Agenda Item	**11.**
Report No	**RES/09/24**

The Highland Council

Committee: **Corporate Resources**

Date: **7 March 2024**

Report Title: **Highland Council Adopting Ecosia Search Engine**

Report By: **Interim Depute Chief Executive**

1.   Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1   A Motion was agreed at the meeting of The Highland Council on 11 January 2024 as follows:

> *Ecosia is an internet search engine that uses its profits to fund tree planting projects worldwide. By adopting Ecosia as the default search engine, Highland Council can actively contribute reforestation efforts, combat deforestation and help mitigate the impacts of climate change.*
>
> *Ecosia is a free search engine, and its implementation as a default option will not incur additional costs for the council. Ecosia provides monthly financial reports, ensuring transparency in their tree planting projects and the allocation of funds.*
>
> *Implementing Ecosia provides the opportunity for Highland Council to engage with the community further on environmental issues by fostering sustainable practices and encouraging residents to use the search engine.*
>
> *Therefore, this Council agrees that a report be brought to Corporate Resources in respect of the ability for Highland Council to adopt Ecosia as the default search engine for all Council operated devices and computer systems.*

1.2   This report provides Members with details about the potential adoption of Ecosia as per the agreed Motion.

2. Recommendations

2.1   Members are asked to:

      i.   **Note** this report; and
      ii.   **Agree** not to adopt Ecosia as the Council's default search engine.

3. Implications

3.1   Resource:
There is no cost to the Council for the use of Ecosia itself. There would be implications for ICT staff to implement a change in the default search engine to Ecosia which is estimated that 0.5 days of a technical officer at HC7 grade. There may be a small impact on the ICT Service Desk due to potential additional calls from users. Experience shows that changes to the standard configuration of Council PCs does generate some calls for advice and guidance. It is hard to quantify the impact but expected to be small.

3.2   Legal:
There are no legal implications arising from this report.

3.3   Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island):
There are no Community implications arising from this report.

3.4   Climate Change / Carbon Clever:
As stated in the Motion, the rationale behind investigating a change to Ecosia is that company profits are directed towards reforestation and the combatting of deforestation. These activities have a positive impact globally on climate change, but no quantification can be put on the level of profits likely to be raised by Highland Council use. More detail on this aspect is provided later in this report.

3.5   Risk:
There are potential risks arising in schools related to protection from access inappropriate content and this is explained in paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3.

3.6   Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people):
There are no health and safety implications arising from this report.

3.7   Gaelic:
There are no implications for Gaelic arising from this report.

4. Ecosia Search Engine

4.1   According to Wikipedia, Ecosia is an Internet search engine based in Berlin, Germany. As a company, Ecosia considers itself to be a social business, claims to be CO2-negative, supports full financial transparency and protects privacy of its users. Ecosia is "B Lab certified" meaning that it is a for-profit corporation certified for its social impact.

B Lab is a non-profit organisation, based in the US, which provides certification for for-profit organisations that meet certain standards of transparency, accountability, sustainability and performance. The "B" stands for "Beneficial".

4.2   An Internet search engine is a software system that searches for and presents a list of web pages to a computer user based on a web search. Google is by far the most widely used (90%+) search engine with Microsoft Bing and Yahoo being the next two most used in the UK, although Yahoo is now actually powered by Bing. Therefore, Google and Bing between them account for the vast majority of all UK Internet searches.

4.3   A *search engine* is different from a *web browser*, which is a software application used to access websites and the Internet. The most commonly used web browsers in the UK are Google Chrome, Microsoft Edge and Safari (on Apple devices) – and previously Microsoft Internet Explorer. Chrome and Edge are both installed on Council PCs. The web browser needs to have access to a search engine in order for users to search for and return web pages. The current default search engine used in the Council is Google, although users can change this themselves to an alternative such as Bing or Ecosia.

4.4   The search engine functionality is accessed by users in various ways.

- Open a specific search web page and type in search criteria in the interface provided – e.g. www.google.com, www.bing.com or www.ecosia.com – in which case the search engine used will be the one that sits behind that web page whatever the default settings are on your PC (i.e. Google, Bing or Ecosia)

- Type the search criteria directly into the address bar at the top of the browser - which will then use the default search engine.

- Install a "browser extension" that adds search functionality to a web browser, which can then be set as the default.

4.5   Although Ecosia is marketed as a search engine, as with Yahoo it actually uses Microsoft Bing to generate all the search results. Ecosia state that profits are generated when a user clicks on an advertisement link within the search results or purchases an item through an affiliate link. Currently 80-100% of profits generated from users clicking advertisement links goes towards tree planting schemes in more than 35 countries. In a list of Ecosia search results, revenue, and therefore profits that will go towards tree planting, is only generated by clicking the results that are adverts. Clicking on other results will not contribute to tree planting. At time of writing, Ecosia state on their website that they have planted 197,650,800 trees and that number is currently increasing at a rate of roughly 1 per second.

4.6   It is standard practice with other search engines, such as Google and Bing, that revenue is generated through users clicking on advertisement links. The advertisement links are usually obvious, will be at the top of the results list and will most likely either have a symbol next to the search results or a label such as the examples below:

Ecosia example

www.rentalcars.com (AD)
Cheap Car Hire Prices | Best Prices - Guaranteed
Lowest Price Guarantee. Book Now! Find it Cheaper & We'll Beat It.

Google example

Sponsored

Europcar
https://www.europcar.co.uk

Europcar Car Rental
Fantastic Value **Car Rental** — No matter where you are or need to go, Europcar has the right
car rental for you.
Europcar Car Rental · Monthly Business Rentals · From £24 a Day · Long Term Hire
Inverness · 2 locations nearby

4.7   There is a question around whether the Council wants to encourage staff to use their work accounts to access advertising links and or purchases items through links (as opposed to purchasing direct through supplier websites) in order to derive a benefit for a third party organisation. It is not the purpose for which staff are provided with IT accounts and the Council's Acceptable Use Policy supports very limited personal use and only provided it is undertaken in the user's own time.

5.   Technical Assessment

5.1   An assessment of the Ecosia search engine has been carried out by ICT Services with the following conclusions relating specifically to devices used by staff and Elected Members:

- There would seem to be no security concerns relating to Ecosia.

- Ecosia do state that they do not create personal profiles of users or use external tracking tools to build profiles.

- There are no technical reasons why Ecosia cannot be set as the default search engine on staff and Member Windows based devices. Users would have the ability to go into their settings and change that to a different search engine, but we would expect most people would not know how to do that or be motivated to do so. Currently there is not an option to set this on iOS and Android managed devices; this a user preference which has to be set by the users themselves.

- There may be an increased number of queries from users which could put extra demands on the ICT Service Desk. This could be mitigated to some extent by clear corporate messaging explaining why a change was happening.

5.2   A different conclusion has been reached in relation to devices used in schools. Web browsing by pupils is filtered and controlled by a combination of the Securly web filtering platform on Chromebooks, our web security gateway for devices in pupil labs, and Google Safe Search. This is enforced on Windows devices and Chromebooks. Safe Search is a component of the Google search engine that is designed to detect explicit content in Google search results and either filter it out completely or blur any images returned. Safe Search is one component of a number of Google tools used with Securly to ensure online safety for pupils. Safe Search is also enforced for teachers as there will be regular occasions when searches are carried out by teachers in front of pupils and the same level of safeguarding is required.

5.3   Ecosia does have a similar safe search function which can be enabled at an individual device level. However, there are some uncertainties about how it operates in conjunction with Securly. There have been instances of pupils using Ecosia as a way to bypass the Google Safe Search leading to Ecosia actually been blocked on the

Securly filtering currently. The Google platform is a fundamental component of the school learning and teaching platform so further work would have to be carried out with Securly to understand whether Ecosia could be integrated into that without either reducing the level of online protection or creating a large administrative overhead around content filtering.

6.   Conclusion

6.1   Ecosia could be adopted as the default search engine on managed Windows devices for non-school staff and Elected Members with relatively low level of effort and risk.

6.2   Use of Ecosia as the default search engine for teaching staff and pupils would need further consideration and may not be possible without reducing the level of online safety.

6.3   Up to 100% of profits from advertising revenue generated from Ecosia web searches does go towards tree planting. However, that revenue is only generated when sponsored or advertisement links are clicked and so not in the course of ordinary work-related activities. There is a question around whether the Council wants to encourage staff to use their work accounts to access advertising links and or purchases items through links and it is also unclear whether sufficient value would be derived from the change and whether this justifies the ICT staff time and wider changes for staff in order to support the switch to Ecosia. This, coupled with the remaining uncertainty around the use of Ecosia in schools means that the recommendation is not to adopt Ecosia as the Council's default search engine.

Designation: Interim Depute Chief Executive

Date: 21 February 2024

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