What is accountability software?

Internet accountability is defined as taking responsibility for one's own browsing activity. It can be used by adults who consider themselves to be at risk of accessing inappropriate content, or by parents who need to monitor their children's Internet use. In most cases the software generates a report which is then viewed by a third party (known as an "accountability partner").

How does it work?

A piece of software is installed on the device used for browsing, and this runs 'in the background' whilst the user is accessing the Internet. During this time, a range of information on the browsing activity is gathered. This may include:

- terms entered into search engines (such as Google)
- a list of sites accessed, rated by levels of appropriateness
- a complete list of URLs (web addresses) accessed, including YouTube videos and social networking profiles
- the time and date of each activity plus an overview of the time spent online
- a list of apps used (on mobile devices) and the amount of time spent on each one

Most accountability software does not capture the actual conversations on social networking sites or images accessed online, nor does it capture 'keystrokes', such as passwords and financial information entered into a website.

The report is normally sent by email to the accountability partner at their chosen interval (typically once per week).

What are the costs?

Some basic services are available free of charge and may be included as part of a software bundle when buying a new computer, but the majority have monthly fees starting at around £6.00. Most providers charge per user, so there is no additional cost for installing the software on multiple devices.

Where can I find out more?

Information on service providers can be found by accessing their websites. The following list may be useful:

- Covenant Eyes – www.covenanteyes.com – available for PC, Mac, iPhone, Kindle and Android devices. One account can be used across all devices and Internet activity is combined into one report. A filtering service is also available at no extra cost (for family accounts).
- X3Watch – www.x3watch.com – again available for all devices. This is operated by a Christian organisation whose aim is to help those who struggle with pornography. Although initially intended for adults, it has very similar features to Covenant Eyes and produces detailed reports.
- Net Nanny – www.netnanny.com – a popular choice for families and featuring a detailed management console which can filter many levels of content. Functions include social media monitoring, child protection software and profanity masking.