

PRESS RELEASE 14thth April 2004

**INQUEST INTO THE DEATH OF 16-YEAR-OLD JOSPEH SCHOLES WHO
DIED IN STOKE HEATH YOUNG OFFENDERS INSTITUTION
COMMENCES APRIL 19th 2004**

On April 19th 2004 the inquest into the death of 16-year-old Joseph Scholes will begin at Shrewsbury Magistrates Court at 10.00 am.

On 24 March 2002 Joseph was found hanging from a sheet attached to the bars of his cell window. His death occurred one-month after his sixteenth birthday, just nine days into a two-year sentence for street robbery.

Joseph was an extremely disturbed young boy who had a long history of anxiety and depression, self-harming behaviour and suicide attempts. Despite the serious concerns expressed by all those who had the most knowledge and information about Joseph and his extreme vulnerability, the Youth Justice Board made the decision to place him in prison service accommodation at Stoke Heath Young Offender Institution.

Upon arrival at Stoke Heath Joseph was initially put in strip clothing and placed in a cell with a surveillance camera, reduced ligature points, and high levels of observations. His mother Yvonne telephoned Stoke Heath Young Offenders Institute to ensure that they were aware that Joseph had been a victim of rape and to inform them that he was depressed and unstable with a history of self-harm and suicidal behaviour. Within days of his arrival and without consultation with Yvonne, Joseph was moved to a single cell with no surveillance camera, with ligature points and reduced observations.

INQUEST has been working with Yvonne Scholes, Joseph's mother, since Joseph died. We are concerned that the current inadequate remit of the inquest means that many of the fundamental systemic issues raised by his death will not be explored. These issues cause us to question the treatment and care of vulnerable children in the criminal justice system and the accountability of those agencies responsible. This responsibility applies particularly to the Youth Justice Board, the prison service and the social services departments.

The fundamental issues raised are:

- Sentencing policy and practice
- the allocation by the Youth Justice Board of a place in a Young Offender Institution instead of a local authority secure unit
- the effectiveness of suicide/self harm prevention policies and training for staff in YOIs

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On November 11th 2003 INQUEST joined forces with crime reduction charity Nacro to call for a public inquiry into Joseph's death. This inquiry has been well supported by penal reform and children's rights groups and Lords, Baronesses, MP's and lawyers.

On Thursday 1st April Liberal Democrat Peer Lord Navnit Dholakia raised his concerns in a debate in the House of Lords in support of INQUEST and Nacro's call for an inquiry. He opened his debate by saying; "The purpose of my question is to ensure that the state will never again fail in its duty to protect those in its care. We failed Joseph Scholes. I do not wish to apportion blame, but I want to ensure that one death is one too many. It should never happen again."

Lord Bassam of Brighton responded to Lord Dholakia with the Government's response to the call for a public inquiry. He said;

"I have to make clear it that there are no plans at this stage, however sympathetic we may be, to hold a public inquiry. The inquest will resume later this month and over 50 witnesses have been called to give evidence. This in itself will be a thorough inquiry, providing the opportunity for independent public scrutiny, and it is hoped that many of Mrs Scholes's questions will be answered."

The inquest will begin on 19 April 2004 and is expected to last at least two weeks. The family are being represented by INQUEST Lawyers Group members Karon Monaghan (barrister Matrix Chambers) and Mark Scott (solicitor Bhatt Murphy).

A press conference with the family and representatives from INQUEST will be held at the conclusion of the inquest. A photograph of Joseph will be available at the inquest. A detailed briefing on the case is available (see below)

Yvonne Scholes, Joseph's mother said:

"Whilst we are pleased that the coroner is going to examine several issues during the inquest, the family want to know why Joseph's sentencing and the provision of places in secure units is not going to fall in the remit of this inquest. The family also has reservations about the narrow scope of the inquest and what it can actually achieve. This is a very difficult time for all of us as we are going to be going over the intimate details of Joseph's deaths more than two years after he died."

Deborah Coles co-director of INQUEST said:

"It is well documented that Joseph Scholes was one of 25 young children to die in prison since 1990. But what needs to be highlighted is that this suffering and these deaths of children happen while in the custody and care of the state. The inquest is not the forum in which the crucial questions about the treatment of children by the criminal justice system can be thoroughly addressed and it is dishonest of the Government to suggest that it is."

Chris Ruane MP for Yvonne Scholes says:

"I hope that this inquiry will be thorough and look at all aspects of Joseph's death including sentencing and that his tragic loss of life will result in lessons being learned so that no other family will have to go through such an experience."