our recommendations accordingly. Where we think that the Council should make representation to national bodies on matters of policy or practice

then we have couched our recommendations accordingly. A point to note is that Reading Borough Council delivers its Children's Services functions through a not-for-profit company, wholly owned by, but independent of, Reading Borough Council called Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC). This arrangement came about through the Council's previous inadequate rating in a children's social care inspection. The company, which operates as an alternative delivery model for children's services, took over the responsibility for the delivery of Reading's children's social care, education (including Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) and early help & prevention services in December 2018. The arrangement has seen a significant improvement in children's social care services as measured by Ofsted rating. Some services that are accessed by school staff are still run corporately by the Council, including Human Resources (HR), Health and Safety services and emergency planning functions. Unless stated otherwise, where we refer to the local authority, or Reading Borough Council, we are including Brighter Futures for Children and the other functions of the Council as set out above. Where it is helpful to draw a distinction we will do so. It is our view that the recommendations that we make have validity across the schools' sector. Both academies and maintained schools have been judged inadequate by Ofsted on safeguarding issues. Similarly, it is a matter of public record that academy school leaders as well as those in the maintained sector have experienced distress and trauma in their working lives and any system needs to understand how to support them better. It would not be helpful to turn the issues outlined in this report into a reductive academies versus local authority schools debate.

8. The authors' view is that in the United Kingdom there is a history of public reports which, by accident or design, have led to the public excoriation of individuals. If Ruth's death tells us anything, it is that that practice must stop. Our public services are run and delivered by human beings. We are all fallible – including the authors. Arguably, the spurious search for infallibility leads us to some of the situations described in this report. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't always strive to be the best that we can be, to make things better. That is what public servants come to work to do. But that requires an openness, curiosity and fearlessness that cannot exist where there is an overwhelming fear of 'failure' and the consequences that follow for an individual. Our report will therefore focus on systems, processes, policies and potential learning which will hopefully help to improve services for children and their families and those people delivering public services, sometimes in difficult circumstances, all of whom want to do their best for children and families.
9. In preparing this report we have met headteachers and governors from across Reading and from Caversham Primary School. We have met with elected members, officers and senior leaders within the Council as well as other interested parties as they were recommended to us or stepped forward. We have also met with members of Ruth's family. We would like to extend our thanks to everyone who participated and contributed.

Executive Summary

10. Caversham Primary School was subject to a full graded inspection on 15 and 16 November 2022 by Ofsted. The school had been rated as 'outstanding' in 2009 and had not been inspected subsequently.
11. The inspection at Caversham Primary was extremely difficult with safeguarding being judged ineffective. Where safeguarding is judged ineffective that is deemed to be a limiting judgement resulting in the school being judged inadequate overall. The publication of the report was delayed over the Christmas holidays in line with Ofsted's standard practice. Prior to the report's publication, the school's Headteacher, Ruth Perry, sadly took her own life on 8 January 2023.
12. This report outlines the policy complexity with regards to the role of local authorities vis a vis staff in maintained schools. The local authority is the employer of school staff but in reality has few of the powers one would expect of an employer which are instead deployed through the Board of Governors acting as the de facto employer.
13. The report also outlines the role of local authorities with regards to school effectiveness and their statutory duty in 'promoting high standards'. Again, there is complexity and nuance which is explored below but which highlights that local authorities are now reliant on maintained schools choosing to de-delegate part of their budgets back to the local authority to fund the monitoring and intervention work with those schools.
14. This policy ambiguity has meant that local authorities (and schools) have exercised latitude in deciding the degree to which they play an active part in supporting the effectiveness of schools within their area and how they carry out those functions. Reading Borough Council has sought to be pro-actively involved in the support, development and effectiveness of schools in its area. As such, Reading Borough Council's system works in accordance with the government's policy direction in that schools choose the amount of support and challenge that they wish to buy in from the local authority – but whether that is enough (in policy terms) is a moot point. As school budgets have also been pegged in real terms, schools' collective appetite to pay for the local authority to challenge them may be under pressure, a case of funding 'what you want rather than what you need'. Such a funding dilemma has the potential to further wither the effectiveness of the system overall both nationally and locally. Given that mass academisation is unlikely in the near future then the reality of the local authority role vis a vis schools needs to be clarified and funded. In recommending this though, we want to be clear that setting the bar according to the diminished options available to overstretched and underfunded local authorities would miss the central point: that such local authorities are effectively hamstrung in their ability to provide high quality support for their school leaders by a combination of both policy and funding constraints.
15. The main body of the report also explores the issue of whether a system of public, high stakes accountability is actually effective in raising standards. Other higher performing countries adopt much more collaborative systems. Such

countries seem to be able to incorporate school improvement, accountability, inspection and oversight into a more collaborative, respectful, high performing and child focused education system. We suggest that it is time to look at them a little more. Inspection need not be oppositional but could be collaborative; and accountability does not need to be a high stakes judgement for just one or two individuals but a shared endeavour and responsibility. There has not been an honest dialogue nationally about the context, focus and impact of inspections and the authors are pleased that Ofsted under its new Chief Inspector has embarked on its 'Big Listen'. We also recommend that the Council makes strong representations to Ofsted through the Big Listen. In particular the representations should encompass the issues of conduct, improving the complaints procedure, single word judgements, limiting judgements, pausing inspections, delays in publication, training for inspectors.

16. Whilst the above constitute the main recommendations relating to national policy, we have also looked in detail at the Council's work prior to the inspection at Caversham Primary School, during the inspection, after the inspection and after Ruth's tragic death.
17. In terms of the Council delivering its school effectiveness functions in order to prepare schools for inspection, we explore this in the report below and conclude that Reading's approach is consistent with that adopted by many other local authorities and goes beyond that which is offered by many similar councils.
18. However, the level and communication of HR support from the Council was less well regarded by school leaders.
19. There was little that could have been done by the Council or Brighter Futures for Children during the inspection, as the Ofsted framework stood at the time, to avoid the judgement. Whether the framework is 'right' is, of course, an entirely different point and one which we explore in more detail in the main body of the report. Reducing the analysis of an inspection to a one-word judgement is particularly unfortunate practice and as authors we have no doubt that the community of Caversham could have understood an Ofsted report which had a summary along the following lines: 'Caversham Primary School provides a good quality of education and children flourish and achieve well against a rounded curriculum. The school needs to tighten up some of its safeguarding procedures and we will come back to test this has been done in three months'.
20. The report explores the actions of the local authority after the inspection. It is clear that school effectiveness officers, like their colleagues in schools, and Ruth in particular, consistently worked 'above and beyond' the call of duty' reflecting the prevailing culture in schools nationally. What is less well considered is the degree of training that senior leaders in local authorities and schools have with regards to supporting and helping employees who are distressed and we make recommendations accordingly. In particular the issue of complaint to Ofsted is explored.
21. Many people were deeply affected and distressed by Ruth's death, primarily of course her family and friends. Responses to critical incidents often have

separate specialists who support the family and feed in their wishes and feelings to the overall management of the incident. As such it would benefit Children's Services to have a comprehensive policy on responding to critical incidents that incorporates guidance on how to support affected parties.

22. The Council and Brighter Futures for Children have taken a number of actions already which has improved their support for schools. These are outlined below. The authors have also made a number of recommendations that will further enhance the progress that has been made.

Background in Brief

23. The tragic background to this review is now a matter of public record. It is not the intention of this review to in any way re-hear or reinterpret the evidence heard in the Coroner's inquest, the Coroner has given her verdict. Nor is it our intention to unnecessarily cross into those matters quite properly being reviewed by Ofsted's own internal review, although the authors have met with Ofsted to clarify some points. Furthermore, some of the evidence that we had to review was frankly distressing and we have tried to be careful with detail and information in order that we can paint a full picture but without re-traumatising individuals who have had to suffer enough already.

24. In very brief summary, Caversham Primary School was subject to a full graded inspection on 15 and 16 November 2022 by Ofsted. The school had been rated as 'outstanding' in 2009 and had not been inspected subsequently. In 2012, the Department for Education made outstanding schools exempt from inspection unless there were specific concerns about the school. That exemption was lifted in 2020 bringing the school back into the purview of Ofsted.

25. The inspection at Caversham Primary School was extremely difficult with safeguarding being judged ineffective. Where safeguarding is judged ineffective that is deemed to be a limiting judgement resulting in the school being judged inadequate overall. The publication of the report was delayed over the Christmas holidays in line with Ofsted's standard practice. Prior to the report's publication, the school's Headteacher, Ruth Perry, sadly took her own life on 8 January 2023.

26. The Coroner subsequently found that:

Ruth Perry was a headteacher at Caversham Primary School, Reading in Berkshire. She had no relevant mental health history. An Ofsted inspection took place on 15th and 16th November 2022. During and after this inspection, Ruth's mental health deteriorated significantly. Ruth took her own life on 8th January 2023....

27. The Coroner then found that the cause of death was:

Suicide, contributed to by an Ofsted inspection carried out in November 2022.

28. The Coroner also noted that in regards to the local authority:

I intend to include Reading Borough Council in a Regulation 28 report, focusing on three matters. Before I deal with those three matters, it is fair to state that there was a marked difference between the approach and evidence of Ofsted on the one hand, and the local authority on the other. The evidence given by senior leaders at Reading Borough Council was open and accepting, with a clear wish to improve matters for the future. I do not doubt that things will change in the short term, particularly for those who knew Ruth. However, I am particularly concerned that a number of these points are not reflected in written policy. The areas of concern I have are:

1. *[Officers] indicated the intention to adopt a much more robust and proactive approach to dealing with Ofsted, particularly where there are concerns. This is not in written policy or guidance – which may go some way towards reassuring school leaders that their employer ‘has their back’ – both now and in future years.*

2. *Reading Borough Council also did not carry out any form of internal review. I was not made aware of any policy setting out when such an internal review should take place. It is not sufficient after 11 months, to say that the authority was focused on dealing with the aftermath of Ruth's death. The benefit of a learning review is that it can offer input from families, create an action plan with deadlines, and allow for a more careful and thorough analysis of any areas that can be improved.*

3. *We heard in evidence that school leaders have received correspondence from Reading Borough Council about what mental health support options are available. I am concerned to know whether there is now written policy or guidance about communicating this, so that this continues to happen in future years.*

29. Therefore, this review fulfils the second of the Coroner's directions and will look in particular at the way in which READING BOROUGH COUNCIL supports and supported schools before, during and after Ofsted inspections (because the Ofsted inspection was found to be a contributory factor in Ruth's death and therefore has wider implications for schools) and draw out relevant learning. For the sake of completeness, the report will touch upon the Coroner's other two points (because they are integral to the review) but READING BOROUGH COUNCIL has also responded separately to the Coroner on those points.

Before the Inspection of Caversham Primary School: the general role of the local authority nationally in school improvement and effectiveness

30. The Education Act 1944 established a national system of primary and secondary schools under the supervision of 'local education authorities' (now 'local authorities'), responsible for funding ('maintaining') all such schools. From 1988, schools were granted legal autonomy and local governing bodies rather than the local authority became responsible for making decisions on matters such as finance and personnel. Since 1988, successive Governments have introduced legislation that has granted further autonomy to schools, culminating in the period since 2010 where schools have been actively encouraged to seek academy status. Academies are funded and overseen directly by the DfE through a system of regional directors with less oversight by local authorities.
31. A majority of secondary schools are now academies (around 80%) and a majority of primary schools have chosen to remain maintained by their local authorities (around 60%). In response to the changing landscape, local authorities have charted very different paths for their role in fulfilling their duties and overseeing the quality of school effectiveness in their area. Much ink has been spilled about the role of local authorities and indeed, more recently Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) in terms of their role in overseeing, intervening and

improving the school system in their local area or their chain. Often referred to as the 'middle tier', the fact that much ink has been spilled is in itself an indicator of the lack of clarity that lies at the heart of national policy in this regard. This has been partially driven by the policy drivers around academisation; partially due to the layering of different types of school governance (eg foundation schools, voluntary aided schools, alternative provision etc); and partially due to more than a decade of austerity when local authorities have needed to make substantial reductions in their expenditure. The Academies Act in 2010 allowed for good or outstanding schools to convert to academy status without local authority approval. The main intervention for underperforming schools was forced conversion to sponsored academy status as set out in the DfE's Schools Causing Concern guidance. The 2012 version explicitly states that 'the expectation is that a persistently underperforming school or a school that is in an Ofsted category will become an Academy.' Successive versions have reiterated this expectation. Many new schools built from this period onwards have been set up as free schools (a type of academy).

32. This built upon the reforms initiated by Lord Baker in the 1988 Education Act which devolved 90% of school budgets from local authorities to local governing bodies. The governing body in maintained schools became responsible for setting the school budget with advice from the headteacher. On personnel matters, it is the governing body which appoints headteachers and deputy headteachers and which sets their pay as set out in the DfE guidance '*A guide to the recruitment and selection of headteachers and other leadership roles*' and the DfE guidance '*Staffing and employment advice for schools*'. The local authority can offer advice on the appointment process, but the governing body is the decision maker. The power to appoint other staff is usually delegated by the governing body to the headteacher within parameters. This change meant that local authorities no longer directly managed schools or headteachers, with their role changing to a regulatory function and influencing model. It is the governing body that carries on the performance management of the headteacher through a small committee with the chair of governors offering more regular support and challenge to the headteacher.
33. The DfE governance handbook (October 2020) was in operation at the time of the Ofsted inspection of Caversham Primary School and has recently been replaced by the maintained schools governance guide 2024. The 2020 handbook sets out that effective governance is based on six key features:
 - Strategic leadership that sets and champions vision, ethos and strategy.
 - Accountability that drives up educational standards and financial performance.
 - People with the right skills, experience, qualities and capacity.
 - Structures that reinforce clearly defined roles and responsibilities.
 - Compliance with statutory and contractual requirements.
 - Evaluation to monitor and improve the quality and impact of governance.
34. The handbook states that 'as the accountable body, the board is the key decision maker. It may delegate operational matters to executive leaders and

governance functions to committees or in some cases to individuals, but the board as a corporate entity remains accountable and responsible for all decisions made and executive leaders operate within the autonomy, powers and functions delegated to them by the board'. The same guidance makes it clear that headteachers are responsible for the day-to-day operational running of the school but that boards will hold the headteacher to account for improving pupil and staff performance by asking the right questions.

35. The handbook makes it clear that the main staffing functions of the board in a maintained school includes the appointment, conduct, suspension and dismissal of staff. The handbook points governors to the school staffing regulations of 2009 for further detail.
36. This is further complicated by the different types of state schools such as Foundation Schools (where the school is the employer) and schools with a religious character such as voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools. In voluntary aided schools the school is the employer and in voluntary controlled it is the local authority that is the employer. Both the Catholic and Anglican Dioceses play an active role in such schools and also have a role to play in staff appointments and the oversight of the schools. Where schools are designated as having a religious character, they will have their denominational education and collective worship inspected under section 48 of the Education Act 2005. These are conducted in addition to Ofsted inspections. Different guidance again applies to pupil referral units which are designated as being 'school like' and have different governance arrangements discharged by management committees.
37. The general point here is that staff working in a maintained school such as Caversham Primary School are employees of the local authority but that employee status is mediated (for both parties) in a way that we don't see in other professions by a range of legislation and guidance that places other parties (governing bodies) between the employer and employee.
38. As referred to above, the role of improving schools largely fell to local authorities prior to 2010, with the statutory intervention powers being set out in DfE guidance around Schools Causing Concern. Prior to 2010, the DfE had a range of National Strategies to improve schools that were discharged by staff employed by the local authority but funded by the DfE. These were extensive strategies with specific strategies around standards in English and mathematics and also around areas such as behaviour and attendance. In addition to employing a dedicated school improvement workforce, effective local authorities also brokered school to school support to bring about improvement.
39. Since 2010, successive versions of the DfE's Schools Causing Concern guidance have reduced the role of local authorities in school improvement with the main school improvement tool being seen as either voluntary academisation or 'forced academisation' based upon Ofsted failure. Teaching schools were set up as the DfE's preferred improvement strategy and were funded to provide school to school support. Over time these have morphed into initiatives such as English hubs, mathematics hubs and teaching school hubs.

40. Many councils, with the active support of schools, have sought to retain a role around school improvement. As national funding was withdrawn, they created sold services and have been successful in becoming the school improvement partner of choice for most of the schools in their area. Extensive staff development programmes are created and delivered through a partnership approach between school leaders and local authority employees. Local authorities retain an interest in both challenging and supporting schools in their locality and regularly visit schools to evaluate aspects of a school's performance and to offer support and advice to stimulate further improvement. This latter function is usually funded by schools collectively agreeing to de-delegate a small proportion of their budget back to the local authority through Schools Forum.
41. Our experience has been that this role is usually welcomed by school leaders (as is the case in Reading) and many academy leaders continue to buy in these services from local authorities where these services are high quality. Thus, local authorities often compete in a 'market' for school improvement services.
42. The latest Schools Causing Concern guidance (January 2024) sets out the role of local authorities. It states that:
 - 'A local authority must exercise its education functions with a view to promoting high standards'.
43. Beyond the above statutory duty, local authorities have considerable freedom as to how they deliver their statutory responsibilities. Local authorities should act as champions of high standards of education across maintained schools in their area, and in doing so should:
 - Understand the performance of maintained schools in their area, using data as a starting point to identify any maintained school that is underperforming, while working with them to explore ways to support progress;
 - Work closely with DfE region, diocese and other local partners to ensure maintained schools receive the support they need to improve;
 - Where underperformance has been recognised in a maintained school, proactively work with DfE region, combining local and regional expertise to ensure the right approach, including sending warning notices, and using intervention powers where this will improve leadership and standards; and
 - Encourage Good and Outstanding maintained schools to take responsibility for their own improvement; support other maintained schools; and enable other maintained schools to access the support they need to improve.
44. Local authorities are permitted to de-delegate from maintained schools' budget shares to fund this core school improvement activity. As set out above, these core school improvement activities extend beyond exercising of statutory intervention powers but do not extend to a duty to provide or fund school improvement services themselves; and relate only to schools they maintain, rather than academies which are accountable to the Secretary of State.

However, should a local authority have any concerns about an academy's standards, leadership or governance, they should raise these directly with the DfE regional group.

45. Whilst this is the policy landscape it is also useful to 'follow the money' when looking at public policy and here we can see that the School Monitoring and Brokering Grant which came from DfE to local authorities was reduced by 50% in 2022/23 and finally withdrawn (i.e. reduced to zero) in 2023/24. Local authorities are now reliant on maintained schools de-delegating part of their budgets back to the local authority to fund the monitoring and intervention work with those schools still maintained by the local authority.
46. This policy ambiguity has meant that local authorities have exercised latitude in deciding the degree to which they play an active part in supporting the effectiveness of schools within their area and how they carry out those functions. With relatively low levels of academisation, a growing population and a keen ambition for the future skills and development of its young citizens, Reading Borough Council has sought to be pro-actively involved in the support, development and effectiveness of schools in its area. From our meetings with politicians and senior leaders this ambition is ongoing and seems to be entirely appropriate for the local circumstances. In real terms this has meant careful negotiation and discussion with its Schools Forum in order for the Schools Budget to contribute £300k to cover the costs of the School Effectiveness Service with additional sums coming from earned income, in ways such as described above. As such, Reading Borough Council's system works in accordance with the government's policy direction in that schools choose the amount of support and challenge that they wish to buy in from the local authority – but whether that is enough (in policy terms) is a moot point. As school budgets have also been pegged in real terms, schools' collective appetite to pay for the local authority to challenge them may be under pressure, a case of funding 'what you want rather than what you might need'. Such a funding dilemma has the potential to further wither the effectiveness of the system overall both nationally and locally.
47. At the time of the inspection of Caversham Primary School, the DfE had determined, through its Schools Causing Concern guidance that any school judged inadequate by Ofsted must join a multi academy trust. In such circumstances, governing bodies and local authorities are under a duty to cooperate with this process. It is a system of high stakes accountability for schools and school leaders, with Ofsted reports being published highlighting areas of failure and no guarantees that headteachers will remain employed by the academy trust taking over the management of the school.
48. It is worth considering whether such a system of public, high stakes accountability is actually effective in raising standards. The DfE's own document, '*School Improvement Systems in High Performing Countries*' (2019) shows that having a high stakes accountability system is not a necessary precursor to having high quality education. Other higher performing countries adopt much more collaborative systems. For example, whilst most states in Germany operate a system of inspection to identify underperforming schools, they do not publish the results resulting in lower stakes public accountability –

but accountability all the same. Similarly, Estonia's education system appears to outperform England's in many ways and has a more targeted approach to oversight and inspection. Such countries seem to be able to incorporate school improvement, accountability, inspection and oversight into a more collaborative, respectful, high performing and child focused education system. Perhaps it is time to look at them a little more. Inspection need not be oppositional but could be collaborative; and accountability does not need to be a high stakes judgement for just one or two individuals but a shared endeavour and responsibility. We recommend that Reading Borough Council makes representations to Ofsted on this matter in its Big Listen.

The role of the local authority in inspection readiness in Reading prior to November 2022

49. In looking at how well schools were prepared for Ofsted in Reading we looked back a little to the period pre-Covid period then focused on the systems post-Covid from the end of 2020. School leaders report a relatively high (compared to our experience of other local authorities) level of engagement between school effectiveness staff and schools historically. This was tempered by concerns about a historic (pre-Covid) lack of consistency in leadership in the local authority. Equally, headteachers were consistent in their view that post-Covid there has been welcome consistency in visible leadership and, subsequent to Ruth's death, a further heightening of the level of contact between the local authority and schools. This contact has taken the form of more and better briefings, a termly visit, and additional partnership arrangements which, they tell us, have galvanised and engaged headteachers.
50. Reading Borough Council discharges its school effectiveness strategy through Brighter Futures for Children. Prior to November 2022, Brighter Futures for Children employed a school effectiveness team comprising 2.0 full time School Effectiveness Leads and a small advisory team including governor services. It should be stated that in a local authority such as Reading, the school effectiveness service is relatively small and this has an impact on the capacity to manage unexpected critical incidents. An example of this would be the excessive hours worked by individuals to manage the response – see below.
51. The team had created a school effectiveness strategy which was shared with schools based upon the prevailing DfE guidance. All maintained schools at the time had a termly visit from the school effectiveness team to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's own improvement strategies. This visit was both data led and risk led, depending on a range of factors (e.g. change in school leadership, declining standards, high exclusions etc). The visits were focused on the various outcome data sets such as phonics and end of key stage assessments. In addition, the school's own self-evaluation was scrutinised and any school improvement plans evaluated. Brighter Futures for Children also offered further curriculum reviews by its school effectiveness team and a safeguarding review was one option, all of which needed to be bought in by the individual school unless the school was identified as underperforming. In addition, schools were offered additional support in the lead up to inspections,

in so far as such inspections could be anticipated. As an approach this system is entirely consistent with that adopted by many other local authorities.

52. There was evidently close and respectful working between schools and the experienced school improvement officers. Regular briefings were available for school leaders and governors on a range of school activities including safeguarding. During this timeline there was, for example, safeguarding training for governors in June 2021, a Directors briefing including a 30 minute section on safeguarding in September 2022, a two hour session for governors from Judicium in October 2022 and termly updates. Given the role of governors outlined above, it is critical that governors attend such training, albeit that they are volunteers.
53. The Local Safeguarding partnership oversaw the completion and aggregation of its s175 returns. These are self-evaluations carried out by schools on their compliance with safeguarding procedures as set out in Keeping Children Safe in Education (various versions). Reading used the NSPCC self-evaluation document which is used in many other local authorities. The purpose is to identify key themes or concerns and relies upon good quality self-assessment. The partnership dip sampled responses to ensure compliance. Whilst the system was compliant with procedures and 'did what it said on the tin' it was not intended for an individual school to rely on – its purpose being more to identify systemic issues.
54. In addition to the work of the school effectiveness team, Reading Borough Council directly offered service level agreements for schools to purchase such as human resources and health and safety. Funding for these services lies within school budgets so that they can determine whether to purchase the services from Reading Borough Council or elsewhere. Nearly all schools continue to purchase these services from Reading Borough Council. Note however, the fact that a school can have its staff employed by the local authority but choose to receive its HR advice from a different organisation. Again, this seems to be an anomaly in the line management relationships between local authorities and its staff employed in schools (although this was not the case in Caversham Primary School – the point is illustrative of the policy ambiguity with regards to employers' duties in schools). In practice because virtually all schools bought into a service level agreement with the Council this ensured that they had an HR adviser to link with and a range of HR support as detailed in the Service Level Agreement.
55. Performance management of the headteacher is carried out by a small group of governors determined by the governing body. Every maintained school governing body has to engage a school improvement adviser (again, not necessarily the local authority) to assist governors with their annual performance management process with the headteacher. Where chosen by the school, Brighter Futures for Children provided a member of the school effectiveness team to fulfil this function.
56. Reading's policies with regards to DBS checks for overseas workers had been drawn up and distributed in 2014. These were available on the Council's

intranet, similarly for the checks under regulation 128. The HR policy which was updated in February 2021 states that:

“Human Resources are responsible for:

- *Ensuring all required pre-employment and other suitability checks are carried out “*

57. Of course, given that schools and governing bodies actually do the recruiting then the school would need to notify the Council’s HR department about which checks to carry out on whom but this wording seems ambiguous.
58. The documents that support HR arrangements are complex, but reflect national policy, they require close reading and sometimes interpretation. Similarly, the Council’s health and safety policies are generic and whilst saying the right things, require further interpretation for a schools’ audience. There is a good online governor hub which governors can access, but, so far as we could ascertain, Reading Borough Council policies are available on the Council’s intranet meaning that governors have to go through school staff to access them. See recommendation below.

Inspection preparation in Caversham Primary School and the role of the local authority

59. As outlined above, considerable preparation for inspection was available for schools in Reading. Caversham Primary School, through Ruth, had also volunteered to be inspected by Ofsted in 2019 as part of Ofsted’s process of trialling of the new education inspection framework. This voluntary pilot inspection was an entirely sensible step to take given that the school had not been inspected for nearly ten years by that point. The pilot inspection trialled aspects of the new framework (mainly curriculum focused) and was not a ‘full’ inspection as such and no gradings were given and no written report produced. Ofsted subsequently confirmed that ‘inspectors looked at the single central record where no problems were found’. Included in the verbal feedback which Ruth shared with parents was the statement ‘staff are vigilant and Safeguarding Leads are tenacious’. Thus, the verbal feedback was very positive and would have given the school and local authority additional reassurance about the quality of education being provided.
60. In addition to the scheduled termly visit carried out at Caversham Primary School, the local authority supported the school by undertaking Ofsted preparation work before the inspection. This comprised preparing subject leads with curriculum reviews in their subjects similar to the deep dives which would be undertaken by Ofsted. This is good practice. Specific training on preparation for Ofsted was also given to the governing body and the Senior Leadership Team.
61. With regard to safeguarding, advice was given around the expectations of Ofsted. A safeguarding audit was offered to the school. In line with many primary schools, the headteacher was the designated safeguarding lead (DSL)

for the school and there was a safeguarding governor in place. The training undertaken by the DSL was appropriate. Safeguarding training was also offered to governors through the authority's governor training programme. The school had completed its annual safeguarding self-assessment (the s175 self-assessment).

62. For the headteacher's performance management, the governing body had selected an adviser from the school effectiveness team. The documentation around this process is appropriate and in line with guidance. It has a balance of aspirational targets for children's outcomes and due regard for the well-being of the headteacher – although it should be noted that this is a standard part of the process, no concerns were raised specifically about Ruth's wellbeing at this stage.
63. Reading Borough Council and Brighter Futures for Children had no specific, routine processes in place to check that the school's single register was complete and up to date, that reg 128 checks had been carried out on governors and senior leaders and that overseas workers checks had been completed. However, Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance places the responsibility to carry out these checks with schools and therefore the approach of Reading Borough Council and Brighter Futures for Children was consistent with national expectations set out in guidance. Reminders on these matters were covered in national guidance, local policies and training that was accessible to schools.
64. Caversham Primary School was previously graded as outstanding by Ofsted. Pupil outcomes at the school were positive. Given that local authorities intervene and offer support in inverse proportion to success, the balance of support and challenge appears to be appropriate. If anything, the local authority had certainly offered support beyond the level that could be considered its basic duties. Again, it is a moot point as to whether fulfilling its basic duties, as they stand at this point, is enough for any local authority or school.

The role of the Reading Borough Council during the Ofsted inspection

65. In formal terms, the role of a local authority when a maintained school is being inspected is limited, with the local authority invited to give evidence either in person or telephone call. In practice, school effectiveness officers can assist schools by offering advice, acting as a sounding board, occasionally sorting out a problem. They have a role in outlining the support that the school has received from the local authority and in attending the feedback session at the end of the Inspection.
66. The local authority officers involved in the inspection of Caversham Primary School did all of this with an emphasis on support for Ruth and her team at the time.
67. Once Ofsted had notified the school about the inspection, Brighter Futures for Children had contacted the headteacher and offered encouragement. The

school effectiveness officer linked to the school was clearly in text, email and telephone contact with Ruth throughout both days of the inspection. The tone is warm and supportive. It becomes evident from about 11am on the first day that there is a problem for the school with regards to the maintenance and recording of safeguarding records. Further evidence was sought by Ofsted. The school effectiveness officer was in contact with Ruth throughout the day including chasing up information that may have existed in local authority systems and offered to speak to Ruth after 9pm on the evening of the first day (because Ruth was involved in other meetings relating to the inspection) or after 6am the next morning. There is reference in the texts and emails to phone calls that have happened in between.

68. By 8am on the second day Ruth sent a text to the school effectiveness officer ‘...what happens if safeguarding fails. Do I lose my job?’ to which the school effectiveness officer responds ‘No of course not. We fix it and move on...’. The school had put in place an immediate action plan and administrative shortfalls were immediately addressed. However, it was clear that a subsequent meeting between the inspection team and Ruth had not gone well and from this point on Ruth was distressed. The local authority representative was invited to speak with the lead inspector by telephone or Teams (not in person according to evidence in the coroner’s papers) and subsequently attended the feedback session at the end of the inspection.
69. As is now known, the inspection team gave their final feedback in which the inspectors agreed with the school’s self-evaluation around the quality of provision being good. The area judged as ineffective was safeguarding (incorporated in the leadership and management judgement) which is a limiting judgement. If safeguarding is deemed ineffective then the overall judgement becomes inadequate.
70. It is not for the authors to evaluate the findings of the Ofsted inspection or the evidence upon which it is based. We are sure that Ofsted’s own independent review will look into that in detail, we certainly hope so. From our own experience we believe that, given the prevailing Ofsted framework, safeguarding would most likely have been judged ineffective based upon the checks that were insufficient. The other evidence pointed to in the Ofsted report suggests a cumulative effect for the inspection team. The prevailing framework then dictates that the school must be judged inadequate as safeguarding was a limiting judgement. There was little that could have been done during the inspection, as the framework stood, to avoid this judgement. Whether the framework is ‘right’ is, of course, an entirely different point and our own view is that safeguarding being a limiting judgement has a disproportionate impact on a school that, according to the same report, was a ‘welcoming and vibrant school’ for its pupils, where pupils ‘know how to stay safe, including online’ and which provided a good standard of education.
71. It should be noted that a subsequent re-inspection on 21 and 22nd June 2023, six months after the inspection that contributed to Ruth’s death, found the school to be good in all areas and the school remains categorised overall as ‘good’ by Ofsted.

72. Some of the post-hoc comments attributed to Ofsted in the inquest evidence need to be addressed. They state that the local authority ‘did not have a system or structure to understand what is happening in CVP’. Whereas, as we can see from above, there was indeed a system, and it was in line with government policy. That said, it is interesting to note that the inspection team thought that there should be something else, despite the national policy framework which leans towards school autonomy and which we have outlined above. There is also an Ofsted reference to a complaint going through the school and local authority system – whereas in fact the local authority has no role in the school complaints process, unless informed by Ofsted specifically about a safeguarding issue. Similarly, the Ofsted evidence noted that the local authority had not challenged the findings of the report at the feedback meeting. In our experience such challenge is not welcomed, although in fact the chair of governors had challenged the disparity between previous verbal feedback and the final judgement. In any case by this stage Ruth was extremely distressed and the meeting needed to be expedited. Again, these things are complex and open to interpretation - we are sure that these issues will be looked into carefully in Ofsted’s own review. But the key strategic point here is that the complexity and ambiguity in policy about the local authority’s role is not well understood even by a range of professionals in the system – we don’t blame anyone for that given the complexity that we have outlined above, but is a role that needs clarifying (and no doubt some will take issue with our own interpretation of the roles and responsibilities of the various parties, to which we would say QED).

The role of the local authority after the inspection up to Ruth’s death

73. After the inspection had concluded, the governing body considered whether the school should appeal the inadequate Ofsted judgement. Complaints can be made if schools believe that there has been a problem with the inspection process, how the inspection was conducted, for example the behaviour of the inspector or the outcome of the inspection, including the report.
74. Discussion on this topic was undertaken during the regular Rapid Improvement Groups in November and December 2022. Advice was given by the local authority that given the prevailing Ofsted framework there was little or no likelihood that the grading would be overturned. Based upon the evidence gathered around the identified issues this advice was correct. It is ultimately the school’s decision to complain (not the local authority) but ultimately, they agreed with this position. Given the shortcomings around safeguarding, putting in a complaint may have been considered to have provided further evidence that there was not a robust safeguarding culture at the school. This is something of a Catch 22 position for schools, see our recommendations below. Submitting an appeal would also have increased the time between the inspection and publication of the report. Less consideration appears to have been given by all concerned about whether to complain about the conduct of the inspection after the inspection had concluded. Again, this is something that Ofsted will no doubt look into and by raising the issue we do not wish readers to infer that we know something additional about the conduct of the inspection that

would have led to the inspection outcome being overturned – we don't. However, it is a fact that the Coroner, having scrutinised the evidence, stated that 'I find that parts of the Ofsted inspection were conducted in a manner which lacked fairness, respect and sensitivity (to quote from Ofsted's Code of Conduct). It was at times rude and intimidating'. This links to our recommendation below about the Council continuing to gather 'real time' feedback during inspections in order to evaluate all lines of further redress should it be required, and to keep open a channel of communication with Ofsted that goes beyond the formal feedback routes. Furthermore, the clarification of the Ofsted appeals and complaints system should form part of the Council's overall response to Ofsted's Big Listen.

75. Subsequently, the draft report was received on 8 December and Ruth submitted comments the next day with regards to factual accuracy and apparent disparity between verbal feedback into the Ofsted portal. There was a mix up concerning whether the comments should have been seen by the local authority prior to submission which drew comment from the Coroner. Subsequently the local authority made no further comment but our recommendations with regards to 'real time' feedback are designed to address this point.
76. Following the inspection, the local authority put in place a Rapid Improvement Group constituting the Director of Education, the Chair of Governors, the Headteacher and a school effectiveness officer. The purpose of this group was to ensure support was put in place in a timely manner to secure the rapid improvement needed around the Ofsted action points. This appears to have been well led. At this time the Local Authority had to produce a statement of action which was submitted to Ofsted. It is noteworthy that the role of improvement, as is standard practice in other authorities, falls again on very few people. We recommend below that the Local Authority makes it clear that membership of Rapid Improvement Groups can be widened to involve other senior leaders in schools so that the potential for workloads to be shared can be usefully explored.
77. We have seen minutes of meetings that were encouraging towards Ruth, for example '...Ruth you have led the school extremely successfully for over a decade and the improvements needed are simple to resolve...' (24 November 2022). Concern was expressed about Ruth's well-being in the period immediately after the inspection. Support was offered via the Employee Assistance Programme which is an anonymous self-referral system that many local authorities adopt to emotionally support their staff. The Chair of Governors was advised on how to make a referral to Occupational Health services (which required Ruth's consent) and '...any reasonable adjustments that can be made to her role...you can discuss what support would help Ruth and devise a support plan with regular reviews...'¹. One of the concerns expressed by Ruth was that she could not talk openly about the judgement until the final report had been received by the school. Ofsted timelines specify that the final report was due to be sent to the school within 30 working days from the inspection which was the 11 January 2023 (weekends and holidays are disregarded). That final

¹ Email 12/12/2022 from HR to COG

report is then published on the Ofsted website five days later which would have been the 16 January 2023. Clearly, a quicker timeline would have reduced the stress that Ruth was feeling.

78. Another area of concern for Ruth was her job security. The Director of Education made a clear statement on this point at the Rapid Improvement Group stating that he had confidence in her leadership. He could not offer false reassurance though about academisation and what that might mean in the longer term. We have heard evidence that Ruth felt buoyed after these meetings and indeed after visits by members of the school effectiveness team to the school.
79. The focus of the Rapid Improvement Group was about putting things right as quickly as possible and to seek rapid re-inspection so that a good overall judgement could be secured and potentially academisation withdrawn. It is clear that Ruth took personal responsibility for the issues identified in the Ofsted inspection and was working beyond normal working hours to address them. The school effectiveness officer helped co-construct the school's action plan and was supporting with this process very closely. Again, there is evidence of local authority staff working beyond normal working hours to support the school and there is evidence that this was well received and perceived as being supportive.
80. Consideration was given as to whether Ruth should have been asked to refrain from work to safeguard her own well-being. This was explored with Ruth at the time and from the evidence that we have seen she was adamant that she wanted to remain at work to put things right. It is a feature of the education system that such personal responsibility is taken on by headteachers, several of whom told us that it is a 'lonely place'. Partly, this appears to be the sense of personal responsibility that headteachers feel, partly the onus placed upon them by the 'great leaders' theory of education, partly shame and embarrassment at things going wrong on their watch and partly because systems and processes do not support shared responsibility. Our recommendations such as the widening of the Rapid Improvement Group, real time feedback, additional training and support for system leaders in understanding mental health issues, suicide prevention and the systemic changes that we recommend to government will go some way to addressing these issues.

The role of the local authority after Ruth's death

81. Caversham Primary School and the local authority became aware of Ruth's death on the morning of Monday 9 January 2023. The local authority, in conjunction with the school then put in place a series of measures to support the school, its children and parents. For example, the Educational Psychology Service was deployed to the school and media support was available as necessary. Senior leaders from the local authority attended the school, peer to peer support was sought and offered from other schools. Decisions were quickly made to ask the current deputy headteachers to take over the

leadership of the school. In short, a critical incident response was put in place. Generally, this response was well received although there were times that some staff at the school reported feeling somewhat overcrowded.

82. That said, there was not a departmental critical incident response policy that senior leaders could refer to or be guided by. The Council has, as do all Councils, an emergency planning department which co-ordinates responses to critical incidents as defined in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The guidance and training associated with this Act does give some considerable leeway with regards to what could be encompassed by such emergency planning. It does not appear that the Council considered this, although in truth it is unlikely to have made a material difference to the initial response which was comprehensive and thoughtful with regards to the school and children. Whilst on balance a departmental response seems right, where a critical incident policy could learn from emergency planning arrangements are in the debriefing of critical staff (and we have seen above how the response fell upon very few officers) and perhaps most importantly in terms of the relationships with Ruth's family. There have been times when the necessary critical incident response has left the family with insufficient communication or, with a direct line into the officers who were also trying to 'manage the crisis'. Such arrangements can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and one of our recommendations is aimed at trying to ensure that families have a clear line of support from an independent person who is not involved in the day-to-day crisis management.
83. It is also clear from various text messages and other communications that whilst people such as governors and community members were trying to help and support Ruth's family, some of that was unfortunate and occasionally unhelpful. None of this is to attribute any ill intentions to those people, as far as the authors can see they were trying to help, but a critical incident policy may have helped all concerned with regards to expectations and co-ordination.
84. Senior leaders in the Council also informed Ofsted, as would be expected given that the report was due to be published, and in due course informed Ruth's colleagues in other schools etc. Local Authority leaders routinely meet with regional Ofsted leads. This is formalised through an annual engagement meeting and usually quarterly meetings with school inspection leads. In our experience these are usually useful but formal exchanges of information. Those meetings do not influence the content or outcomes of individual inspections in our experience. In this particular case, the matter was complicated by the link inspector being the lead inspector for the Caversham Primary School inspection. There may, for Reading, be an advantage in adopting a more formal approach in submitting 'real time' feedback into Ofsted, gathered from schools that are being inspected.
85. The local authority continued to lead the Rapid Improvement Group and assist the school in planning for its reinspection. The local authority also fast tracked a number of policy changes that were either in train or became immediately evident in the aftermath of Ruth's death. These changes are dealt with in the section below. They are well considered and have stood the test of time since their implementation. We have received positive feedback from headteachers about these changes.

Summary and conclusions

86. This report has outlined the ambiguous and at times confusing national arrangements for maintained school support and effectiveness. The local authority is the employer of school staff but in reality has few of the powers one would expect of an employer which are instead deployed through the Board of Governors acting as the *de facto* employer. The role of the local authority in terms of school effectiveness and improvement is also ambiguous but we have seen that schools in Reading have generally been pleased with the additional focus, challenge and support that they have received especially since Ruth's death. Given that mass academisation is unlikely in the near future then the reality of the local authority role vis a vis schools needs to be clarified and funded. (See recommendation below). In recommending this though, we want to be clear that setting the bar according to the diminished options available to overstretched and underfunded local authorities would miss the central point: that such local authorities are effectively hamstrung in their ability to provide high quality support for their school leaders by a combination of both policy and funding constraints.
87. The Council also finds itself in a position, through the most tragic circumstances, to highlight the folly of the macho culture of 'high stakes accountability'. As we have briefly shown, other countries with effective (arguably superior) education systems do not subscribe to such policies. Which is not to say that standards should not be raised and that aspiration should not be higher. Instead, it is to point to the fact that 'high stakes accountability' is the corollary of the 'great leaders' theory of school improvement. In fact, as most other countries acknowledge, a systemic approach which encourages reflection, collaboration, openness, community engagement, understands fallibility and places humanity at the heart of learning – as well as great leadership - is actually a better way of constructing an education system. Our recommendation is that Reading Borough Council makes representation to the Department for Education, based on the findings of this report, encouraging a new approach to the national and local leadership, co-ordination, regulation and oversight of schools.
88. We have seen that, prior to the inspection of Caversham Primary School in November 2022, school effectiveness arrangements in Reading, provided by Brighter Futures for Children, were provided at a relatively high level compared to other local authorities. Whilst there had been some history of leadership churn, school leaders commented positively upon the impact and consistency of local authority leaders more recently. School effectiveness officers were and are highly regarded as was the quality of governor training. It is clear that school effectiveness officers, like their colleagues in schools, consistently worked 'above and beyond' the call of duty' reflecting the prevailing culture in schools nationally.
89. The linkage between local authority services such as Human Resources and Health and Safety for schools was less well understood and regarded, although when asked about specific issues feedback was generally positive. Our recommendations here therefore, are concerned with the communication, accessibility and promotion of information about these back office services.

90. Governing bodies for schools are a key part of the employer's arrangements for headteachers. There was, and is, a range of training and support for governors, but it has to be acknowledged that governors are volunteers who give their own time freely, often in addition to their own jobs and personal commitments. Nationally, the National Governor Association estimated in 2022 that there were more than 20,000 governor vacancies. Reading appears to be broadly in line with this trend and the Council has also taken measures to increase its monitoring of the take up of training for governors - although this may need to go hand in hand with additional support for governing bodies. But it is a conundrum nationally and locally with regards to the recruitment and training of such people who, in the policy framework, hold highly responsible positions as we have seen, but do this in their own time. The effect of this is for more and more responsibility to fall upon fewer and fewer willing people. We will recommend that the Council make representation to the Department for Education with regards to a national governor recruitment drive. That recruitment drive should go hand in hand with a review of the role of governors in schools; the expectations, training, induction, support and responsibilities that they hold. Governors are a vital national resource and, as we have seen, are a key interface between the local authority as the employer, and the school leadership team, as a country we need to pay more attention to their vital role.
91. The Department's treatment of its s175 self assessments by schools was in line with policy and incorporated into its annual safeguarding report. Brighter Futures for Children has subsequently introduced a safeguarding audit process for schools which has been positively received by all heads that we spoke to. This process is designed to highlight any deficits in paperwork or preparation around the safeguarding judgement. This is good practice and goes beyond the statutory minimum and is to be commended and maintained.
92. When it came to the inspection of Caversham Primary School both the local authority and the school had taken their respective roles seriously and prepared for the inspection. One point which the authors discussed at length with headteachers was the role of the safeguarding governor and the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) amongst school staff. In practice, in many primary schools (our estimate is the majority) the lead DSL in the staff group is the headteacher. In practice, and as was the case in Caversham Primary School, the chair of governors can take on the role of safeguarding governor. There is no implied criticism in this, staff teams and governor teams in primary schools can be small with roles shared around. What this means though is that the relationship between the chair of governors, the headteacher, the DSL and the safeguarding governor becomes combined into a dyadic relationship rather than one which has multiple sets of eyes on it. Having more than two people in the oversight of safeguarding in a school is helpful in providing challenge, avoiding confirmation bias and helping to avoid oversights. But every school is unique in its size and configuration so we are reluctant to make a one size fits all recommendation, particularly in the light of the new, effective safeguarding audits that the local authority has put in place. However, we do think that the local authority should help all schools review their safeguarding governance arrangements so that there is day to day challenge from a third party. This need

not cost as peer-to-peer challenge relationships could be brokered between different schools and governing bodies.

93. We wanted to reflect as well on the support given by the school effectiveness team to Ruth and staff at Caversham Primary School during the inspection. In our view this was well judged and supportive albeit that Ruth was distressed by this point and there is evidence that this support was well received by the school.
94. We have considered the subsequent response to Ruth's distress. This was evident and discussed between the local authority, governors and Ruth herself. It was not hidden nor was it ignored. From the evidence that we have seen Ruth clearly wanted to 'put things right'. Like many headteachers she was driven and rightly had a deep sense of pride in her school. Like many headteachers she also worked long hours and weekends. The local authority tried to be supportive of Ruth. Consideration was given as to whether it would be better for Ruth to take time off which Ruth declined. She was advised to seek clinical support. Ruth was also working and checking things out with local authority officers over holidays and weekends. For example, on 30 December (in school holidays) she texted the school effectiveness advisor at 20.07 in the evening, 'thank you for the fast response. I am having trouble sleeping...' the subsequent response included the following '...it's going to be ok... here if you need me...'. Ruth responded with a heart emoji. This correspondence continued over the holiday period and until the day of Ruth's death.
95. As former senior leaders in local authorities the authors have reflected deeply on these points, in particular the question 'what would we have done'? In all honesty we came to the conclusion that we would have (and indeed have, in the past) responded in the same way, and with the same intention as the officers in Reading – that of trying to understand, help and do the right thing for the person concerned. It would have been tempting to require Ruth to refrain from work but she expressed a clear desire for that not to happen. Similarly, responding to urgent queries and concerns out of hours is part of a culture of long hours and high stress in our education system. We reflect above, that one of the learning points is that there may be ways to share the burden of these responsibilities. What is less well considered is the degree of training that senior leaders in local authorities and schools have with regards to understanding, supporting and helping employees who are distressed – what indeed is the 'right' thing to do? We reflected that in our 40+ years of senior leadership we had never had or commissioned such training and we suspect that we are far from unique. Reading, which was already proactive in this regard, is now in a position to lead the way on this issue. See recommendations below.
96. Subsequently, there was a decision to be taken, ultimately by the school although it would have been difficult without the support of the local authority, as to whether to pursue a complaint with regards to the inspection. It may well have been the case that lodging a complaint would have made Ruth feel better. It is also correct to say, as outlined above, that there was no realistic prospect of overturning the judgement in the framework as it stood at that time. This was where the focus of the discussion was. We could not detect wider consideration

of a complaint with regards to the conduct of the inspection. We cannot, from the information that we have available, form a view as to whether there would have been any prospect for success on these grounds. Ofsted upholding a complaint is rare and overturning a judgement almost never happens in our experience. In 2021/22 only 17% of complaints had aspects that were upheld. Ironically, when schools have been inspected their formal feedback to Ofsted is generally positive, perhaps as an expression of relief (or less charitably 'Stockholm Syndrome') when the school is graded good or better. As an aside, it is odd that as a country we fetishise the notion of a 'good' Ofsted grade when nearly 90% of schools are graded as good or outstanding; this is not a distribution curve but the attainment of a standard – but that standard does not seem to be a sufficiently sophisticated marker to ensure that our education system overall is able to match up to international comparisons. But that expression of relief mingled with pride then sustains a system that many of the same school leaders find punishing and frightening. Similarly, the spurious notion that only a one word judgement can adequately describe the quality of a school to parents and communities needs to be challenged by the Council. As authors we have no doubt that the community of Caversham could have understood an Ofsted report which had a summary along the following lines: 'Caversham Primary School provides a good quality of education and children flourish and achieve well against a rounded curriculum. The school needs to tighten up some of its safeguarding procedures and we will come back to test this has been done in three months'.

97. There has not been an honest dialogue nationally about the context, focus and impact of inspections and the authors are pleased that Ofsted under its new Chief Inspector has embarked on its 'Big Listen'. We also recommend that the Council makes strong representations to Ofsted through the Big Listen. The Coroner has found that the Ofsted inspection contributed towards Ruth's death and this means that due weight should be given to the Council's input. In particular, the representations should encompass the issues of conduct, improving the complaints procedure, single word judgements, limiting judgements, pausing inspections, delays in publication, training for inspectors, the parameters and impact of safeguarding as part of the inspection and other matters. We have set these out below.
98. Notwithstanding this, whilst the current framework exists, for Reading to 'have its schools' back', we think that it would be helpful to compile 'real time' feedback from headteachers whilst inspections are taking place and to feed this back to Ofsted on a routine basis. This process has been initiated by the Local Authority but it is important that it continues and is regularly reviewed. The routinisation of such feedback means that positive messages and more challenging ones can be shared as part of the ongoing dialogue between professionals.
99. After Ruth died, the local authority instigated a response which encompassed media responses, supporting children, governors and staff at the school. Many involved were positive about the management of what was by then a critical incident. Many people were deeply affected and distressed by Ruth's death, primarily of course her family and friends. They have relayed to us that they felt

very disconnected from the response to the school and its children. On the other hand, it is pretty much impossible for a very small team of officers who are very much 'managing the critical incident' to be as emotionally available and supportive to bereaved family members as they would themselves want to be. Although we are not experts on the matter, responses to critical incidents often have separate specialists who support the family and feed in their wishes and feelings to the overall management of the incident – an obvious analogy is the police and the use of family liaison officers for families affected by serious crime. As we have set out above, the Council had in place emergency planning procedures but this tragic event was department specific and as such the learning point here is that it would benefit Children's Services to have a comprehensive policy on responding to critical incidents that incorporates schools (of all types, including academies, independent and maintained) and which calls upon other functions of the Council and, potentially, external partners to deliver the right response.

100. At various points both the school and the Council found itself inhibited in what it felt it could say publicly by both the strictures of the inspection process and subsequently by the tragic events surrounding Ruth's death. It is difficult to see, even with the benefit of hindsight, what communication avenues could have been opened up earlier, but the question of decision making around who communicates what to whom, when and why needs to be incorporated into the critical incident policy. It is fair to say that some of the people affected by Ruth's death, both professionals and family members, continue to hold strong feelings that are not yet resolved, at least in part due to the issues around communication. Should the relevant parties wish it, an opportunity to share those feelings and experiences could be created using restorative approaches which could be beneficial if carefully and professionally enabled.
101. It is also vital to de-brief and learn from people who have been involved in the incident. Of course, the next critical incident is unlikely be of a similar nature but at minimum the policy should help its officers to make key decisions, access support from within the Council and beyond and, crucially, identify how people who have been emotionally affected by the incident can be best supported. This need not cost a fortune and we have in mind partnership or reciprocal arrangements with other agencies or councils.
102. Finally, it should be noted that the work of the school and the local authority had to carry on. The Rapid Improvement Group continued with oversight from the local authority and the school, despite the traumatic impact of Ruth's death, made the necessary changes, including those that Ruth had initiated and achieved a good grading at its next inspection. This should not be underestimated and great credit should be given to the individuals that worked so hard to bring these improvements about.

Actions already taken by Reading Borough Council

103. As detailed above, there is broad consensus that in the post-Covid period, Reading has benefited from consistency in leadership and a number of steps were being taken to improve its support to schools. Ruth's death accelerated the pace of change.

104. The following areas have been implemented in the last two years:

- Following the Caversham Primary School inspection of November 2022, LA officers worked with the school to put in place partnership support and action immediately after inspection. This included school effectiveness support, safeguarding training support, communications support and a review of governance. The school ensured changes were effectively implemented prior to the Ofsted reinspection in June 2023.
- Brighter Futures for Children put in place a deep dive audit on safeguarding which they carry out with schools on an annual basis. This is a much stronger document than the s175 self assessment (which fulfils a different purpose). School leaders were overwhelmingly positive about this work which they consider to be helpful in ensuring that the LA 'has their back'. It should be noted that this goes above and beyond the expectations of a local authority but should be considered as good practice.
- The revised local authority School Effectiveness Strategy is a strong document and reflects the ambition of the local authority and its schools. This document is kept up to date and forms the basis of continued good school effectiveness in the Borough.
- The School Effectiveness Team continues to carry out three school effectiveness visits per year per school, more strongly informed by a strategic overview, agreed priority items on the agenda and a clear expectation that a governor attends the first meeting of the year. Again, this is good practice although significantly above the expectations of the local authority outlined in guidance. That said, schools that we spoke to welcomed this additional level of support and challenge.
- The overall capacity in the School Effectiveness team has increased from 2.0 FTE to 2.6FTE.
- A permanent Director of Children's Services was appointed in February 2023 ensuring consistency of leadership.
- Improved governor training has been put in place with curated reading lists and video training. The Director of Education personally writes to any governors who have not attended the necessary training.
- Revised guidance on overseas checks has been developed and an annual HR guidance update in line with national guidance is in place, including amendments to Keeping Children Safe In Education.
- Headteacher briefings have been strengthened, are now well established and well attended, with an increase in virtual meetings to once a month complementing in-person termly gatherings. Dedicated Ofsted update sessions for headteachers and deputies are held each year where representatives from Ofsted have been invited to share guidance at the

request of the Local Authority and school leaders. Headteacher briefings are more focused on issues identified by heads and key priorities. These briefings are valued by school leaders.

- An Education Partnership Board for Reading was established in February 2023. The membership of the Board includes senior officers from the Local Authority, Primary Secondary and Special School Headteacher representatives and Chairs of Governors. The remit of the board is to engage all Reading schools in the leadership and oversight of the local school system, providing collective leadership and accountability for the Reading schools system.
- An annual wellbeing survey has been established from March 2023 to establish the support needed for headteachers. Survey results and feedback from heads informed a refreshed and strengthened wellbeing support offer, which includes a mentoring and coaching entitlement, a Borough wide community and parent acceptable behaviour policy and an Ofsted challenge and support protocol.
- The Local Authority established from January 2024 a more robust and proactive approach to responding to inspections on behalf of school leaders and governors. Brighter Futures for Children now offers to undertake challenge on a school's behalf before, during and after inspection. This builds on practice established after Ruth's death which supports schools to consider challenge themselves but does go further, in taking on responsibility for raising the challenge on behalf of schools. Elements of this approach include the following:
 - Clear arrangements to work with schools to identify risk of stress, before, during and after inspections, including the mitigations Brighter Futures for Children on behalf of Reading Borough Council will secure to reduce the risks of stress for school leaders and school staff.
 - On announcement of inspection, providing enhanced wellbeing checking for school leaders school staff. This checking process ensures that Brighter Futures for Children can request a pause of inspection on behalf of a school when schools feel this is necessary.
 - An offer to challenge an Ofsted inspection during, and after an inspection, where there is a view from the school that the judgement or process of inspection is not fair and balanced, rather than solely on the published Education Inspection Framework criteria.
 - An offer to collate feedback from school staff on inspection conduct to evaluate with Ofsted's Code of Conduct on a school's behalf or to provide tools and resources for schools to do this for themselves.
 - New policies regarding acceptable parent and community behaviour.

105. These measures are now embedded in Reading Borough Council policy and set out in the revised School Effectiveness Framework.

Actions for Reading Borough Council that could further improve services and reduce the risk of anything similar happening:

- 1) Whilst the annual safeguarding reviews are an excellent addition to the oversight of schools, we were struck by the potential for insufficient day-to-day challenge when the roles of the Designated Safeguarding Lead, the headteacher, the chair of governors and the safeguarding governor become combined into a dyadic relationship. Therefore, our recommendation is that when Brighter Futures for Children carry out the safeguarding review they should evaluate whether safeguarding roles are sufficiently distributed and whether the school would benefit from an additional headteacher or governor from another school to act as a consistent source of peer challenge and support.
- 2) Reading Borough Council, in conjunction with Brighter Futures for Children, should develop a Children's Services Department critical incident policy. This should encompass all schools including academies and the independent sector, because when a critical incident occurs it is the local authority that parents and the community look towards. At minimum this should include a scheme of delegation on decision making; provision to support staff during and after the critical incident; provision to support affected parties (e.g. family) outside the line management of the critical incident and a clear debriefing process for all concerned.
- 3) Reading Borough Council and Brighter Futures for Children rightly wants to retain its high quality staff in the school effectiveness team and influence the quality of significantly more work as outlined above. Reading Borough Council and Brighter Futures for Children should therefore work with Schools Forum to ensure that the school effectiveness team has additional capacity to carry out the work that is expected of it.
- 4) Reading Borough Council should make strong representations to Ofsted's Big Listen. We are aware that, during the course of the preparation of this report various changes have already been outlined by Ofsted. However, we have set out our proposed comments below for completeness. In particular, from our reading of the documentation and interviews with school leaders and local authority leaders the Council is likely to want to comment strongly on the following:
 - The spurious notion that only a one word judgement can adequately describe the quality of a school to parents and communities.
 - That abolishing one word judgements should not be replaced by formulaic phrases, each school is unique and Ofsted Inspectors should be freer to use broader descriptions.
 - The fact that limiting judgements are a blunt instrument and should be abolished and would be unnecessary anyway if a narrative judgement is adopted.
 - The lack of ability to pause an inspection should be reconsidered to allow inspections to be paused for longer periods where it is clear that either some administrative work could easily be carried out to rectify a problem or where a school staff member is distressed.

- That the Ofsted complaints and appeals policy should be clarified and opened up to scrutiny. That consideration be given to having clearer and more transparent processes for raising concerns about both the judgement and/or the conduct of the inspection team. There are ways to do this that could include peer review by experienced headteachers.
 - A consideration as to whether school inspectors should be carrying out safeguarding judgements as part of the school inspection. As we have seen, in the case of Caversham Primary this was 12 years apart, hardly conducive to a consistent view on safeguarding. Too often in the authors' experience the framework with regard to safeguarding is viewed conservatively by Ofsted inspectors and leads to a culture of 'refer everything'. According to research² contacts and referrals from schools to children's social services are at their highest level on record. Of course, there will be multiple reasons for this, but it is tempting to see the focus on safeguarding in inspection as a driving factor in this – rightly or wrongly. The Council should ask Ofsted to give serious consideration as to the best way of getting regular assurance on the issue of safeguarding in schools. Indeed, the Brighter Futures for Children's own annual assessment might provide one such model that could be applied by local authorities or an inspectorate.
 - That Ofsted should strive to publish reports in a more timely fashion without long delays over holiday periods.
 - That headteachers knowing that they are in the Ofsted 'window' creates significant additional stress and anxiety for a relatively long period of time and that frequency and scheduling of inspections needs further consideration. Timing and frequency could be informed by constructive dialogue with local authorities who have the overall responsibility for promoting high standards in schools in their area.
 - That Ofsted's own review should look closely at the evidence considered and the conduct of the Caversham Primary School inspection.
- 5) Of course, Ofsted do not set their own parameters and we recommend that the Council should also take the opportunity to make strong representations to the Department for Education on the role of inspection in raising standards. To be clear, the authors are not against inspection per se, but as a country we have become fixated on a single model which is neither as effective as it could be in raising standards and in examples such as this, positively harmful to individuals and the sector. As set out above, it does not have to be this way. Inspection can be a regular, targeted and a mutually respectful process that raises standards if we get it right. By looking at other countries we can see the potential for a more collaborative and systemic approach to improving our education system which incorporates inspection and regulation in a more constructive manner and points towards a new system of local and national leadership. Reading Borough Council should ensure that their voice is heard in this debate.

² ADCS Safeguarding pressures phase 8.

- 6) The Council should also request that the DfE clarifies the role of the local authority as an employer of staff in maintained schools and the relative roles of governors and headteachers in fulfilling their employment duties. The Council should also reiterate the need for a national recruitment drive for governors. That recruitment drive should go hand in hand with a national review of the role of governors and members of Trusts in schools; the expectations, training, induction, support and responsibilities that they hold.
- 7) Reading Borough Council should revise and republish its HR guidance and its Health and Safety guidance to schools on an annual basis and with explicit reference to Keeping Children Safe in Education. Both sets of guidance should be specifically written for a schools' audience and not generic. This re-publication should be followed up with an annual engagement between named HR and Health and Safety officers and the school. The documents should be published in a way which is easily accessible to both governors and school staff.
- 8) More specifically, Reading Borough Council should re-publish guidance on overseas checks annually and bring those into the school's annual conversation with the HR link officer as above. There is also an opportunity to bring school business managers together in a similar way to which headteachers have been, in order to help communicate and promote clarity in the council's HR guidance.
- 9) Brighter Futures for Children should continue to work with headteachers to implement the recently introduced 'real time' feedback loop for schools that are being inspected in order to identify any necessary further issues in inspections as they arise. This should form part of the quarterly conversation between the Local Authority and Ofsted and is aimed at addressing the power imbalance between schools and Ofsted.
- 10) Brighter Futures for Children should continue, via their safeguarding review, to encourage each school to have the right staff accessing recording systems such as CPOMs and those who don't know the mechanism to raise concerns. Similarly, in its work preparing schools for inspections it should ensure that schools are clear about the advantages of having more than one senior leader in Ofsted meetings unless specifically directed otherwise by Ofsted.
- 11) The Council should commission further training on identifying and constructively responding to stress amongst its senior leaders – specifically including (but not limited to) its school leaders. This should also include specific training on suicide prevention and consideration of how to reshape workloads to support staff that are struggling with their mental health.
- 12) Subsequent to that training, the local authority should review its current system for providing mental health support to its employees (including schools). Although its Employee Assistance Programme is entirely in keeping with other local authorities, there is an opportunity to set an example on the quality and range of support available. We cannot determine the content of this at this stage but it should draw upon the experiences of senior leaders, including headteachers, who participate in the above training.
- 13) Where a Rapid Improvement Group needs to be convened the local authority should provide clarity to participants and give explicit consideration to

ensuring a broad membership that might include other senior leaders within the school (or indeed external to the school) to help spread the burden of improvement activity.

14) Finally, it is clear that several individuals have been and continue to be deeply affected by Ruth's sad death. At some point in the future there may be a potential opportunity for some of those deeply affected individuals to meet to share their feelings and experiences in a restorative manner. Any such meetings should be professionally overseen and facilitated. Nobody should be asked to attend against their will (in accordance with restorative principles). We recommend that Reading Borough Council should broker and facilitate the process should the affected parties wish to meet and agree to do so. The potential to help people understand and even partially heal their trauma is important. However, we cannot determine that this happens but our recommendation is intended to open the door to the possibility of such a resolution, if not now then at some point in the future.

106. We believe that taken as whole, these recommendations will lead to improvements in the education system in Reading, the support for the Council's employees and ultimately for the children and young people of the borough.