

**PAUL GARVEY**

# **TAKING CONTROL 3**

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**HOW TO PREPARE  
FOR OFSTED UNDER  
THE REPORT CARD  
FRAMEWORK**

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## Praise for *Taking Control 3*

When I was head teacher at Parklands, *Taking Control 1* by Paul Garvey wasn't just a book – it was the spark that lit our fire. Without it (and Paul's unwavering support), we wouldn't have dared to dream of Outstanding, let alone achieve it. It gave us structure, confidence and the belief that we could aim high – and deliver.

Later, as Deputy CEO at Create Partnership Trust, *Taking Control 2* came into my life like a well-timed rescue mission. It became our blueprint for improvement, helping us move one Inadequate school to Good and three RI schools to Good. Once again, Paul's recipe worked wonders.

Now, with *Taking Control 3*, Paul has delivered the preparation every school leader needs. Whatever your opinion of Ofsted, being prepared is key – and this book is your battle plan.

I owe a great deal to Paul and to my schools. His books have shaped me professionally and personally. I'm proud to call him a friend – and, in many ways, a guardian angel.

If Ofsted inspections are the educational equivalent of navigating a minefield blindfolded, then *Taking Control 3* is the torch, the map and the emotional support llama you didn't know you needed.

This book doesn't just prepare you for inspection – it prepares you for battle. It's sharp, savvy and soaked in experience. Paul doesn't mince words, and thank goodness for that. He's the Gandalf of school leadership: wise, slightly weary of the system and absolutely not letting you pass without a plan.

*Taking Control 3* is the shield every school leader needs against the ever-shifting sands of the report card framework.

It's not just a book – it's a survival guide, a pep talk and a professional hug. Paul, thank you for being our compass, our coach and, occasionally, our guardian angel. You've helped me lead with confidence, prepare with purpose and feel confident in the face of grading grids.

If you're a school leader and haven't read this yet – what are you waiting for? Ofsted won't wait. But Paul Garvey will help you win.

**Chris Dyson, Interim CEO of Create Partnership, former head teacher of Parklands Primary School  
and author of *Parklands – A School Built On Love***

*Taking Control 3* is dedicated to the memory of Ruth Perry, the head teacher of Caversham Primary School for whom the school's Ofsted inspection led directly to the loss of her life. Edmund Barnett-Ward, the author of the foreword, knew Ruth as the head teacher of his children – she was a part of his life. I cannot think of a more powerful and relevant opening statement.

*Taking Control 3* represents a pragmatically courageous take on the cowardly reality that is Ofsted 2025 – post review, unhelpful to parents, not focussed on improvement, and still immoral. The book will positively help and support and is, in the true spirit of its author, a book that will make especially school leaders feel less lonely and more empowered.

As Edmund Barnett-Ward hints in the foreword: it is a shame that *Taking Control 3* had to be written. However, as educators, which we all are, we should be most grateful for very significant mercies.

**Prof Dr Ger Graus OBE, Global Education Adviser**

If you're in need of more than a cuddly cardigan to navigate the latest Ofsted framework, then this is the book for you. A combination of much needed 'cutting to the chase' practicalities coupled with the insight of someone with intellect, integrity and experience. It's easy to hear Paul's genuine reasons for supporting head teachers and the wider school team to present their school in the best possible light. He encourages us to be honest about the ever evolving joy and continuous change that make our individual schools unique, and to be open and honest about the influence these circumstances play as we respond to the unique communities that we serve. Self and external evaluation play a healthy role in getting education right for young people, especially when it allows us to celebrate what we've got right but encourages us to be open and honest about where we can improve. That critical eye is easier when we can cast it in a culture of trust, and this book reminds us to keep our purpose firmly in focus. Ultimately we want the best for our young people. Sometimes a helping hand when the fear sets in is all we need to get us back on track, and as always Paul is there to help us find 'all things worth celebrating' through a compassionate yet critically analytical eye. Paul Garvey's latest book supports a positive pathway through the panic and does so with absolute aplomb.

**Vanessa Graus Langley, head teacher, Arbourthorne Community Primary**

Edmund is absolutely right, this book shouldn't be necessary, but unfortunately, it is. When the stakes are so high, being prepared for inspection is absolutely vital and Paul's book draws on all his experience of leading inspections and supporting schools through the process to guide and help you to provide an inspection commentary for the new Ofsted framework that really sets the scene in your school and helps you to take control of the whole process. A recommended read!

**Ruth Swailes, Independent Education Consultant, School Improvement Adviser and  
Lead Author of the *Oxford International Early Years Curriculum***

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# FOREWORD

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I wish the book you hold in your hands didn't exist, and that I didn't have to write a foreword to it. Its very existence is tangible proof of the continued failure to operate a school accountability system that is fit for purpose. That three versions of this book have been required to navigate three different Ofsted frameworks is, frankly, shameful.

I wouldn't be writing this foreword to Paul's book if Ofsted's inspection of Caversham Primary School hadn't directly led to the death of the school's head teacher, Ruth Perry. Ruth was part of my life for 14 years. She was my children's head teacher – someone I'd see every morning and every afternoon in the playground. Whether she was greeting the school at the start of the day or shepherding pupils out at the close, she was always available and approachable, always ready to listen and respond. She was a dedicated, passionate head teacher, deeply invested in the community she served.

Ruth's philosophy of education reached far beyond the national curriculum. She devoted a huge amount of her personal time to providing opportunities for her pupils that expanded their knowledge and strengthened the educational foundations on which they would build their secondary learning. She started a Latin club, a Spanish club, and a maths club that was so successful its Year 6 members frequently attained a high enough standard to take a GCSE in the subject.

During the pandemic, she found innovative ways to deliver learning while crafting engaging activities to keep the whole school community connected. She not only excelled at a macro level but was equally tenacious at a micro level, engaging with and supporting children in her school, whatever their needs. When my family faced our own challenges – when I was diagnosed with cancer – Ruth ensured my daughter always had a quiet place to go and someone to talk to if she felt overwhelmed.

And yet, Ofsted judged Caversham Primary 'inadequate'. This label had no bearing on the quality of education – and to those who know the

school, it bore no meaningful relationship to any aspect of its provision. It was applied by default, because under the inspection framework in place in November 2022, any finding of unmet safeguarding requirements automatically triggered an overall judgement of ‘inadequate’, regardless of the school’s strengths in other areas.

The inquest into Ruth’s death heard that, by Ofsted’s own assessment, there was nothing wrong with the safeguarding at the school that could not have been resolved within a matter of weeks – and, further, that no child was ever in danger at Caversham Primary.

When Ruth’s sister, Julia Waters, confirmed in the media what we had long suspected – that Ruth had taken her own life because of the Ofsted inspection – I told my wife that I could not stand by and do nothing. That I had to do whatever was in my power to help change that system. I have been privileged to follow Julia through practically every step she’s taken since, lending my voice to hers in the call for meaningful reform of Ofsted. And what a journey we’ve had.

I sat beside Julia through 19 hours of meetings with the former Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan, the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofsted. I’ve written four articles for *Schools Week*, given evidence to the Commons Education Select Committee and been interviewed for newspapers, radio and television – BBC, ITV, Sky, Independent Cable and even GB News. And because Julia doesn’t ‘do’ social media, I’ve spent a great deal of time engaging on Twitter (now X), where I have a modest 5.5K followers and over 3,000 posts to my name.

Ofsted’s capacity to evade accountability has consistently felt like trying to catch smoke. From an initial response to Ruth’s death that was, as Christine Gilbert described it, ‘defensive and complacent’,<sup>1</sup> I would argue that the organisation’s biggest advancement in the past three years has been in its ability to *appear* to be engaging in a programme of reform, while remaining functionally the same in both method and philosophy.

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1 Christine Gilbert, Independent learning review for Ofsted by Dame Christine Gilbert (September 2024), p. 9. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66ce24201aaf41b21139cf94/Independent\\_learning\\_review\\_for\\_Ofsted\\_by\\_Dame\\_Christine\\_Gilbert.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66ce24201aaf41b21139cf94/Independent_learning_review_for_Ofsted_by_Dame_Christine_Gilbert.pdf).



They have become masters of the very thing that Heidi Connor, Berkshire's most senior coroner, warned about when she said, "There is a risk of future deaths if there is only lip service paid to learning from tragedies like this."<sup>2</sup> Ofsted have treated the practically unique circumstances of Caversham Primary – an excellent school failed on easily resolvable safeguarding issues – as if they represent the entirety of what is wrong with the system, instead of seeing them for what they were: merely one example of what is wrong with the system.

The concessions made have addressed problems that troubled vanishingly few schools, while the core principles of the system remain unchanged. The old system's multiple failings have been identified by the coroner's inquest into Ruth's death, the Commons Education Select Committee's report into the efficacy of Ofsted and the Gilbert Review – not to mention legions of articles and research papers published on the subject.

How, you may ask, has Ofsted achieved the sleight of hand necessary to avoid meaningful change, even when its numerous failings have been so clearly identified?

Firstly, they needed to take – and maintain – control of the narrative. Ofsted's initial mistake was in assuming that Ruth's inquest would not place any responsibility for her death at their door. His Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI), Amanda Spielman, felt both justified and able to make public statements implying that the failings at Caversham were of a graver order than they were, and that the case was being used as 'a pivot to try and discredit' Ofsted's work.<sup>3</sup>

But the coroner was emphatic: Ruth's cause of death was 'suicide, contributed to by an Ofsted inspection carried out in November 2022'.<sup>4</sup> And for the avoidance of doubt, the other stressors implied by the word

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2 Quoted in Richard Adams, Ofsted inspection contributed to headteacher's suicide, coroner rules, *The Guardian* (7 December 2023). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/dec/07/ofsted-inspection-contributed-to-headteacher-suicide-ruth-perry-coroner-rules>.

3 Amy Walker, Spielman claims head's death used 'to try and discredit' Ofsted, *Schools Week* (23 November 2023). Available at: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/spielman-claims-heads-death-used-to-try-and-discredit-ofsted/>.

4 Heidi Connor, Ruth Perry: Prevention of future deaths report. Ref: 2023-0524 (12 December 2023). Available at: <https://www.judiciary.uk/prevention-of-future-death-reports/ruth-perry-prevention-of-future-deaths-report/>.

‘contributed’ were all related to Ofsted: loss of school, loss of job, loss of house, loss of reputation, and a profound sense of powerlessness to influence any of these outcomes.

Spielman’s organisation needed to change tactics. ‘We did nothing wrong’ was no longer a credible position. There was now a real danger for Ofsted: that their detractors might actually have had some valid criticisms.

Fortunately for both Spielman and Ofsted, her tenure as HMCI came to an end at the close of 2023, allowing Ofsted to conveniently distance itself from the Spielman era with the arrival of Sir Martyn Oliver. He made a great show of committing to learn from the tragedy when, in his January 2024 press statement, he said, ‘We accept the Coroner’s findings and have responded to the recommendations of her report in full.’<sup>5</sup>

Of course, ‘responding’ to recommendations is not the same as acting on them. And soon, it became clear that Sir Martyn would do everything within his power to avoid a programme of genuine reform – at least until after the 2024 election. Thus, the Big Listen was conceived: supposedly a mechanism to provide Ofsted with data to inform reforms in response to the inquest and the Education Select Committee’s conclusions to its inquiry into Ofsted’s efficacy. In practice, the initiative was a masterclass in poor research – designed to produce a rich stew of responses from which Ofsted could cherry-pick whatever they needed to support whatever they wanted.

And then, with the election of a Labour government, Ofsted were once again gifted the opportunity to take control of their own destiny. Labour came into power promising Ofsted reform, including a new report card system – but it soon became apparent that this was a slogan in need of a policy. The new Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, handed that opportunity back to Ofsted by tasking them with designing the new system.

Let’s briefly compare the legacy framework with the one based on the report card, shall we?

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5 Ofsted, Ofsted responds to Prevention of Future Deaths report [press release] (19 January 2024). Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-responds-to-prevention-of-future-deaths-report>.

**The old system:**

- A competitive grading system that lacked the nuance to describe the work of schools.
- Defined by stigmatising single-word judgements, or phrases in the case of ‘requires improvement’.
- Laden with high-stakes consequences.
- Delivered by fallible inspectors.
- No independent complaints process through which schools could meaningfully challenge Ofsted’s assessments or inspectors’ behaviour.

**The ‘new’ system:**

- A competitive grading system.
- Defined by stigmatising, colour-coded single-word/phrase judgements (just more of them).
- Claims a greater emphasis on improvement but is still laden with high-stakes consequences.
- Will be delivered by fallible inspectors.
- Still lacks an independent complaints process through which schools can meaningfully challenge Ofsted’s assessments or inspectors’ behaviour.

The report card is a rehash of what came before, not the rethink that was required.

How far we’ve come – from January 2024, when Sir Martyn was so keen to emphasise his willingness to learn from the mistakes of the past, to January 2025 and his appearance before the Education Select Committee, where he denied that any mistakes had been made at all, claiming that ‘there was no suggestion that they [the lead inspector at Caversham Primary] did a bad job or did anything wrong whatsoever.’<sup>6</sup>

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6 See: <https://committees.parliament.uk/event/22863/formal-meeting-oral-evidence-session/>.

This was in direct contradiction to the facts established at the inquest, which characterised the inspection as ‘rude and intimidating’.<sup>7</sup>

Sir Martyn also claimed to have prioritised talking to Ruth’s family, despite having failed to reply to a single email since March 2024.

Sir Martyn has repeatedly misrepresented Heidi Connor’s findings by claiming that the Christine Gilbert ‘learning review’ was commissioned in response to the coroner’s criticism of Ofsted for failing to conduct one. In reality, the coroner’s rebuke was far broader and far graver: she was referring to Ofsted’s failure to review the inspection itself, the framework that underpinned it, and the organisational culture that allowed it to unfold as it did. Ofsted chose to interpret her words in the narrowest possible way – commissioning a review only into its handling of the aftermath. Sir Martyn claims that Ofsted has gone ‘over and above’ Connor’s recommendations,<sup>8</sup> but to suggest that this fulfils the coroner’s intent is, at best, evasive; at worst, a calculated attempt to deflect scrutiny from the systemic failures that led to Ruth Perry’s death.

It is a credit to the former HMCI Christine Gilbert that her review was so comprehensive – and her withering criticisms of Ofsted’s response to the death of Ruth Perry should give us all a tiny glimmer of hope, given Bridget Phillipson’s subsequent decision to appoint her as the new chair of Ofsted’s governing board. Perhaps, finally, there will be someone inside the organisation who *does* see the need for reform.

I write this foreword with a heavy heart, because I know that, as you read this, thousands of school leaders across the country are still bracing themselves for the next inspection. Ofsted is still having an adverse effect on the mental health of educators and is contributing – significantly – to the crisis in retention and recruitment in senior leadership.

A dear friend, a Wiltshire-based head teacher who is extremely successful by any and all metrics (including those of Ofsted), recently told me that she finds the idea of retiring early and pulling a few shifts a week as a barista preferable to facing the inspection pencilled in for early 2027. That’s just wrong.

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7 Quoted in Amy Walker and Freddie Whittaker, Ofsted inspection ‘contributed’ to head Ruth Perry’s death – coroner, *Schools Week* (7 December 2023). Available at: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/ofsted-inspection-contributed-to-head-ruth-perrys-death-coroner/>.

8 Ofsted, Ofsted responds to Prevention of Future Deaths report.

I hope that if you are a school leader, wrestling with the concerns Ofsted generates, this book will help equip you with the knowledge you need to alleviate those concerns. A great head teacher, Ruth Perry, taught me the power of knowledge – the power of education – and I will be forever grateful for the innumerable gifts that education bestowed on my family.

So, while I am clear that this is not a book anyone *should* need – and indeed, I wish it didn't exist, but since it *does*, and since it *must* – I am grateful to Paul for writing it. I hope it helps every leader who picks it up to navigate the system as it is, even as we fight to build a better one. And I hope that in the pages that follow, you find not just the guidance you need, but the resolve to keep going.

Because even in the face of a system so terribly flawed, educators and leaders like Ruth – and like you – remain the beating heart of education. Ruth was an exceptional head teacher, but the tragedy of her story is that her situation was not exceptional. She could have been any one of you. And the one lesson that nobody seems to have learned from her death is that it is the leaders within education who keep schools alive.

And they all – you all – deserve a system that truly sees you, values you and helps you to thrive. Until that day comes, we need to help each other as best we can – and we might as well start with the pages of this book.

Edmund Barnett-Ward, Caversham Primary School parent and governor

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# PROLOGUE

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Thank you so much for buying *Taking Control* 3!

This book's predecessors – *Taking Control* and *Taking Control* 2 – helped many schools to prepare for inspection under the two previous Ofsted frameworks. I hope this will achieve the same for the report card framework and I also hope it will help you to face your inspections with confidence. In Part 1, I will talk about how the framework has changed, how it is similar and what you should do pre-inspection. In Part 2, you will find a dialogic tool to write an inspection commentary, which will replace the old self-evaluation form (SEF), whose over-long life finally came to an end in November 2025. It will detail how to construct a persuasive narrative for each inspection area and how this inspection commentary should be used.

Since the publication of *Taking Control* 2 in 2020, education suffered the tragic death of Ruth Perry, head teacher at Caversham Primary school, who felt she had to end her life rather than face the ignominy and shame of her school being judged 'inadequate'. A judgement that was overturned just four months later. But Ruth didn't live to see the 'good' judgement that many believe her school had deserved in the first place.

The effect on her family was understandably dreadful, and my own heart went out to them, as did the hearts of so many in education. Her sister, Professor Julia Waters, has fought long and hard for Ofsted to take the responsibility she feels they should, and for them to listen and change. Ruth's death affected so many in education so deeply and has led me to give this book a dual purpose.

I will use my experience of inspection and over 40 years in education to give you as much confidence as I can to face yet another expanded and deficit Ofsted framework. In my introduction, you will find an examination of whether Ofsted have really listened, after they made the promise to do just that and to change the way they inspect, following

Ruth Perry's suicide. This is a book I truly never wanted to write, on both those counts.

Despite the coroner's report citing Ofsted as a major contributory factor in the death of Ruth Perry, it survived the outrage in the profession and it still survives. Amanda Spielman, His Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) at the time, who has never admitted to an ounce of responsibility over Ruth's death, was even given a peerage. Ofsted is now under the control of Sir Martyn Oliver. Oliver was formerly CEO of Outwood Grange Academies Trust (OGAT) who led *Schools Week* to report in 2019, that the leaders in his multi-academy trust (MAT)'s new schools were expected to 'flatten the grass' and terrify children in assemblies.<sup>9</sup> There was also extensive use of isolation rooms and 'reflection booths' in his OGAT schools, which Oliver had to justify in his interview for the HMCI post.<sup>10</sup>

Under his leadership, Ofsted survived and were given licence to interpret the incoming Labour government's wish for a report card for schools to replace the existing Ofsted report. That interpretation has crystallised into yet another deficit framework. Moreover, it is an *expanded* deficit framework. Instead of an inspection report with four number grades, we now have a report card with five colour grades. In addition, there are nine possible areas to inspect, with at least seven to grade in every school (as not every school will offer early years and/or post-16 provision), including safeguarding to judge 'met' or 'not met'. This is an increase on the six evaluation areas of previous frameworks (most recently five after Ofsted was forced to remove the 'overall effectiveness' grade). The five possible grades are: 'exceptional', 'strong standard', 'expected standard', 'needs attention' and 'urgent improvement'. Yet more areas in which Ofsted can find schools wanting. Yet more areas to defend in your inspection planning.

Grade, grade, grade. Judge, judge, judge. It's not difficult to see, right from the start, that this is the same old Ofsted.

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9 John Dickens, 'Flattening the grass': what's really going on at OGAT and Delta? *Schools Week* (14 February 2019). Available at: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/flattening-the-grass-whats-really-going-on-at-ogat-and-delta/>.

10 See his responses to Q19 and Q20. Education Committee, Oral evidence: Pre-appointment hearing for His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, HC 1800, *House of Commons* (5 September 2023). Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/13580/html/>.

The expectations on schools and especially upon head teachers – particularly those in disadvantaged schools – will increase with this framework. Despite so many sources telling Ofsted to reduce those pressures, including the Berkshire coroner, Heidi Connor, in her prevention of future deaths report following the investigation into Ruth Perry’s suicide. She ‘recorded a narrative conclusion as follows: Suicide, contributed to by an Ofsted inspection carried out in November 2022.’<sup>11</sup> I fear for school leaders with this new framework, and my greatest fear is that the pressure will push someone else to consider ending their life. Do we really need another suicide to finally see the end of Ofsted?

Schools need help in facing Ofsted within this new framework. They shouldn’t need that help, but Ofsted are still not prepared to work with schools on school improvement. They only want to judge them.

This book will help. *Taking Control 3* will help in all types of maintained schools, academies and free schools. (There are separate frameworks for early years, full-time equivalent (FTE) and skills, and initial teacher education (ITE), which are not covered by this book.) It is a book that will alleviate some worries about inspection, stop schools piling unnecessary work onto staff and, most of all, it will help you to feel much more confident about facing your next report card inspection. There are many references to pages (always in grey) in Ofsted’s latest guidance document where you can investigate the detail further.<sup>12</sup>

*Taking Control 3* will show you how to prepare for that inspection. It will reveal the thinking behind Ofsted’s new framework, and it will give you a dialogic tool to enable you to write a commentary to provide a positive picture of your school’s work. Your inspection commentary will give you a blueprint for your inspection arguments and will help to align all in the school behind your preparation and approach to the inspection itself. But most of all it might help bring the pressure within tolerable limits and give you the tools to allow you to wave goodbye to Ofsted for another four years and get on with your work in being a great school.

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11 Heidi Connor, Ruth Perry: Prevention of future deaths report. Ref: 2023-0524 (12 December 2023). Available at: <https://www.judiciary.uk/prevention-of-future-death-reports/ruth-perry-prevention-of-future-deaths-report/>.

12 Ofsted, *State-Funded School Inspection Toolkit* (9 September 2025). Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68b9a6b8b0a373a01819fe4b/Schools\\_inspection\\_toolkit.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68b9a6b8b0a373a01819fe4b/Schools_inspection_toolkit.pdf).



It will allow you to Take Control of your inspection.

My help will follow the principle of *praemonitus praemunitus* – forewarned is forearmed. The Latin phrase, and its translation, is associated with a number of military organisations, including the UK Royal Observer Corps – perhaps a fitting outlook for the adversarial nature of inspection that Ofsted have created.

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# Once again, Paul Garvey draws on his many years as an Ofsted lead inspector to guide readers through their inspections, this time using the new report card framework

Building on the success of his previous two books, this third volume helps school leaders develop the confidence and know-how to fully understand the new areas judged under the latest inspection model.

Paul also confronts the wider context around school inspections, including contentious debates surrounding Ofsted, the impact of inspections on staff wellbeing and the tragic death of head teacher Ruth Perry. Against this backdrop, he offers a toolkit grounded in experience and compassion to help leaders truly take control and approach their inspections with confidence.

**Suitable for head teachers, senior leadership team members, subject leaders and governors in mainstream schools in England.**

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If you're a school leader and haven't read this yet – what are you waiting for? Ofsted won't wait. But Paul Garvey will help you win.

**Chris Dyson, Interim CEO of Create Partnership, former head teacher of Parklands Primary School and author of *Parklands – A School Built On Love***

If you're in need of more than a cuddly cardigan to navigate the latest Ofsted framework, then this is the book for you.

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The book will positively help and support and is, in the true spirit of its author, a book that will make especially school leaders feel less lonely and more empowered.

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**Ruth Swailes, Independent Education Consultant, School Improvement Adviser and Lead Author of the *Oxford International Early Years Curriculum***

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**Paul Garvey** was a teacher for 22 years and is a former lead inspector for Ofsted. He has also supported many schools in preparing for inspection. Paul is the author of *Taking Control*, *Taking Control 2* and *Talk for Teaching*.



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