

Utility Strike Avoidance Group (USAG)

Meeting minutes – Thursday 7th December 2023

Steering Group meeting (MS Teams)

ATTENDEES

Name	Initials	Company
Mike Leppard	ML	ENA
Richard Broome	RB	LSBUD
Laura Knight	LK	LSBUD
Mark McDonnell	MM	UKPN
Greg McGinn	GM	BT Openreach
Stephen Bonnen	SB	SGN
Jane Eccleston	JE	ENWL
Bryan Woods	BW	Amey
Dave McPherson	DM	USP Competency/Kier
John Murphy	JM	SPEN
Andrew Pinkham	AP	United Living
Julia Evans	JE	National Highways
Russell Simkins	RS	Balfour Beatty

APOLOGIES

Name	Initials	Company
Aaron Eaton	AE	UKPN
Steve Welsh	SW	SGN
Lee Greatorex	LG	HSE
Mark Downing	MD	BT Openreach
Matthew Hopkinson	MH	National Grid
Billy McCann	BM	Cadent Gas
Simon Kruyswijk	SK	Virgin/O2
Joseph Docherty	JDo	Amey
David Burgess	DB	Network Rail
Lee Cartwright	LC	Costain
Jim Denholm	JD	SPEN
Brett Stinton	BS	Northumbrian Water
Gareth Mullen	GMu	Thames Water

MEETING NOTES AND ACTIONS

1. Welcome & Introductions

ML welcomed members to the Q4 2023 Utility Strike Avoidance Group (USAG) meeting, which was held as an MS Teams meeting. Several new colleagues and deputies for members were attending and so a round of introductions and companies/roles was undertaken.

Apologies were received as above, and work continues to confirm the current active membership of the Steering Group (SG).

Governance

ML updated the group on proposals for a new Chair to strengthen governance of the SG. Alan Taylor (Head of SHE, ENWL and member of ENA SHE Committee) has offered to chair the group going forward which will provide further support on behalf of ENA member companies to USAG in addition to existing ENA and ENWL representation. Members were asked for any feedback and, if there are no objections, the arrangements will be made for Alan to chair the group in 2024 whilst ENA will continue to provide secretariat support.

ML reported on the recent news that the Gas Distribution Network companies will be leaving ENA membership at the end of 2024 having given a twelve month contractual notice of intent. This is a long term business decision and the companies have stated the need for long term policy assurance for the future of the gas networks. There will obviously be impacts on ENA through changes to the current cross cutting approach to regulation, innovation, and SHE issues, but the work continues as BAU for the time being. There should be minimal impact on USAG issues as the companies are separately members of ENA and also USAG.

Actions

2. Meeting minutes – 5th September 2023

Accuracy

There were no amendments to the minutes which were accepted as an accurate record of the meeting.

Actions

Section 1 – Steering Group (SG) membership

Some replacements for company representatives have been established and have joined the SG, whilst work continues on following up on the continued membership of others. Following Joanne Michael’s (HSE) departure from the group and HSE, contact was made with Bernadine Cooney and subsequently Lee Greatorex (HSE Inspector, Nottingham) who will be joining the SG. ML will contact LG to provide information and briefing.

Section 1 – HSE Operational Guidance

The HSE Operational Guidance Note on welfare standards was circulated to the SG for noting.

Section 2 – BPAUS 09 module

Following queries to the USAG Infoline on the BPAUS Toolkit, a review had been undertaken of BPAUS 09 on excavation techniques for cables encased in concrete. The flow diagram on the excavation decision process refers to alternative methods to the use of hand powered tools such as switching out or other excavation methods, but some asset owners do not use other methods. There is a need to canvass all the DNOs to determine their conformance to BPAUS 08 and 09 principles and establish if any changes are required, but in the meantime the modules remain current USAG guidance.

Section 2 – Pot ended cables

There is an outstanding action on ENA to canvass DNO companies via the ENA Public Safety Committee on options/practices employed to identify such assets. Detailed information on the systems of work and scanning routes/equipment that could be used has previously been supplied and needs to be collated into a briefing for noting.

Section 4 – Communications contacts

LK had issued a request for key communication contacts within businesses that can be used to help promote USAG messages through company social media channels in support of centrally managed USAG work.

Section 4 – CECA workshop

SG members had presented and participated in the latest CECA strike avoidance workshop. An update will be provided at agenda Item 5.

Section 5 – Streetworks UK (SWUK) guidance

The presentation from Marcus Cartmell (Cadent Gas) on Volume 1 had been circulated post meeting followed by a link to the consultation, which had been extended to 30th November to allow for further feedback. This issue is on the agenda at Item 6.

Section 6 – USAG objectives

ML and AP held a call on 20th November following the SG discussion on routes to engaging the wider USAG membership; there is a need to revise the current governance arrangements and establish a programme of work for 2024. Further discussion at agenda Item 4.

Section 7 – Utility plans

Outstanding action for asset owners to be canvassed for comments on any charging arrangements for utility plans which have been reported; in the first instance the ENA Public Safety Committee will be canvassed for feedback.

Section 7 – USP Competency Framework

DM (Kier) has been invited to present on this issue at today's meeting.

Section 7 – SWUK webinar

SWUK webinar updates on the excavated spoil project had been held on 8th September and 26th October. An invitation had been issued for the next one scheduled for 13th December (now postponed to 11th January 2024).

Section 8 – HSE information

Information on construction campaigns (health), the Working Well Together initiative, and CONIAC updates had been circulated by HSE to the SG for information.

Actions	ML to contact and provide information and briefing to Lee Greatorex (HSE)	ML (Next meeting)
	There is a need to canvass all the DNOs to determine their conformance to BPAUS 08 and 09 principles, and options/practices employed to identify pot ended cables	ML (Ongoing)
	ENA Public Safety Committee to be canvassed for feedback on any charging arrangements for utility plans	ML (Next meeting)

3. Underground Service Protection (USP) Competency Framework

DM (Kier) presented the principles and intent of the USP Competency Framework, which has been designed to address training gaps in utility protection arrangements to help ensure competency at every level. A cradle to grave approach has been adopted covering employees at both operational and organisational level. A holistic and outcome focussed training framework is designed to identify both pre-duty dependencies and post duty provision leading to targeted training and support covering training, assessment, and monitoring requirements. This evidence based approach has led to the development of a free universal framework which is being trialled through pilot training schemes with a target to formally launch the framework in 2025.

DM explained that the work started from an analysis of Kier incident reports, which highlighted the improper use of cable avoidance equipment and gaps in policies and procedures, and which needed to be addressed by a collective response to the issues. The framework that has been developed is a roadmap of the roles, responsibilities, and competencies for all those involved in the excavation process. As such it does not include individual training courses but rather a unified framework to provide consistency of training across the various sectors in the absence of a mandated competency standard.

The core messages are designed to address the health, safety, and welfare of employees, contractors, and members of the public. The framework addresses the gaps and requirements for training, knowledge, skills, experience, and supporting factors that could lead to undetected services and poor working practices and unsafe methods which in turn can then lead to a loss on control and potential incidents.

A core team of twenty experts has helped develop the principles, being mindful of the need to address both organisational and operational staff across a variety of company sizes and the range of roles and skills needed for successful management of this work. A key requirement is to establish links between all the various roles and at different levels to ensure a robust, successful, and safe outcome.

The following discussion centred on the Kier pilot trial for training its own operatives; this is an eighteen month process including the introduction of targeted courses to address identified gaps in training and awareness (e.g. incident investigation) and this has already led to a reduction in incident frequency rate. Other companies are already using the USP framework as a guide to shape their needs. Members also enquired as to assessments of competence post training and the possibility of introducing a supporting competency assurance framework.

Going forward, the aim is to launch the USP framework more widely in the public domain in 2024, and to encourage companies to use and provide feedback to enable further development of the system. At a sector level USAG could also consider endorsement of the process following assessment by businesses.

4. USAG Governance

Previous SG discussions had focussed on routes to promoting the USAG role and objectives to the wider membership to encourage greater participation. This would help build on current/previous successes in communications, data reporting, and events/campaigns by developing a revised governance platform that enables wider engagement.

Specifications have been drawn up for the Chair, SG members, and future WG members which can be used as a 'mirror' for all USAG members to aspire to. The last meeting saw agreement on the framework and approach to adopt which sets out a structure of an SG supported by various working groups (WGs) similar to the IOSH governance framework. This was explored by AP and ML offline, and an outline proposals paper was now presented to the group for discussion.

Members remain supportive of the proposal as it will enable further promotion of the good work of the group and effective USAG communications. There was some discussion on the number and topics required for the supporting WGs, which ideally should be led by members of the SG to provide direct reporting lines. It was agreed that Safe Systems of Work and Training & Competency issues were quite different topics and skill sets and should be kept separate, such that new WGs should address the following issues;

- Safe Systems of Work
- Training & competency
- Data & Reporting
- Equipment & Innovation
- Stakeholder Engagement

This approved framework now needs to be used to direct the required practical arrangements for reaching out to the USAG membership and to set up the new governance model. The new Chair needs to be briefed, and WG leads established from within the SG. A dedicated SG call may be needed, and the Terms of Reference revised and agreed. At this point a USAG wide membership webinar can then be held to communicate the proposed framework and request WG members.

In the first instance the framework model will be completed, and discussions held with key colleagues to develop a roadmap for implementation. Post meeting the following timetable was proposed:

- Brief incoming SG Chair – January/February 2024
- Engage with new HSE contact to determine the regulator's expectations – February
- Q1 USAG SG meeting and potential dedicated call – March
- USAG membership webinar – April

Actions	USAG governance framework model will be completed, and discussions held with key colleagues to develop a roadmap of implementation	All (Q1 2024)
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5. Stakeholder engagement

CECA

The CECA Safe Digging event held in Cinderford on 14th November featured contributions from several USAG members and was open to non-members of CECA. 120 delegates attended including students from the AccXel Academy, and the programme included demonstrations of equipment. CECA remains committed to holding further events in 2024.

LSBUD

Plans have begun for the 2024 National Damage Prevention Day. Updates will be provided to members and communication contacts, and information will be available on the LSBUD web site in due course. There will be opportunities for sponsorship of the event.

ENA

The ENA Public Safety Conference has been rearranged for 24th April 2024 at the ICC Birmingham. The aim is to raise awareness of and promote best practice for work in the vicinity of energy network infrastructure, including underground cables and pipelines which will feature in the morning session.

Communications

LK provided an update on communications and web site activity which is being managed by David Gerrard (LSBUD). The new USAG web site continues to evolve with improved visuals and search engine functions. Data analytics continue to show an increase in the number of engagements, Linked In messaging, and web page views, whilst correspondence with USAG members has highlighted new Charter sign ups. Future plans include the use of articles and blogs to keep the web site material fresh and engaging.

Actions

6. Industry updates

Streetworks UK (SWUK) guidance

The consultation on Volume 1: Positioning and colour Coding of Underground Apparatus outlined in the last meeting had been extended to 30th November 2023 but was now closed. USAG members had provided input, and the revised guidance will be circulated when available.

HAUC UK

ENA had been consulted on a HAUC UK bulletin that was drafted on 'Unauthorised Repairs to Buried Equipment' in response to reports of third party damage incidents that had not been formally reported and were in contravention of HSG 47 principles. The current status and publication of this bulletin is unclear and needs to be established.

National Underground Asset Register (NUAR)

A project update had been issued by the Geospatial Commission in November outlining progress with this initiative, and the report had been circulated with the meeting papers for information. The scheme had gone live in April 2023 in London and the Northeast, extended to the Midlands in August, with a roll out in Northern Ireland planned for Spring 2024. The requirement for legislation and the launch of a Discovery Project to widen access to new infrastructure developments are still to be determined. USAG and its members will maintain a watching brief on the initiative and engage as required.

Innovation equipment

Information was circulated with the meeting papers on feedback from an AMC Pro trial undertaken by Severn Trent Water (STW) to assess the detection of PVC pipes. The equipment operates by radio frequency detection and locates objects by analysing differences in material densities, and a survey was undertaken of a number of contractors who are members of the STW Service Avoidance Working Group.

Surveys of gas, water, and sewer pipes were conducted in carriageways, footpaths, private land, and properties. Only 43% of marked up and 33% of uncharted services were correctly located, and a separate STW trial to locate PE mains led to the asset being found in a different location to the scan results. These findings align with other feedback in the utility surveying industry on the effectiveness of this equipment.

Actions	The current status and publication of the HAUC UK bulletin is unclear and needs to be established	ML (Next meeting)
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7. USAG meetings 2024

Dates for the quarterly Steering Group meetings were confirmed as follows to provide early notification to members:

- **Thursday 14th March 2024**
- **Thursday 20th June**
- **Thursday 19th September**
- **Thursday 12th December**

All meetings to be held at the ENA offices in London unless otherwise notified, and a hybrid attendance option (MS Teams) will be made available.

Actions		
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