# Parents demand accountability from Bristol City Council over SEND scandal



In a heated exchange at the strategy and resources committee on April 14, Jen Smith, a parent of children with special educational needs (SEND), vehemently criticised Bristol City Council leaders for failing to initiate an independent investigation into what she described as the "spying" scandal involving the scrutiny of SEND parents' social media. Ms Smith's remarks came in response to what she termed "bent, weak cowards" leading the council, after a long-awaited inquiry had been promised following a controversial uncovering of council practices.

The impetus for the promised inquiry began in 2022, when leaked emails revealed that Bristol City Council staff monitored social media posts that were critical of the authority. These communications involved the collection and sharing of a dossier that included private information gathered from various platforms, including cross-referencing anonymous Twitter accounts with wedding photos posted on Facebook. A motion was subsequently passed by the council in October 2022, which called upon the then-Labour mayor, Marvin Rees, to sanction an external probe into these activities.

However, the inquiry has yet to commence, leading Ms Smith to confront the current council leadership directly. During the recent committee meeting, she expressed her discontent with the lack of action. "I don’t think it’s a constitutional answer – I think it’s fairly outrageous," she stated, questioning whether the council's inaction was due to cowardice or a deeper moral failing.

In a written response to Ms Smith's inquiries, the council provided clarity on the situation, noting, "The motion in October 2022 called upon the mayor to agree to hold an independent inquiry. The mayor is no longer in office, and agreement in relation to this was not reached during his term." This statement, however, did little to appease Ms Smith, who argued that council members had campaigned on promises to address SEND issues and were now seemingly neglecting their responsibilities.

Council leader Cllr Tony Dyer, representing the Green Party for Southville, acknowledged Ms Smith's concerns but defended the council's position. "The answer to both of those is neither," he replied, referring to the allegations of cowardice. Dyer explained that while the previous administration did not proceed with the inquiry, he was open to discussions about establishing a new investigation under the current administration's oversight. He indicated plans to consult with Cllr Christine Townsend, chair of the children and young people committee, about the potential for an independent review.

Smith also addressed broader concerns regarding the council's handling of SEND-related services, arguing that it was prioritising public relations over substantively tackling the issues faced by vulnerable families. She highlighted decisions made by the council that allegedly jeopardised transport services for SEND children, stating, "You are talking about equity for disabled people including proactively removing barriers and yet you continue to block access to education."

The issue remains contentious within the council, particularly as an internal report into the scandal concluded that there was “no systematic monitoring,” a finding that received backlash for lacking transparency and accountability. This report was described by critics as a "whitewash," and the ongoing fallout represents a significant challenge for Bristol City Council as it navigates community expectations and governance transparency.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://thebristolcable.org/2022/10/send-spying-charities-distance-themselves-council-review-spying-on-parents-social-media/> - Corroborates the controversy involving Bristol City Council monitoring the social media of SEND parents and the subsequent distancing of charities from the council's internal review.
* <https://www.bristol247.com/news-and-features/news/inquiry-into-bristol-council-send-spying-scandal-delayed-for-months/> - Details the delay in the independent inquiry into the social media monitoring scandal, despite the council's initial promise to conduct one, and the ongoing concerns around the council's actions.
* <https://www.bristol247.com/news-and-features/news/independent-investigation-into-councils-surveillance-of-send-families/> - Supports the claim that the council faced criticism for monitoring social media and that an independent investigation was called for to address these concerns.
* <https://www.bristolworld.com/news/council-lawyer-denies-systematic-monitoring-of-send-parents-social-media-3857810> - The council's assertion that there was no systematic monitoring of social media, despite the collection of extensive data, which was met with skepticism by critics who labeled the internal report a 'whitewash'.
* <https://thebristolcable.org/2023/05/funding-reinstated-for-send-charity-at-heart-of-council-social-media-spying-row/> - Documents the funding reinstatement for a SEND charity involved in the scandal, reflecting efforts to mend relationships between the council and the charity after the controversy.