# Bristol City Council faces backlash over social media monitoring scandal



Bristol City Council is facing renewed criticism from a local mother following the council's failure to initiate an independent inquiry into a scandal involving the alleged monitoring of social media accounts belonging to parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Jen Smith, whose children fall under this category, has voiced her discontent at a strategy and resources committee meeting held on April 14, 2023, labelling council leaders as “bent, weak cowards” for their inaction.

The controversy began in 2022 when leaked emails revealed that council officials had collected and compiled a dossier of social media posts that were critical of the council. This dossier reportedly included a comparison of anonymous Twitter accounts with private Facebook images, raising concerns over privacy and misuse of information. Following these revelations, a majority of councillors voted in favour of an independent investigation to further examine the issue, specifically calling on then-Labour mayor Marvin Rees to oversee the inquiry.

However, despite overwhelming support within the council for an investigation, the inquiry has not materialised. Smith's frustrations were articulated in her questioning of council leader Cllr Tony Dyer during the meeting. She expressed her dissatisfaction with the council's lack of progress and stated, “I think it’s fairly outrageous," referring to the council's inability to act on the motion passed in October 2022.

In response, Cllr Dyer acknowledged the lack of action, noting that the request for an inquiry was contingent upon the former mayor's agreement. He stated, “The mayor is no longer in office and agreement in relation to this was not reached during his term.” He stated that the newly-elected administration would consider the possibility of establishing an independent investigation moving forward.

During the meeting, Smith critiqued not only the council's response to the scandal but also the broader impact of council policies on SEND families. She argued that the local authority is prioritising public relations over genuine accountability and support, stating, “This council has cut the ability for SEND young people to get to their placements.” She further chastised the council for continuing to "protect officers who have targeted SEND parents and spied on them," asserting that the internal report into the spying allegations was a mere whitewash.

The internal review concluded that there was "no systematic monitoring" of parents' social media, a finding that has been met with widespread scepticism from the families affected. Smith wrapped up her harangue by stating, "This disgraceful cover-up remains unchallenged by the weak men presiding over it, men who are bent, weak cowards and you totally disgrace Bristol."

As the council grapples with these allegations and the fallout from this scandal, it remains to be seen whether an independent investigation will be pursued, highlighting the ongoing tensions between the local authority and families seeking transparency and accountability.

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

## References

* <https://thebristolcable.org/2023/05/funding-reinstated-for-send-charity-at-heart-of-council-social-media-spying-row/> - This article discusses the reinstatement of funding for Bristol Parent Carers, a charity caught in the middle of the social media monitoring scandal. It highlights the council's assertion that surveillance took place following a request from the charity, a claim the charity denied.
* <https://thebristolcable.org/2022/10/send-spying-charities-distance-themselves-council-review-spying-on-parents-social-media/> - This article details charities distancing themselves from Bristol City Council's review of social media monitoring of local parents. It touches on the council's monitoring practices and the controversy surrounding them.
* <https://www.bristol247.com/news-and-features/news/inquiry-into-bristol-council-send-spying-scandal-delayed-for-months/> - This piece reports on the delay in starting an independent inquiry into Bristol City Council's monitoring of SEND parents' social media. It mentions that council officials are awaiting the outcome of an Ofsted inspection before proceeding with the inquiry.
* <https://www.bristolworld.com/news/council-lawyer-denies-systematic-monitoring-of-send-parents-social-media-3857810> - This article quotes a top council lawyer claiming there was 'no systematic monitoring' of SEND parents' social media, despite evidence showing council staff compiled a dossier of critical posts.
* <https://www.bristol247.com/news-and-features/news/bristol-city-councils-surveillance-send-parents-revealed/> - This report discusses the surveillance of SEND parents by Bristol City Council, highlighting leaked documents showing staff compiled dossiers of social media activity and personal photos to gather evidence.