

SIC External blog

Conventions and procedures

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Scottish Information
Commissioner

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Introduction

1. Blogs are regularly updated websites or web pages, typically one run by an individual or small group. Classed as social media, they are usually written in an informal or conversational style. Being internet-based, they allow people to create, share or exchange information, ideas and multimedia in virtual communities and networks.
2. A blog is like a newspaper: its content is composed of separate articles (or posts) on a wide range of topics. Readers of blogs form views about the content, the authors, their messages, etc.
3. Blogs do not come with pre-set rules, but there are conventions about how they are used.
4. The SIC blog is one of the media we use to deliver our Communication Strategy. It has the potential to be a powerful, but efficient, way to reach a wide range of stakeholders, and to generate greater interest both in FOI issues and our organisation.
5. The impact of a good blog is measurable. For example, we can identify increased visitor numbers to specific content on our website, and “spin-off” benefits from sharing our content more widely, including via social media. However, we also have to recognise that reader behaviour of blogs tends to be ad hoc. Substantial proportions of readers visit blogs via a link in a tweet (a post made via twitter) or another blog. They may stay to read only the one post and then leave.
6. Achieving the benefits from the SIC blog is dependent on us:
 - (i) offering regular interesting content, in an appealing way.
 - (ii) encouraging new visitors to the blog and converting them to frequent readers.
7. This document provides a framework for these benefits. The first section sets out the SIC conventions (or principles) for the content, style and voice. The second section explains procedures for identifying, drafting and approving content.

Conventions

The following conventions apply to all our blog posts:

Frequency

8. We manage the blog to provide a regular offering of posts covering diverse and new content to appeal to different audiences (see **Editing and planning** below)

Content

9. All content must meet the following five simple criteria:
 - (i) It is always **accurate** and **factually** based, even when we are sharing opinions or third party views.
 - (ii) It is **interesting** to the audience: It's not enough that the subject matter is about FOI; it must have a "hook" (something that will attract the reader). "*A dog bites man*" – *that's a story*; "*a man bites a dog*" – *that's a good story*" (Jesse Lynch Williams). We're not journalists, but we are the enforcement body and our views matter to our audience.
 - (iii) It is **relevant** to the audience: If we can't make the post relevant to our Scottish audience, we shouldn't post it. For example, we wouldn't blog about an Information Rights Tribunal judgment unless it had specific bearing on a Scottish FOI provision, or about changes in volume of appeals in Ireland without a reference to our own fee provisions.
 - (iv) It is **accessible**: This is about the content and voice, rather than the format (see **Tone** and **Style**). We write for our audience: we provide additional explanation, context and links to more in-depth content where appropriate.
 - (v) Content is **topical**: It doesn't have to be in today's papers, but the content has to have some currency. For us, the currency is generally derived from speaking with authority: as the enforcement body, we have a specific angle on the issues we write about.

Tone

10. For a blog, as a form of social media, presentation is as important as the content. Our blog tone is:
 - (i) We're **human**: A blog post has to show some personality (readers are often just as interested in who the author is as they are in the content of the post). Our blog belongs to the organisation and is the Commissioner's voice in the same way that every decision is the Commissioner's decision. The style of our posts should reflect the organisation's personality and values (open, accessible, independent fair and impartial, etc.). There will always be individual personality in the subjects we write about, the writing style and stories we tell, but our tone must professional and in keeping with our principles.
 - (ii) We **share and explain**: We have access to a range of FOI knowledge that others want. If a reader wants in-depth knowledge, we point them to an authoritative source e.g. an exemption briefing for more reading. It's not the purpose of the blog to give chapter and verse, but to alert and signpost to more in-depth content, where available. Our blog audience want us to share, inform and inspire, not be over-bearing or boring.

- (iii) We tell a **narrative**: Our blog posts may be delivered with humour, but we must never be flippant. Posts should always be interesting to read. We explain the facts at the heart of each post with examples and experiences to get readers' empathy. For example, a post about FOI charging might start with "Is FOI the only thing that's not getting more expensive these days?", or we'll include a quote illustrating a particular point.
- (iv) We **engage** with our readers: We can invite feedback, suggest the reader follows a link for more information, or issue a call for action. Engagement has maximum effect when used judiciously and sparingly.

Style

11. The style of individual posts is determined by the content of the blog overall. Blogs are creative media and they evolve. It is essential therefore that authors are familiar with the blog as a whole.
12. Each individual post must be capable of being read and understood on its own and out of context. So it must contain all of the relevant information (or links to additional reading), clearly and unambiguously described.
13. It must also fit the structure and conventions of the blog:
 - (i) **Title**: The title of a blog post is like the headline in a newspaper: in just a few words it tells the reader enough about the post for them to decide whether to read on. We can occasionally use teasers and questions to attract attention, for example, "It's all getting very personal..." (title of a post about a new s38 briefing), but note the point above about not being flippant.
 - (ii) **Construction**: The first two sentences of each blog post appear on the opening page. Only a small proportion of our readers will open every post. So the first two sentences must either contain the main points, or be sufficiently engaging to make the reader want to open the full post.
 - (iii) **Length**: The length of a post is determined entirely by its content. There is nothing wrong with a very short or very long post, as long as the content criteria are met (see **Editing and planning** below)
 - (iv) **ContentLanguage**: Blogs must be accessible as well as appealing and engaging. So our language, even plain language, has to be adjusted to suit the medium. Posts are usually written in first person singular (I've read, I noticed) and plural (we've thought, we publish, we decided). Where we refer to what others have said, we should make it clear who is "speaking". It is acceptable to use acronyms that everyone understands, for example, FOI and NHS, but generally acronyms should be avoided.
 - (v) **Visuals**: Photographs, charts and graphs are a great way to tell a narrative (see **Tone** above) and introduce variety. We must of course own the copyright in, or have permission to use, any images.

Procedures

Editing and planning

14. Our blog is part of the way we present our organisation externally, but is far more informal than other channels of communication. It is particularly important for this channel to be editorially managed.
15. The Policy and Information Team has editorial responsibility and maintains an overview of the resource. Posts are planned through the Communication Plan and the content is kept under continual review. This approach ensures that we maintain an overview of the blog as a whole, our key messages are shared consistently across a range of media and that we post sufficiently frequently to maintain reader interest.
16. We should aim to add at least one blog post each week, but generally no more than three, by different authors and on a range of subjects. We are guided by what we have to say and do not add posts for the sake of it. The table below indicates the general balance in content and scheduling of posts. Scheduling is continually reviewed to accommodate new developments.

Type of post	Description	Author	Frequency
Commissioner's commentary	Current developments, emerging themes, observations, views, speaking engagements, New Year message, etc	RA	Monthly
FOI in the news	Wider developments, links (national and international), recent press coverage	P&I	Fortnightly
New this week	DRU learning points, promotion of other resources	P&I	Weekly
Guest blog	Various	Guest	Monthly
Our performance	Investigation performance, link to Governance on website, round up of SIC developments, new resources	HOE	Quarterly
Specials	e.g., new exemption briefings, decisions that set precedent	All staff	Ad hoc
Roadshows	Our learning from the visit, what participants said	P&I	Ad hoc
Annual report	Synopsis of headlines	P&I	Annual
About us	Contributions by staff – reflections on their job and role, high points, low points	All staff	Bi-monthly

17. Contributions to the blog are very welcome. Any member of the Commissioner's staff can contribute a post and we should encourage colleagues to do so.
18. Proposals for posts or guest "blogspots" should be made to HOPI. Proposals are considered either at monthly P&I meetings (as part of communication planning), or on an ad hoc basis, if the subject is particularly topical.

Drafting

19. While there are no rules, there are conventions for blog posts. These are set out in the principles in the previous section.
20. A content grid is a useful way to plan and construct an individual blog post (or any external writing); see the notes from Writing for the Media training (45636). You may find it helpful to brainstorm the content (on your own, or with a colleague) before deciding the structure of your post.
21. Blog posts should be created in an VC Word document and saved in the Policy and Communications / Publications and Guidance / External Blog interest:
 - (i) Description: [YYYY MM DD] [Title of blog post] (NB the title should be updated if it is changed in the document)
 - (ii) Organisation: OSIC
 - (iii) Subject: external blog
 - (iv) Document Type: blog post

Approval

22. Draft posts are forwarded to SIC and relevant managers for approval at least two working days before publication. Do please make sure that the managers will actually have time to approve the draft post.

Guest posts

23. Guest posts can be commissioned by the Editorial Team five weeks before the publication due date, according to the Communication Plan.
 - (i) The guest is provided with a short briefing, including suggestions for relevant subject matter, length and tone and asked to submit the draft one week before publication.
 - (ii) Guests are asked to provide a photograph for publication with their post
24. Any editing of a guest post is negotiated with the author. But be mindful that it is the guest's words we are posting so we should allow some latitude in the style and content as long as it is clear to readers that it is the guest's post. Draft guest posts should be forwarded to SIC, HOPI and HOE for approval two working days before publication.
25. Guests are given advance notification of the publication date and always thanked for their contribution.

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