# Bristol City Council faces backlash over handling of SEND scandal



In a recent explosive meeting of the Bristol City Council's strategy and resources committee, a mother of children with special educational needs unleashed a fierce criticism of council leaders for their blatant failure to initiate a promised independent investigation into the damning "spying" scandal. Jen Smith, a steadfast advocate for parental rights, didn't hold back when she labeled the council's leaders as "bent, weak cowards" during the session held on Monday, April 14.

The uproar stems from a shameful period in 2022 when a majority of councillors voted to investigate allegations that council officers conducted surveillance on the social media accounts of parents advocating for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Concerns escalated after leaked emails revealed that council staff had secretly compiled a dossier of derogatory social media posts regarding their handling of SEND. This included disturbing actions such as merging information from anonymous Twitter handles with personal Facebook photos to silence dissent.

Despite robust calls for an inquiry, the investigation has yet to materialize, further eroding public trust in the council. The council’s excuse, relayed in a written response to Smith's queries, attempts to deflect responsibility by stating: "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." Smith vehemently rejected this argument, arguing that the leadership’s inaction is nothing short of an outrage, especially since many of these councillors campaigned purportedly to address SEND issues.

During the meeting, Smith openly voiced her frustrations regarding the council’s inadequacies, suggesting the leadership is more preoccupied with controlling the narrative of their failings rather than sincerely addressing the pressing challenges faced by SEND families. She provocatively questioned committee members, asking, “Are you now being cowardly or just totally bent?” to which council leader Cllr Tony Dyer (Green, Southville) feebly responded: “The answer to both of those is neither.” Dyer's acknowledgment of collective responsibility fell flat as he indicated that the new administration might consider a self-initiated investigation—only a hollow promise to placate growing discontent.

Smith's criticisms hit home as she identified ongoing setbacks affecting SEND families, particularly citing disturbing cuts to transport services for vulnerable pupils. These cuts, she argued, not only obstruct access to crucial education but also jeopardize children's safety. With unwavering resolve, Smith proclaimed, “you continue to block access to education,” accusing the leadership of prioritizing public relations gimmicks over meaningful reform and action.

Moreover, Smith expressed outrage at what she perceived as the council protecting officers implicated in monitoring parents who dared criticize the council’s woeful SEND strategies. “Nearly three years later, this council persists in covering up the fact its officers… spied on Bristol residents,” she exclaimed, characterizing this as a disgraceful failure to hold accountable those complicit in this scandal. The internal report concerning the scandal, which concluded there was "no systematic monitoring," has been dismissed by critics as little more than a pitiful whitewash, ignoring the serious issues plaguing the community.

The meeting has reignited urgent discussions about the council's commitment to transparency and accountability, especially as more families are left feeling marginalized and distrustful. The implications of such egregious surveillance practices threaten to fracture trust and engagement between local authorities and the very families they are supposed to serve. As the prospect of an inquiry hangs in uncertainty amidst this inept and vacillating leadership, the outcome of this situation may very well define the future of Bristol’s governance.

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/> - This article corroborates the incident of council officers spying on social media accounts of parents advocating for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), highlighting a 'fact-finding' report and subsequent distancing by charities.
* <https://thebristolcable.org/2023/05/funding-reinstated-for-send-charity-at-heart-of-council-social-media-spying-row/> - It explains the controversy surrounding Bristol City Council's social media monitoring and its impact on charities like Bristol Parent Carers, which had its funding reinstated after being pulled during the scandal.
* <https://thebristolian.net/2022/07/27/send-parent-spy-scandal-is-it-widspread-and-systematic/> - This article discusses the broader implications of the 'spying' scandal, questioning whether it was widespread and systematic, reflecting the escalating concerns about council surveillance.
* <https://www.bristol247.com/news-and-features/news/cases-of-parents-taking-council-to-court-over-send-delays-tripled-in-2022/> - It highlights the increasing number of tribunal appeals by parents frustrated with SEND provision in Bristol, illustrating the growing distrust between parents and the council.
* <https://thebristolcable.org/2023/05/funding-reinstated-for-send-charity-at-heart-of-council-social-media-spying-row/#:~:text=The%20inquiry%27s%20future%20is,have%20now%20been%20issued.> - It mentions the uncertain future of an independent inquiry into the social media monitoring by the council, aligning with the concerns about the council's accountability.