

Parents Pursue Legal Action Against Sussex Police Over Teen's Suicide Response

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The parents of a transgender teenager who died by suicide in 2022 are suing Sussex Police, alleging that the force's inadequate response to his disappearance contributed to his death. Emily and Mark Pulman, the mother and stepfather of 15-year-old Jason Pulman, have launched High Court action, claiming the police breached their son's human rights by failing to act swiftly or appropriately when he went missing. The case has sparked renewed

scrutiny of how police handle vulnerable missing persons, particularly those with complex mental health needs.

Jason was found dead in Hampden Park, Eastbourne, on 19 April 2022, approximately 12 hours after his mother reported him missing. An inquest the following year ruled that multiple services, including Sussex Police, had failed to adequately assess or support Jason's emotional and mental health needs. The inquest jury found the police's response "inadequate," highlighting a 10-hour delay between the initial missing persons report and an officer's arrival at the Pulman home.

The Pulmans, represented by Nick Armstrong KC of Bindmans solicitors, argue that Sussex Police failed to protect Jason from the risk of suicide. Legal documents submitted to the High Court assert that Jason, classified as a "medium risk" despite a history of self-harm and suicide attempts, might have had a "real prospect of a different outcome" had the police responded promptly. The family accuses Sussex Police of inconsistency, with Mr Pulman telling PA Media that the force had "flip-flopped" on their account of events. "No apology or amount of money can undo the long-term damage of the last three years," he said, expressing feelings of being "let down, hurt, and confused."

In a heartfelt interview, Mrs Pulman, 39, shared her grief and determination to seek justice. "Jason used to fight for what he believed in," she said. "He went to protests, researched, and got involved because he wanted change. I want to honour that by fighting for kids like him." She described the ordeal as "devastating," adding, "When I feel like giving up, I picture Jason's cheeky smile, his badges, telling me to keep fighting."

Jason, who began identifying as male at age 14, had been referred to the Tavistock Gender Identity Development Service but never received specialist treatment due to prolonged waiting times. The coroner's Prevention of Future Deaths report noted that Jason's mental health struggles and identity issues were likely contributing factors, and flagged system-wide failings in mental health and risk communication. The report indicated that earlier notification of British Transport Police (BTP) after Jason was thought to have boarded a train to London might have led to a different outcome.

On the day Jason went missing, Mrs Pulman contacted police immediately, informing them of his transgender identity and history of self-harm. Despite her repeated calls and a tip that Jason might be heading to London, the case was not escalated to high-risk status, and BTP was not informed. Mr Armstrong described the police response as "slow and strikingly

casual,” despite clear indicators of “real and immediate risk” to Jason’s life. Tragically, Jason was found deceased by a passerby in Hampden Park, shortly after an officer’s delayed visit to the family home.

The Pulmans’ frustration deepened during the inquest, where they allege Sussex Police shifted their position. Initially, then-chief superintendent Katy Woolford acknowledged shortcomings in a meeting nine days after Jason’s death, assuring the family they had done “everything right.” However, at the inquest, the force appeared to downplay these admissions, claiming there was “no arguable omission.” Mr Armstrong called this “reversal and re-reversal” of stance “shameful,” leaving the family uncertain whether lessons have been learned.

Mrs Pulman expressed the emotional toll: “It’s like torture. You feel you’re getting close to answers, then it’s pulled away again.” Mr Pulman, 50, added that the force’s inconsistency left him feeling “hopeless.” The couple’s legal battle seeks accountability and systemic change to prevent similar failures.

Sussex Police issued a statement: “Our sincere condolences remain with Jason’s family following their tragic loss; however, we are unable to comment further whilst legal proceedings are ongoing.” The case underscores broader concerns about police handling of vulnerable missing persons cases, amid ongoing national criticism of underfunded mental health and policing services.

The Pulmans remember Jason as a “funny, mischievous, artistic, rude, and unconventional” teenager, a “source of unlimited joy.” Their fight is not just for justice but to ensure his legacy drives meaningful reform.