

Access to Wikipedia could be blocked in Edinburgh's libraries

Access to Wikipedia could be blocked in Edinburgh's libraries after it emerged children were able to view inappropriate content.

An IT error meant filters were not enabled on computers accessed with a child's library card, allowing for pornography and violent videos to be viewed.

The council said the issue had been resolved, but added it was considering whether maintaining access to Wikipedia for library users was "still fit for purpose".

The free online encyclopaedia is among the most visited websites on the internet and is a key research tool for many around the world. However, its more than six million English articles cover a wide range of topics, including those which may contain explicit language and adult themes related to sex and violence.

After being told pupils had managed to view inappropriate material, a concerned parent tested the filters while logged on at a 'children-only' computer in a city library using a child's library card.

It was discovered porn sites were accessible on the PCs as well as execution videos and Wikipedia articles which 'may have included inappropriate images and graphics seen by children' according to a BBC News report.

In response Edinburgh Council reported the breach to CGI, its IT services provider, which took computers in libraries offline for a week while the fault was investigated, before restoring access on October 3.

However upon testing to see if the issue had been resolved the parent found the adult content could still be viewed by easily turning 'safe-search' off in web browser settings. The computers were temporarily disabled again but are now available for use, as the council carries out a review of security measures.

The council's head of digital services Nicola Harvey said: "Residents will still be able to get access to Wikipedia in libraries and that has always been the case, and libraries are considering whether that is still fit for purpose."

Responding to concerns raised by councillors at the policy and sustainability committee on Tuesday, October 22, she said: "I have to say when we have residents using our public property they have to complete as part of accessing the system our acceptable use policy, but that individual did get access to non-filtered images.

"The moment that digital services were aware of that the system was shut down in libraries until it was investigated and then it was resolved within a six-day period and re-established."

Simita Kumar, SNP group leader, said it was vital to "protect all of our pupils".

She said: "The fact somebody was able to access this unfiltered images or whatever it was in a public domain is a huge concern.

"By the time that system was shut down we don't know how that information was spread, we don't know how it was used and to me that is a huge concern."

Council officers dismissed initial reports pornography was accessed by pupils during class time as “not accurate”.

Ms Harvey said: “This issue has got confused with an issue in libraries where it was highlighted that there was an individual who did get access to non-filtered information.”

The Conservatives called for a review of how it was possible “to view pornography on computers used by children” and what measures have been taken to prevent any further such incidences given that this should be a basic requirement of the current contract [with CGI].”

Tory group leader Iain Whyte said: “Despite what was done, a parent went back in and checked and by doing some simple stuff – unclicking safe search – was able to get back into that stuff on a children’s library card.

“My issue . . . is that some of the stuff that was reported as being accessible through library computers shouldn’t be accessible by adults in a public place, let alone by children. So I think we do need to know a bit more about that.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter