

MANAGEMENT BOARD**SOCIAL NETWORK SITES & BLOGGING****Note by the Director General of Resources****Purpose**

This note sets out the main issues on the question whether access to social network sites and blogs should be restricted for staff.

Issue for Board

2. The Board is asked to consider whether staff should be denied access to social networking sites from the Parliamentary Estate, other than for bona fide business purposes.

HRG's recommendation

3. HRG considered the issue at its February and March meetings. Factors to take into account are:

- *use of bandwidth.* At times, use of social networking sites has constituted over 40 per cent of parliamentary web traffic. This is by no means marginal use of public resource;
- *reputational risk.* There is the risk of unguarded or derogatory comments. Staff have been reminded of the danger of this in a staff notice;
- *interference with work/productivity.* Unfettered use of such sites can be time-consuming and addictive, and may interfere with normal work commitments.

4. In the light of such considerations, HRG recommended that access to such sites be blocked, except where there is a specific business need. The issues are addressed in the HRG paper attached (Annex A).

5. The Board is invited to consider whether to agree with HRG's recommendation.

A J Walker

Director General of Resources

May 2008

ANNEX A

Human Resources Group**Use of Social Network sites and Blogging**

A paper by Director of HR Management and Development

1. Purpose

- 1.1 HRG have already discussed issues relating to social networking sites at its February 2008 meeting (HRG2008.P12). However following the recent publicity in the press regarding the "Civil Serf" blog we have been asked to take immediate action.
- 1.2 This paper seeks HRG's view on the introduction of a policy on staff's use of social networking sites e.g. MySpace, Bebo, Facebook, etc whilst in the workplace, together with guidelines on the appropriate use of personal blogs ensuring that paragraph 5.24 in the Staff Handbook is upheld.

2. Background

- 2.1 There is evidence to suggest that some employers are blocking their staff's access to social networking sites such as Facebook during office hours due to concerns about productivity and security. According to a study undertaken by information security consultancy, Global Secure Systems, the use of such sites is costing the UK an estimated £6.5bn per annum in terms of reduced output. A poll carried out amongst 776 office workers indicated that staff spent at least 30 minutes a day on networking sites, with some spending as much as three hours a day on such activities. Paper HRG2008.P.12 highlighted that average figures from PICT indicated that browsing to externally hosted social networking resources consisted over 40% of Parliamentary web traffic. Unsurprisingly, therefore, other research by Computerweekly.com found that some 63% of organisations were planning to monitor or limit staff access to these sites over the next six months, while 17% intended to ban usage completely. In addition, regardless of staff productivity issues there are also security issues.
- 2.2 As a result, in some organisations policies or access controls have therefore been put in place to ban the use of these social networking sites in the workplace. In a Sophos poll of 600 workers, 43 percent revealed that their company was blocking access to Facebook, while an additional seven percent reported that usage of the social networking site was restricted and only those with a specific business requirement were allowed to access it. Lloyds TSB, Credit Suisse and Goldman Sachs are amongst the companies reported to have blocked employees from visiting Facebook. In contrast, 50 percent of the respondents said that their company did not block access to Facebook,

with eight percent specifying that the reason was fear of employee backlash.

- 2.3 The press coverage surrounding the “Civil Serf” blog case which involved an internet blogger who published derisive accounts of life as a civil servant at the heart of the Brown government has further highlighted this issue. The person responsible has been identified and suspended.

3. Findings

- 3.1 The Cabinet Office is drawing up guidelines for using blogs and social network sites in response to an independent report published last June called *The Power of Information*. The guidelines are expected to cover how civil servants should respond when they feel inaccurate information has been posted, for instance, on social networking sites. The guidelines could deal with dilemmas such as whether making an official comment on a blog contravenes civil service rules. The Cabinet Office’s interim findings are expected within the next few weeks, with the final recommendations coming out later in the year.
- 3.2 The Head of HR Employee Relations and Reward from the Scottish Government has confirmed that they use Surfcontrol to block staff’s access to any blogging or social network sites. This is because:
- it is not possible to moderate the content of social networking sites such as MySpace, Bebo, Facebook, etc which could easily be of an offensive or otherwise inappropriate nature. It is also not possible to restrict the access of those parts of the website which may be deemed legitimate for business purposes;
 - they have been advised by IT Security colleagues that with sites such as this where there are large numbers of users there is a very high likelihood of the existence of “malware” (software designed to infiltrate or damage a computer system without the owner’s consent) and other significant risks.
- 3.3 However the Scottish Government (SG) do allow access to a blogging/social networking site which is particularly narrow in subject matter, on a case by case basis. In addition, very exceptionally, they allow access to certain mainstream (such as Facebook) rather than specialist blogging/social networking sites to a discrete group within SG (Ministerial Special Advisers) who have a strong case for access based on the need to have an awareness of current political thinking/views. PICT has indicated that they could block access to House staff whilst still allowing access for Members and Members’ staff.

4. Reputational Risk

- 4.1 There is a further risk in staff participating in social networking at home, and in their own free time. Although the Staff Handbook has some

sections which may be relevant. Paragraph 5.20 deals with publishing articles, and taking part in surveys or research which deal with attitudes or opinions on political matters or matters of government or party policy. However it is felt that the wording is ambiguous, and as such could not be relied on to support any potential disciplinary action.

- 4.2 Paragraph 5.17 of the Staff Handbook states that staff must uphold the reputation of the House and paragraph 5.24 asks staff to please ensure that their conduct and behaviour off duty does not bring the House into disrepute. This is believed to be more directly relevant but such be strengthened to include social networking as an example.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

- 5.1 HRG2008.P12 explored a number of possible applications for social networking technologies to improve communications within the House service, and asked HRG to consider whether there was a case for further work on developing such tools. However, in light of the recent cases in the media, the Chief Executive has asked for immediate action.
- 5.2 It is likely that there may be a significant backlash if we decide to block Members and Members' staff access. In addition, as Members' staff do not work for the House any breach of confidentiality or inappropriate behaviour would be for individual Members to address.
- 5.3 There may also be a few House staff who may have legitimate business reasons for access to these sites.
- 5.4 It is possible for PICT to block the use of particular social networking sites for staff of the House whilst leaving them available to other Parliamentary Network users such as Members and their staff. **It is therefore recommended that, for the time being, the House of Commons implement a similar approach to the Scottish Parliament and ban staff from social networking sites at work, except where there is a specific business need.**
- 5.5 This policy should be reviewed when wider civil service guidance is available.
- 5.6 I recommend that a Staff Notice be issued a) telling staff of the decision to curtail the use of networking sites, and b) reminding staff that they have an obligation to uphold the reputation of the House, even in activities outside their course of duty. This should also be included in the Staff Handbook in due course (subject to the normal consultation with Trade Union representatives).

6. HAIS implications

- 6.1 None

7. Actions for HRG**7.1 HRG are asked to:**

- approve blocking normal use of social networking site for House staff using the Parliamentary network;
- review this decision once any guidance from the Cabinet Office is issued;
- approve issue of a Staff Notice on the inclusion of employment details appearing in a personal blog, and amendments to the Staff Handbook, particular Section 5.24.

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March 2008**

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