

# Concerns over council drivers under the influence

**Edinburgh Council bosses have raised concerns some staff could be driving under the influence while on duty.**

“Strong concerns” around the potential use of alcohol or drugs while driving for the council were highlighted in a shocking new audit report.

These were based on “suspected behaviours” observed by fleet and operational services managers, who are “unable to take concrete actions where the concerned colleagues deny the consumption,” the report states.

This is because councillors rejected plans to introduce both random and ‘with cause’ drug testing on staff, a practice they described as “invasive” as the idea was discussed last year.

Officials said the council should “reconsider the introduction of alcohol and drug testing”.

Council leader Cammy Day said councillors “need to act” if there was evidence to suggest anyone in the workforce was drunk or on drugs whilst carrying out their duties.

Iain Whyte, leader of the council’s Conservatives, the only group to support drug and alcohol testing when last discussed in the City Chambers, said it was “truly shocking” the move had been rejected by other parties.

He said: “Many council vehicles are large HGVs and the

consequences of a collision would be catastrophic. The audit shows that this policy needs to be changed as soon as possible.”

Fears some staff could be impaired behind the wheel have emerged in an audit of the safety of council-operated heavy goods vehicles (HGVs). Councillors requested the report after 11-year-old Thomas Wong died after being hit by a bin lorry, which was not council-operated, in Barnton earlier this year.

Currently managers are told to to “observe and record suspected behaviours, have a discussion with the concerned colleague, and take actions to send colleagues home or involve Police/HR services” when they “reasonably believe” that the staff member is under the alcohol or drug influence.

“Audit discussions with the council’s fleet and operational services have highlighted strong concerns around the potential use of alcohol or drugs while driving for the council,” the report said, “but there are no evidence-based procedures e.g. random or ‘with cause’ drug/alcohol testing to deal with suspected instances.

“Managers expressed reservations to allege colleagues for alcohol/drugs consumption at work, based only on suspected behaviours, and they are unable to take concrete actions where the concerned colleagues deny the consumption.”

It said: “Given the safety risks highlighted in this report, Internal Audit has recommended that management reconsider the introduction of alcohol and drug testing.”

The authority’s latest drugs and alcohol policy was agreed in May last year, as councillors rejected a recommendation from officials to “review the introduction of testing again at the appropriate time”.

Testing for substances at work, which is not supported by trade unions, was described as “invasive and unnecessary” in

an amendment tabled by the Greens and supported by Labour, SNP and the Lib Dems.

They agreed drug and alcohol testing “will not ever be reviewed unless a motion requesting such a review is passed at full council or there is a legal requirement to do so”.

Cllr Whyte told the LDRS: “These audit findings show exactly why we wanted to support senior officers to introduce the ability to test for drugs and alcohol amongst council staff. People who drive on council business should be checked to ensure they are safe, not just for their benefit but critically to protect the public.

“It is truly shocking that the various left wing parties on the council caved in to the trade unions over mandatory alcohol and drug testing when this is a serious safety issue potentially affecting the public.

“Many council vehicles are large HGVs and the consequences of a collision would be catastrophic. The audit shows that this policy needs to be changed as soon as possible.”

Cllr Day added: “If officers are telling us they have a concern about the use of council vehicles because of drugs and alcohol we need to seriously look at that.”

However the council leader questioned if there were “other ways to respond to that rather than having to bring in random drug and alcohol testing”. He said this could include stricter enforcement of existing policies for managing staff absences and managing people at work.

He said: “There should be an option to look at all these things to make sure that our staff are safe and that if they’re driving council vehicles we are confident in ensuring the public are safe as well.

“For me it’s important we work with trade unions to make sure

that whatever new policies or procedures come in that we work with them and our staff to get the best policy and solution going forward.

“If there’s evidence to suggest our workforce are under the influence of alcohol and drugs we need to act.

“Whether it’s to bring in a random test or enforcing our absence policies and managing people at work policies, there should be something done about it. We can’t sit back and do nothing.”

Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter