

From: [REDACTED]
To: [emc](#)
Subject: My experience re Social Media Impact on Local Council Elections
Date: Friday, 30 October 2020 4:40:22 PM

Hi there

Firstly, thanks for accepting my submission. As a first time candidate running for local council - full of optimism and a genuine desire to make positive change in my community – never in my worst nightmares would I have expected such hostile, vindictive and atrocious treatment on social media. Evidently, the bullying was politically motivated and agenda-driven, traceable back to other competing candidates and their associates. I am so dispirited and exhausted from the experience, it has soured what should have been an exciting and enjoyable opportunity for me to engage with residents and learn how to be their voice as we build a better place to live together. I sacrificed a lot to nominate for council, I had no experience whatsoever in politics or campaigning at any level – I only wanted to put myself forward and help [REDACTED] – the place I've lived my entire life. I was so impassioned and delighted to be running for council – instead, I was subjected to a smear campaign characterised by agenda-driven online trolling, bullying and harassment.

As you will see if you click on the posts below, the link is clear between these online participants and other local candidates running in [REDACTED]. Additionally, the moderators of these particular community Facebook groups have political ties to particular candidates. This resulted in deliberate “cherry-picked” censorship (i.e. deleting comments or blocking people, or allowing comments that supported a particular agenda) and also failing to enact the Facebook groups' own stated codes of conduct in order to allow hateful vitriol and bullying to continue if it suited the moderator's personal political slant. I have good reason to believe, based on circumstantial evidence, the main driver of all this is the current Councillor for [REDACTED].

It all started with a resident (who I now know for certain is affiliated with this councillor) sending me DM's and commenting publicly on my posts, asking me incessant and repeated questions about my political affiliations. This resident does not live in the council ward in which I'm running, but continued to ceaselessly pursue me publicly on Facebook. Examples such as “why is [REDACTED] running in [REDACTED] when she doesn't live there” “[REDACTED] what political party is backing you” (a question I had already answered to him privately) and so forth. He also labelled me publicly as “a liar, dishonest and not to be trusted.” This was amidst almost daily DM's where he made deliberate attempts to interrogate, menace and discourage me. This was disheartening, as I consider myself a friendly, approachable and harmonious person, especially with those whom I don't necessarily share the same beliefs with. I took the high road, made genuine attempts to repair and attempt a relationship with this person, but it was all met with further vitriol and accusations. He was clearly determined to “expose” me – for what, I still do not know. I have conducted myself with the utmost transparency and integrity throughout my entire campaign.

This year during COVID, campaigning has looked completely different to the past. Also, this is my first time ever campaigning. I learned door-knocking wasn't an option within the rules of lockdown, so I instead decided to call local residents and discuss their concerns and what they would love to see in the community. Coincidentally the first person I called was the aforementioned Councillor's best friend – hereafter, things online escalated. First was a post from this aforementioned resident who incessantly pursued me online. The post was regarding how I obtained peoples' phone numbers. I was accused of a privacy breach and that I was breaking the law (FYI - I had this all checked and legal advice before proceeding – it is not unlawful. The posts continued daily, creating hysteria and sensationalist virulence in a Facebook Group that most residents would mostly engage with to read posts about local parks, children's fundraisers, neighbourhood watch, lost pets etc. The intention here was to intimidate me, tarnish my reputation and turn residents against me. Amongst this horrific experience, the thing that warmed my heart and kept me going was that the people I spoke to over the phone were so lovely, supportive of me and their community. People generally loved having a chat - especially in a lockdown environment when people were feeling isolated. I did not receive any direct complaints or anyone asking me not to call them. Online, the narrative was the complete contrary. A narrative that was architected and carefully positioned to support an opposing candidate's (the current Councillor) agenda.

Following several posts, the councillor also placed an article in the local newspaper article, which contained a distortion of facts and incorrect accusations that “the (offending) candidate” had been sending SMS’ to locals, which was not true. Whilst I was not named in the article directly, the posts and comments on Facebook named me, explicitly linking me to the story, and throwing out unsubstantiated claims that many residents were angry. The posts also implied I was calling from a private number so that people couldn’t call me back which was also not true. I stopped making these calls solely because these intimidation tactics and deliberate attempts to discredit me via an incessant online bullying campaign began to wear me down. As a person of great integrity, I made attempts to comment on these posts and set the record straight, explain my side of the story, and offer to personally handle any residents’ concerns. These posts were deleted by the moderator.

I decided to stick to my community engagement strategy and I sent a ‘reminder to vote’ text to residents on the second last day of voting. I provided an ‘opt out’ option and was moved by the hundreds of positive responses to my text, thanking me for the reminder and wishing me good luck. Conversely, I did receive some hateful and nasty responses - which was expected. Screenshots of my text message were then posted in these online Facebook community groups by mostly the same group of people I mentioned above. The politically-charged mudslinging and attempts to defame my character reached peak new levels at this point. The posters were demanding to know how I got this information, claimed I’d broken the law and that it was a privacy breach (confirmed it is not). The narrative encouraged people to complain directly (of which many did), and the current Councillor was involved in this narrative directly. These particular posts received a lot of comments, a lot of negativity and one particular resident making all sorts of wild allegations about me to the point that if I’m elected, my solicitor will write to her to formally request she desist from defaming me.

A friend of mine responded to one of the posts in my defence (before his comment was deleted and he became blocked from the page by the moderator quickly). This group of online bullies searched him online, found his LinkedIn profile and connected the dots that we worked together. Despite my friend posting from his personal Facebook page - in his personal life - our employer received a letter of complaint seeking a letter of apology from the individual and demanding 12 months free services from our company, or they would go to the media. The complaint written to my employer was actually written by another opposing local council candidate in my ward – writing on behalf of the resident driving the online bullying I have primarily been referring to in this email. This candidate is a “support candidate” for the current Councillor I believe has been driving these targeted attempts to defame my character. My employer saw the comments posted by my colleague friend and had no concerns about his conduct, nor mine. They in fact expressed great shock and disappointment in the treatment I’d received, and the lengths at which these people were prepared to go to smear me, and anyone voicing their support of me.

Even after these events, the harassment continued and my private replies to a resident were screenshotted and posted into these groups. At this point the audience in these Facebook groups - likely just logging in to see when a local farmer’s market might be open – appeared to have had enough. There have been numerous people now telling these repeat offenders to stop going on about this issue, and that they were harassing me. It feels good to see my community supporting me, because I have been so dispirited and hurt by this experience. However many of these posts in support of me were also deleted by the moderators in order to twist, pervert and control the narrative – followed by subsequent posts from the current Councillor furthering their agenda.

Thank you for running this inquiry, it is very much required. Let me please remind you – I am a first time candidate. I am a young community member passionate about change, people, and the place where I live. I started my campaign buoyed about making a positive impact in my community – it was a dream of mine to give back to society in this way. What I’ve endured was not what I signed up for at all. I am utterly disgusted. In an environment where mental health concerns are rampant coming out of COVID, I feel it’s important I voice my story and experience so that meaningful change can hopefully be enacted. I would hate to think of future generations of decent, ambitious and caring people being bullied out of running for council.

Below are some of the posts I am referring to, and there are many more of which have been deleted. Others I have photos of.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I am happy to provide screenshots and go into more detail if you are looking to specifically investigate any of this further. I am happy to have given you an overview of my experience so this can be dealt with in a fair, reasonable and long-lasting fashion for future elections. This behaviour should absolutely not be tolerated.

On a positive note, I am placing well, 8 votes off the current councillor in first place. There are two positions available and in second place I am proud of my efforts. Whatever the outcome next week I am grateful for this opportunity and the things I've learnt.

Many thanks

[REDACTED]