

Utility Strike Avoidance Group (USAG)

Meeting minutes – Thursday 14th March 2024

Steering Group meeting (Hybrid meeting)

ATTENDEES

Name	Initials	Company
Bryan Woods	BW	Amey
Jim Denholm	JD	SPEN
Richard Wilson	RW	National Highways
Alison Green	AG	Essex & Sussex Water
Andrew Pinkham	AP	United Living
Jane Eccleston	JE	ENWL
Lee Greatorex	LG	HSE
Stephen Bonnen	SB	SGN
Richard Broome	RB	LSBUD
Dan Fitzgerald	DF	Virgin/O ₂
Jamie Reeve	JR	ENA
Mike Leppard	ML	ENA

APOLOGIES

Name	Initials	Company
Alan Taylor	AT	ENWL
Julia Evans	JE	National Highways
Russell Simkins	RS	Balfour Beatty
Mark Downing	MD	BT Openreach
Matthew Hopkinson	MH	National Grid
Billy McCann	BM	Cadent Gas
Aaron Eaton	AE	UKPN
Steve Welsh	SW	SGN
David Burgess	DB	Network Rail
Lee Cartwright	LC	Costain
Laura Knight	LK	LSBUD
Brett Stinton	BS	Northumbrian Water
Gareth Mullen	GM	Thames Water

MEETING NOTES AND ACTIONS

1. Welcome & Introductions

ML welcomed members to the Q1 2024 Utility Strike Avoidance Group (USAG) meeting, which was held as a hybrid meeting. Given new colleagues were in attendance a round table of introductions and roles was undertaken, including LG (HSE) RW (National Highways), and AG (Essex & Sussex Water) who were all attending for the first time.

Apologies were noted as above. A lower level of attendance was noted and those that have not attended for some time will be removed from the Steering Group circulation, particularly if they are unable to engage in the revised governance arrangements which will be outlined in the meeting.

Governance

It was confirmed that Alan Taylor (Head of SHE, ENWL) will take over as USAG Steering Group Chair, and he has already been briefed on past and current work. A meeting had also been held with LG (HSE) who has replaced Jo-Anne Michael on the group, and he provided a further introduction to his background and role and interest in the group.

ML provided an update on ENA membership issues, and an Operational Task Force was overseeing the arrangements for the GDNs to leave ENA membership by the end of 2024. There should be limited impact on USAG as this is an independent, cross industry forum and all companies are members in their own right and not in lieu of ENA or other group membership.

Actions

2. Meeting minutes – 7th December 2023

Accuracy

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

Actions

Section 2 – HSE contact

As above there was an action to liaise with and provide briefing to LG (HSE) on the work of USAG. An initial call was held in March and LG has now joined the Steering Group.

Section 2 – BPAUS 08 & 09 modules

Action on ENA to canvass DNOs via the Public Safety Committee on conformance to the principles and practices related to excavating around concrete encased cables. JD had earlier provided a response on behalf of SPEN, and information is awaited from other companies. Action ongoing.

Section 2 – Utility plan charging

Following an earlier notification from RB (LSBUD) of a report of charging for utility plans, the DNOs are similarly being canvassed for a response on their charging policy arrangements to determine whether this was an isolated case or representative of wider practice. Asset owners in the meeting reported that some commercial charging is undertaken but this is for third parties (architects, designers, project managers) who are undertaking and charging for a service to others and not directly to companies breaking ground.

Section 3 – USP Competency Framework

Members commented on the status of the work presented at the last meeting. There is general support for this initiative and good liaison with Amey, but it was noted that the focus is mainly on training rather than proof of competence and that the framework could also benefit from inclusion of assurance aspects.

Section 4 – USAG governance

Discussions have been held in previous meetings on a proposed way forward to revise the governance of the SG and seek engagement with the wider USAG membership, and this had been summarised within a proposed framework. An updated version of this document was circulated with the meeting papers which has received support by all, and further planning and discussion will be held at agenda Item 3.

Section 6 – HAUC UK bulletin

A draft bulletin on unauthorised repairs to buried equipment had previously been circulated and input provided by USAG to the content. This highlights the serious potential risks from such activity and its contravention of HSG 47 principles. The final safety bulletin has been issued by HAUC on social media and they were now updating their Safety Code of Practice. Members noted that any unreported damage highlights poor operational safety culture and also the difficulty in collating evidence of such activity. The bulletin will be circulated with the minutes and can be promoted via the USAG web site.

Actions	The HAUC UK bulletin on the dangers of unauthorised repairs will be circulated and can be promoted via the USAG web site	ML/Comms (April 2024)
----------------	--	--------------------------

3. USAG governance

A recap was provided on proposals to help progress the work of USAG through engagement of the wider membership and expand the scope of work, all of which needs to be achieved on a voluntary basis. The agreed process is to develop revised governance arrangements based on a Steering Group and supporting Working Groups framework model, and this is set out in the revised document that had been circulated with the meeting papers.

The Steering Group, new Chair, and HSE have all been consulted, and the next stage is for the SG to nominate chairs for the WGs for which five specific topics have been agreed. These groups can work offline and then feedback outputs and recommendations to the SG.

The mechanics of reaching out to the membership will be via a webinar that sets out the current status of USAG, recent work of the group, the revised web site and communications, and then an outline of the new governance framework. This will be accompanied by an invitation to join the WGs, so the arrangements need to be finalised and in place first and a date for the webinar then determined. ENA are currently investigating the IT options for setting up and hosting the online event.

The following discussion highlighted the need for SG and WG members to set out and agree what they can contribute to the process as part of future participation. Members will need to volunteer as chairs, and it will be useful to appoint deputy chairs to provide support and continuity. This process will help determine those SG members that can remain involved in the group and work based on their availability and commitment, and it was agreed that the SG will need to be rationalised to a core, key group of individuals.

A dedicated SG call will be held on Monday 15th April to further discuss and agree plans to progress this initiative. This will lead to a finalised framework, WG chairs from members of the SG, a draft agenda for the webinar, and the mechanics for setting this up and promoting to and inviting USAG members.

Actions	A dedicated SG call will be held on 15 th April to further discuss and agree plans to progress wider engagement with the USAG membership	All (15/04/24)
----------------	---	----------------

4. Vacuum excavators		
<p>A SHE Bulletin had been circulated by BW (Amey) related to an incident involving a vacuum excavator (excavated spoil falling from a skip). The issue here is that use of the equipment and the risk assessment process had been focussed on the core function of the excavator, and that other risks and processes had not been adequately considered and assessed. Furthermore, colleagues were insufficiently aware of industry guidance on correct equipment application and use.</p> <p>Other members reported similar incidents; AP referred to events in the water sector that had led to injuries, whilst RW noted that public access to such equipment is also a potential risk. Wider aspects of use, including adequate location lighting, exclusion zones, and proximity alert sensors are important factors here.</p> <p>There is good industry guidance from the Constriction Plant Association, which is free to download, and both this and the SHE Bulletin need wider promotion which can be supported by USAG.</p>		
Actions	Industry guidance from the Constriction Plant Association and the SHE Bulletin on vacuum excavators to be promoted	ML/Comms (April 2024)

5. Guidance material		
<p><u>Proximity Wheel</u></p> <p>This a longstanding tool used as a guide to assist with excavation work planning by operatives. It is CECA branded but also promoted via the USAG web site including instructions on how to download, print and use, and it continues to be popular and is requested by businesses. This has led CECA to consider a review of the content and format and, if it continues to be promoted and used, then there are opportunities to improve the wheel. This has led to initial engagement from Peter Crosland (CECA) with USAG and LSBUD.</p> <p>Comments provided to CECA to date have focussed on the RAG status categories for work near various utilities, clarification of safe vertical and horizontal distances, revised wording, and a rationalisation of logos and branding. Members were asked for any other input at this stage; it was noted that being a simple, high level tool then only so many details can be included, but it was agreed that in addition to the above further clarification on oil and gas pipeline safety risk messaging is needed. The SG were content for the project to progress, and ML/RB will continue to liaise with Peter Crosland (CECA).</p>		
Actions	USAG to continue to liaise with Peter Crosland (CECA) on the revision to the Proximity Wheel	ML/RB (Ongoing)

6. Stakeholder engagement

Company initiatives

A number of industry events in 2024 will be supported or attended by USAG members. This includes the Royal Highland Show in June at which SPEN will be exhibiting, including use of a safety video and demonstration on overhead line safety.

The Safety & Health in Fibre Telecoms Group (SHIFT) is a collective of fibre asset owners committed to improving health and safety standards in the sector, and they are holding a conference in Coventry on 3rd April.

ENA Public Safety Workshop

ENA is holding its rearranged Public Safety Conference at the ICC in Birmingham on 24th April. This is aimed at engaging with a variety of stakeholders on the avoidance of contact with DNO and GDN assets, both overhead lines and underground cables and pipes. This builds on recent engagement with supply chain delivery companies, and trade bodies such as the Builders Merchants Foundation. This a free to attend event and will include speakers from HSE, LSBUD, National Gas, NUAR, NFU etc. The final agenda will be circulated to the group for reference, and it was also suggested that summaries of the excavation safety speakers would be useful for wider promotion.

Damage Prevention Day

This annual LSBUD hosted event will again be held at the Hilton Hotel, St Georges Park near Burton on Trent on 26th June. Promotional information and a draft agenda will be available shortly and members will be able to register to attend via the LSBUD web site.

Communications

RB introduced the latest USAG Marketing Report for March with details of current communications and web site and social media activity which continues to grow; this will be circulated with the meeting papers for noting.

ENA had circulated a couple of SHE Bulletins that had recently been issued by SPEN and BU-UK. These cover excavation good practice and the application of risk assessment and method statements, and an LV cable incident. These bulletins are shared between ENA members, and it will be checked whether they can be further promoted and published more widely by USAG.

Action	Final agenda of the ENA Public Safety Conference will be circulated to the group for reference and promotion	ML (April 2024)
Action	USAG Marketing Report for March to be circulated for noting	RB (April 2024)
Action	ENA to check whether SHE Bulletins can be further promoted and published more widely by USAG	ML (Next meeting)

7. Industry updates

Streetworks UK

ML provided an update on the excavated spoil project being managed by Streetworks UK (SWUK). The final stage of the work involves a Phase 3 sampling programme of 2000 samples across the utility sector which are being taken over six months. These will help determine whether the draft industry desk and site based risk assessment process can be adopted in place of the WM3 waste classification methodology. The results will be presented to the Environment Agency in the summer and, if approved, the new arrangements will be phased in during 2024/25.

In the meantime, the existing RPS 211 exemption for non-hazardous waste is due to be reissued as RPS 298 and 299 for waste producers and waste site management owners respectively until the project is completed. The next SWUK webinar will be held on 4th April to provide members with a progress update and the presentation slides will be circulated to the group when issued.

NUAR

The Geospatial Commission are holding a series of webinars to provide updates on the roll out of NUAR which now covers most of the UK geographic area. Further information and detail are needed on the legislative requirements to underpin this initiative, whilst other Discovery webinars are planned to propose and discuss potential wider uses of the asset data that is being collated.

Supplier engagement

The SG had previously agreed that future requests for supplier presentations should be channelled via the USAG Infoline email account. Occasional requests are still being received but these will be put on hold until the new WGs are set up, which will be more suitable for specific presentations from suppliers on their equipment and services.

Actions

8. Forward look

Aside from the 2024 governance plans for USAG, the current status and use of the Business Plan was considered which is available on the USAG web site. This was updated in 2023 but it was agreed could be developed further into a set of SG Terms of Reference and outputs as part of the revision of arrangements.

Actions

9. USAG meetings 2024

Dates for the quarterly Steering Group meetings have already been set for the year as follows:

- **Thursday 20th June**
- **Thursday 19th September**
- **Thursday 12th December**

All meetings to be held at the ENA offices in London unless otherwise notified, and calendar invites will be issued.

Actions