

## **Dealing with Abusive Correspondence and Abusive Social Media Posts**

I have been asked to produce a briefing note for Members following the abusive email from Tim Thorne ( who occasionally posts on the North Yorks Enquirer Website ) and a post that Andy Strangeway has brought to Members attention on his own website Andy Strangeway – Independent.

The first thing to say is that we do take threats and harassment of Members and staff seriously and have taken action where appropriate. As an example we reported an individual who had been sending abusive correspondence and making abusive telephone calls on multiple occasions to staff and Members to the Police. This resulted in the individual being prosecuted for malicious communications on two occasions.

To put things in perspective those prosecutions came after the individual had been sending such correspondence and making such calls for a period of months. The Council had implemented procedures to protect staff and Members from the abuse and had warned the individual that his behaviour would be reported to the Police. Reporting the matter to the Police was the last stage in an escalated response following other actions to contain the impact of the actions of the individual on staff and Members.

The second thing to say is that I understand Member's concerns I have been subject to abuse on websites myself , including being called a bully , incompetent and corrupt. I understand how disheartening it is to have statements made about you on social media which you know are untrue.

### **The email from Tim Thorne**

Dealing first with the email from Tim Thorne. The content of the email is clearly abusive and offensive ( and could have used a spell check ). The element that concerned Members was –

*I look forward to the time when capital punishment is repealed and we can start executing you useless cunts on Pay Per View TV.*

I have contacted the Police to ask if they consider that the above would be a Police matter. I have made it clear to some Members that I do not consider that it is. The threat is not directed at any individual. He is ranting. However it is a matter for the Police whether this communication is actionable and I await a response from them. We have however taken action as we have in the past to protect Members from future abuse from this individual. I have advised Members to block Mr Thorne's email address and not to correspond with him. I have also written to Mr Thorne making it clear that the content is offensive and we are considering reporting the matter to the Police.

Taken on its own I do not consider that the email from Mr Thorne would constitute harassment. It is a single email. In the case I set out above the Police took action and prosecuted the individual after a period of months of multiple abusive communications. The Police have been clear in the past that for threats to be actionable by themselves either as threats or malicious communications there has to be a sustained campaign of threats abuse or intimidation. A one off email would not usually warrant a response from the Police but this clearly will depend upon the content. If Mr Thorne makes contact with a Member or Members again we can revisit our response. I think that the actions that we have taken thus far are proportionate to the email sent by Mr Thorne.

## Postings on Websites

There are two locally based websites ‘ North Yorks Enquirer ‘ and ‘ Andy Strangeway – Independent ‘. These websites ( especially the latter ) sometimes feature posts that refer to Members of the Council. These comments refer to Members generally or refer to specific Members. The content of the posts can be critical of Members. Both websites style themselves as websites that challenge the actions of the Council and Members in the public interest. Both claim to have a wide public readership. Authors who post on the websites will sometimes write to Members bringing a particular post to their attention and / or offering Members a ‘ right of reply’.

The best way to deal with postings on such sites is to ignore them. The reasons for this are as follows –

- Although the post can be hurtful they do not really matter. Members should remember that people who know you know what the reality of the situation is. When they know you are not a bully they are not going to start believing that you are based on a couple of posts on a website.
- Responding to such posts simply keeps the story going. It gives those who run the websites further material to place on their website. If you do not rise to the bait you are not providing them with further material to create further posts.
- We have in the past taken advice on such posts from a leading firm of libel lawyers. They stated that the advice that they gave to clients who were unhappy with posts on such ‘ micro sites ‘ was not to take action. The reason for this was that taking action simply brought the posts to a wider audience and gave them more prominence.
- It is not clear what prominence posts on these sites have in the minds of the public. Both sites claim to have a wide readership. I would take this with a large pinch of salt. My own view is that if officers and Members stopped clicking on the websites their readership would take a serious knock.

In order to deal with such posts I would advise Members to take the following actions –

- Don’t visit the websites. I know that they can exercise a lurid fascination but what you don’t know cannot harm you. The criticism of myself on the websites made no difference to the way in which my colleagues and friends treated me and not looking at the websites did provide me with greater peace of mind.
- If you decide that you are not going to visit the sites tell your colleagues that you are not interested in postings on the sites and do not wish to be informed about them.
- Block the email addresses of those who post on the sites and write to you bringing posts to your attention or asking for comments.
- If you become aware of a post that upsets you then talk to someone about it don’t brood over it.
- Finally if Members see something that they consider may be actionable or constitute a criminal act do not hesitate to contact me.

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