ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Corporate Policy and Performance
DATE	04 March 2010
DIRECTOR	Gordon McIntosh
TITLE OF REPORT	Social Networking Sites for Aberdeen City Council
REPORT NUMBER	EPI/09/118.

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To present information on social networking websites and whether they would benefit the Council as part of its communication, marketing and promotional activity.

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

Members are requested to approve the proposal to create a profile for Aberdeen City Council across social networking sites such as Facebook, bebo, Flickr and Twitter and to utilise the You Tube media channel to enhance existing communication channels and encourage interaction with residents and service users.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications associated with this proposal. The social networking would be developed within the existing service resources.

4. SERVICE & COMMUNITY IMPACT

This report supports the Community Plan as it seeks to ensure '*people who live and work in Aberdeen will be well informed and actively supported to achieve their full potential*'; Aberdeen will be '*a city with a strong, vibrant local democracy and a sense of civic pride*', and also become '*a city that promotes high expectations and meets those through the genuine involvement of its people'*.

Within the Single Outcome Agreement the Council pledges to '*engage young people to facilitate their personal, social and educational development and enabling them to gain a voice, influence and place in society*' (Policy: Priorities for Community Learning); and to ensure that Aberdeen is a place '*where every citizen is enabled to be more active in his or her community…*' (Policy: Strengthening Local Democracy).

The proposal has been assessed under the Council's Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment procedure and no negative impact has been established.

By developing alternative forms of engagement and communication to complement the existing channels the proposal to use social networking sites supports the Council's Equality and Human Rights Policy.

5. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

Legal – where data is captured on users it will be in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2003 and Council policy and procedure.

Resource – services presenting information on the social networking sites will need to allocate staff time for regular updates to ensure maximum effectiveness. It is anticipated these services will require support and guidance from the Council's marketing, communications and e-government teams. Consequently staff time will need to be allocated within these teams. This will need careful monitoring to ensure effective use of resources.

Personnel – no implications.

Property – no implications.

Equipment – no implications, activity should be carried out on existing IT equipment.

Sustainability and environmental – a benefit of communicating through social networking sites could be a reduction in the quantity of paper and printing produced by the Council.

Health and safety – to identify and alleviate potential risks to the Council's existing internet and IT functions the SDD security team have been consulted and advice has been sought from the outset.

Policy implications and risks – no implications.

6.0 REPORT

The Council website, http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/ , has recently been ranked across a range of measures as the third best website out of the 429 local authorities in the UK (Source: Site Morse, January 2010). It is intended that the social networking sites would complement the Council website and enable teams within the Council to reach and connect with previously 'hard to reach' groups by communicating with them on their terms using technologies they are familiar with. The relative ease of implementation, and virtually no cost, makes this an attractive communication tool, as does the opportunity to present Council information and news without media influence or editing.

Evidence of a large growth in the use of social networking sites by young people is provided by recent figures from Ofcom (September 2009) which demonstrate that in 2007, 54% of these sites were used by young people within the 16-24 age group. By 2009 this figure had grown to 86%.

The popularity and growth of social networking sites has been rapid. Twitter, has produced a league of local authorities using the sites. Currently 125 local authorities in the UK are accessing Twitter in some form. Included within these authorities are 55 councils who are also posting videos on You Tube, and 44 with a Facebook profile[1].

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[1] Research delivered at the 'Building Perfect Council Websites '09' conference

Locally, the use of these social networking sites is above average. Within Aberdeen 31% of adults have accessed or regularly access these sites. This is well above the UK average of 20% and slightly above the Scottish average of 30%[2].

These figures and comparative research would support the creation of social networking profiles for Aberdeen City Council as a way of targeting 'hard to reach' groups such as young people, encouraging interaction and engagement with all citizens, raising awareness of the range of Council services available and providing an additional marketing and communication channel.

6.1 An explanation of social networking sites:

Social networking is the loose term for a group of technologies and websites which include public internet forums such as bebo, Facebook, Twitter and myspace. Prior to the development of these forums, websites were built by applying specialist skills to compose, format and publish information. Networking sites enable anyone to publish as it hides this complex technology behind simple easy-to-use interfaces.

The result is a huge growth of personal sites, opinions, comments, knowledge sharing and interaction. Alongside this expansion is an expectation of 'being in the loop'. As the sites mature they shift from being the latest gimmick to the acceptable norm attracting attention from both public and private sectors.

As media attention of social networking sites has increased so have the expectations of members of public that opportunities to interact with organisations now exist.

Social networking sites would provide opportunities for the Council to communicate and interact directly with individuals and groups. These benefits for the Council would be:
- creating additional communication channels for citizens who regularly access social networking sites
- potential to interact with 'hard to reach' sections of the population who may not think to visit the main website
- an opportunity to generate additional income
- the Council will become more transparent and accountable
- providing a facility that enables questions to be answered
- possible increase in citizens' perception of trust
- comparatively inexpensive to introduce
- speedy, almost immediate, engagement with service users
- providing additional paper-free communication channels
- increased contact with residents

6.2 Social networking sites and local authorities:

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[2] The Scotsman, September 2009-12-10

Whilst the Council has well established features on the website which provide a wide range of information on council services, not all citizens go there first for information. The scenarios below illustrate the potential benefits social networking would provide for the Council and citizens by extending the reach and functionality of the present arrangements.

Social Networking and interaction – a scenario **featuring a member of the public:**

i. A 21 year old male science student has just moved to the city. His interests include live music and studying. Whilst he would like to pursue all of his interests he would not think of visiting the Council web pages for information of bands in the area.

- He receives a tweet from a friend telling him about a local band playing at the Beach Ballroom. From this he clicks onto the Beach Ballroom Facebook page; follows the link to the Council website, books and pays for his ticket and passes the information to his friends using Twitter, text SMS or updating his Facebook status. They do the same.

- Having attended the gig, he uploads his review and photographs of the event to the Beach Ballroom's Facebook page and also makes a comment about what a great night he had on his own Facebook and bebo pages. His 100 or so Facebook friends are then notified of his post on their own Facebook pages and become interested in the venue.

- As this is all handled through social networking sites the Beach Ballroom doesn't pay booking fees, income is received in advance and the profile of the Beach Ballroom as a music venue for all ages grows.

- The student now joins the Council's mailing list and regularly receives electronic details of forthcoming events. He notices a series of Science Festival lectures. He informs his classmates and they also attend the lectures. One session is from a librarian talking about the academic services provided by the central library. This information drives the student to the Council website where he is able to source the relevant information he needs. His quest then takes him onto the libraries section of the social networking pages and he takes advantage of the music instrument and media hire services provided within the library.

- He now is becoming more and more aware of the breadth of Council services available to him and regularly visits the Council website.

- Following an email requesting young people join City Voice panel he applies and begins to expand his contact with the Council still further.

ii. Scenario two: **Snow / flooding / bad weather**
News items are posted regularly on the Council's website referring to roads conditions / flooding / weather / gritting / travel advice and support for the elderly.

- By linking this service to Twitter it automatically sends 'tweets' to a wide audience of followers. These tweets provide links back to detailed news and information posted on the Council's website and encourage interaction through the online system for reporting roads issues (where appropriate).

- Maps are created on the sites showing roads affected by severe snow and ice or areas affected by flooding. Again interaction is encouraged through the online reporting.

- A map showing the location of all grit bins is set up. People can click on the map and report when the grit is running out. An interactive map is provided showing where gritters have been and where the next gritting is scheduled for.

- In the case of disruption to household waste collections, we send this information through twitter and by triggering e-mail alerts to the media (as per existing school closures), or by SMS (texting).

- Where schools are affected, head teachers complete the school closures system. This automatically triggers tweets containing links to the school closures system for further information. The system automatically sends alerts to local media through e-mail distribution lists.. Parents can subscribe to tweets, or for emails or SMS messages.

    iii.   Scenario three: **Major emergency**

The majority of the Council website front page is given over to the prevailing situation. News items and updates are posted regularly to keep the public informed.

- Automatic tweets are circulated to citizens following the Council's Twitter feed. Those who have consented to SMS texts or emails receive information by those methods.

- If the situation concerns a geographical area (e.g. a bomb scare) we post information on social networking sites with links back to a map showing the affected area - with open and closed roads and alternative routes. There is also a link to information on bus services / parking and car sharing.

- We set up a page for people to log concerns and monitor and respond to queries that can be received by e-mail, web page, twitter, and phone.

    iv.   Scenario four: **Art Gallery promotion and engagement**

The art gallery wishes to raise awareness of the touring Turner Prize exhibition. The team is aware of the importance of the exhibition to the city and is keen for all residents to have the opportunity to experience it.

- Gallery staff contact community groups and community learning teams through their email addresses and direct them to the Council's website, Twitter feed, bebo page and You Tube presence. By using social networking to raise awareness of the event it becomes more accessible.

- As the date for the exhibition draws near a promotional video of the installation is featured on You Tube. This contains a link to the Art Gallery pages with details of this and other events. Short concise Twitter feeds and a 'countdown to opening' is created by the curator.

- Live reviews and reactions are displayed on screens at the entrance to the gallery as well as through social networking channels with the large numbers of visitors tracked and promoted. Local media cover the exhibition, and the reaction to it, (amazement, excitement and surprise) from amongst citizens and creates a feeling of collective involvement rather than the exhibition being 'not for me'.

- A large database of art gallery visitors is collected for future promotions and advance previews.

6.3 Growing Aberdeen City Council's Social Network

The use of social networking sites, as identified above, demonstrate a 'comfortable fit' with local authorities in that both are about building communities and connecting people. There is now an expectation, especially amongst the younger population that organisations will have a presence amongst this virtual community and that it will be possible to access information and services through this channel.

Awareness of the sites would be raised through the following channels:
- through active use of the sites themselves
- on the Council's existing website
- by adding a note to personal email signatures
- by incorporating the information into other Council publications and literature where appropriate
- through issuing media releases
- word of mouth

6.4 Next steps

This report requests approval to develop a corporate profile on the social networking sites of bebo and Facebook; use of the You Tube media channel to present movie or DVD recordings; and the creation of a Council Twitter feed.

The sites should be branded corporately wherever possible to promote the wide range of services and events. Each site would feature some or all of the elements listed below:

- Council press releases and appropriate images
- Forthcoming events
- Reviews of events
- Information on and changes to waste services
- Links to relevant sites such as partners
- Brochures and other documents in a downloadable form
- Award successes
- Promotional videos
- 'Stop press' information
- Road closed notices
- Schools closed information
- Roadworks and road conditions
- Severe weather announcements

- Discussion forums
- Links to the Council website
- Individual, service and team blogs

Issues to be addressed and solutions:

Issue:	Solution:	Delivered by:
Opening up social networking sites for public comment does not mean a response received is a full reflection of popular opinion	This will be addressed through careful monitoring of the number and content of comments to ensure a balance of opinion is presented	Marketing, e-Government and Comms teams
Offensive comments and feedback posted on the site would require moderation and/or removal where appropriate	Regular monitoring would be required	Service teams
Potential security issues are identified	Colleagues should adhere to the Council's ICT Acceptable Use Policy, and liaise closely with the ICT service, following their advice to alleviate and remove any risks	Service teams, e-Government and ICT security teams
Sites must be maintained, monitored and updated for maximum effectiveness	Staff time required to update the sites will need to be incorporated into each service's ongoing communications activity	Service teams

6.5 Timescales:

It is envisaged the building of profiles will begin immediately with an evaluation presented to the Corporate Police and Performance committee meeting on the 9 September 2010.

6.6 Consultation with elected members:

As part of the preparation to present this report to committee, a period of consultation was undertaken. Four members responded with three voicing their approval of the proposal. One elected member raised concerns and stated the proposal was a 'step to far'.

7. REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS:

Victoria Livingstone, Marketing Manager
vilivingstone@aberdeencity.gov.uk, 01224 522921

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

None