

Plan to use digital surveillance halted amid fears of abuse by council managers

A plan to roll-out driver data capturing technology across all Edinburgh Council vehicles has been halted amid concerns about “rogue managers” abusing it for “digital surveillance”.

The ‘telematics’ devices, which are already installed in the city’s waste and cleansing fleet, allow the council to collect data on different aspects of a vehicle’s operation including fuel consumption, miles travelled, location data and “parameters around driver and vehicle performance”.

In the absence of a policy covering the management and appropriate use of any information gathered, officials tabled one for approval at the policy and sustainability committee on Tuesday.

A report to the committee also sought councillors’ approval of a major expansion of the scheme to include all 1,200 council vehicles by the end of this year.

However, members voted to put plans on hold until March as union members raised concerns about potential abuse of the system.

According to the authority the key objectives of telematics systems include improving the driving behaviour of council drivers, improving claims and complaints defensibility and reducing exposure to high risk driving situations.

It is also used to 'reduce vehicle, fuel and other driving costs to support savings targets and optimise asset use and life cycle' the report stated.

Graeme Smith, convener of Unite's City of Edinburgh Council Branch, said the union's problem "isn't so much around telematics". He added: "What we're wanting is a policy on digital surveillance."

"The actual use of telematics for the stated aims are commendable," he said.

"However that is not what this system will be used for by management in the council – it'll be used for a workforce facing increasing surveillance.

"A policy that looks at digital surveillance in the round whether that's personal surveillance, vehicle surveillance – the whole lot of it – is what is really needed, above and beyond the telematics policy."

Mr Smith added there was concern amongst workers the technology "being used to target individuals for bullying and for looking for issues".

He said there were "numerous examples of rogue managers using this to target certain people" in the waste and cleansing department where the technology already exists.

Speaking at the City Chambers meeting on Tuesday, Gareth Barwell, the council's operational services director, said: "I think there's a concern in some teams maybe around whether the system would be abused by managers – by people like myself.

"That maybe speaks to culture we maybe need to improve and

managing relations we need to improve in those teams.”

The committee also heard that UNISON, the council’s biggest union, had expressed its opposition to the policy for similar reasons to Unite.

Fleet and workshops manager Scott Millar added without telematics insurance premiums “could rise quite significantly”.

“We may get in a position where some insurance providers would not be willing to insure us,” he warned.

Mr Millar added the benefits of the devices came into focus over the festive period when several council vehicles were stolen.

He said: “They were actually fitted with a telematics system and we were able to assist the police with their investigation to actually locate these vehicles.”

The report will return to the committee in March following further consultation with trade unions.

But Mr Smith said Unite CEC have a “complete red line in the sand” that local area managers should not have access to the system or access to any data collected.

by Donald Turvill

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