

Plans to track drivers in council vehicles opposed by union

Trade union bosses concerned that the data captured could be used against workers in disciplinary proceedings.

Already installed in the city's waste and cleansing fleet, 'telematics' automatically monitor fuel consumption, miles travelled, location and other data, and is now set to be rolled out in all 1,200 council vehicles.

Unite, which represents 1,500 local authority workers in Edinburgh, called for "ironclad protection against misuse" ahead of councillors approving a new policy setting out how the system would be used and who would have access.

However the union's red line – to make telematics data impermissible as evidence in disciplinary cases – was not met by the council.

Graeme Smith, convener of Unite's City of Edinburgh Council branch, said as a result the policy "is not a local collective agreement" and could spread fear among the workforce.

Council chiefs played down the concerns however, saying there have been very few instances where driver data has been used to investigate employee misconduct.

According to the council, the key objectives of vehicle telematics include reducing accidents, improving the driving

behaviour of council drivers, reducing exposure to “high risk driving situations”, improving the councils safety record, optimising routes and schedules and reducing fuel consumption.

Mr Smith appeared before councillors in January and persuaded them to delay a decision on the policy, citing fears about “rogue managers” misusing telematics data by targeting individuals and “looking for issues”.

Engagement with trade unions has been ramped up since and several changes were made, such as further limiting which officials will be able to access the data, with monitoring of waste and cleansing vehicles “removed from managers and supervisors”.

Staff still felt these did not go far enough however and Unite did not back the telematics policy, which was eventually approved by the policy and sustainability committee on Tuesday (May 23).

Addressing the committee, the council’s fleet manager Scott Millar said: “There has historically been one or two instances where evidence for telematics has been referenced where there’s been an investigation that’s led to a disciplinary.”

Operational services manager Gareth Barwell said: “I could think of at best a handful of disciplinaries that have resulted from telematics data or have been substantiated with telematics data so I don’t expect that to be a major issue moving forward.”

Greens councillor Alex Staniforth said he was “very happy to support telematics”, however added the new technologies “do represent potential invasions of privacy”.

He said: “We do need to monitor it very carefully to ensure that we are rejecting the bad while accepting the good.”

An amendment tabled by the Greens, and accepted by the administration, called for a report exploring how the council could draw up a “digital surveillance policy” to further protect staff against misuse of their data.

Mr Smith said: “The joint trade unions sought ironclad protection against misuse of telematics, by making telematics data impermissible as evidence in disciplinary cases. This would allow the Council to reap the benefits of the technology, without creating fear among the workforce. As management could not agree to this demand, the policy is not a local collective agreement.

“Through negotiation with the trade unions, the policy approved today is a massive improvement from that originally tabled, as it contains safeguards against misuse.

“The key now is making sure these safeguards are effective – the Greens’ amendment will help with this and we welcome the continuation of the telematics working group.

“Unite reps will be vigilant when it comes to spotting potential misuse of the telematics system and protecting members.”

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

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