

Risk Insight Service Avoidance.

Incidents involving contact with underground and overhead services such as gas, water, electricity, and telecommunications lines cause disruption, damage, injury and in the worst case, death. Since 2021 HSE Statistics state that 34 people have been fatally injured from contact with electricity whilst at work.

The monetary cost of such incidents together with reputational damage, injuries to employees and loss of life can all have a significant and sometimes devastating impact on a business. Prosecutions by the HSE are common and employers run the risk of a Corporate Manslaughter charge if they do not pay proper attention to risk management in this area.

Through detailed planning, risk assessments and the implementation of suitable control measures, organisations can reduce their own and their employees' exposure to potential hazards.

What is Service Avoidance?

Any ground disturbance, from digging and excavating to planting and landscaping, to putting in pins or stakes or working under or in the vicinity of overhead cables, carries the risk of damage to utility services. Although this toolkit is directed towards the construction industry any company can damage utility services.

Each type of service has a different type of impact. Electricity can cause injury to workers and disruption to homes and businesses. Although water is less likely to cause injury to a worker, the risk of flooding premises can lead to high value claims, especially foul water. Damaging drinking water can lead to loss of supply and significantly impact a community. An uncontrolled gas release increases the risk of fire or explosion, which may require evacuation of properties in the immediate area and communications cables are known for their expensive repair costs.

What are the costs?

The immediate financial impact of a utility strike primarily involves the repair of the damaged infrastructure. The cost of repair is highly variable and dependent upon the type of utility affected.

Due to the individual characteristics and regulatory requirements associated with each utility type, precise cost is sometimes hard to quantify however, it is consistently observed that the total cost of rectification often significantly exceeds initial expectations. Linesearch Before U Dig (LSBUD) estimate that the true cost of an asset strike is on average times 29 time higher than the direct repair costs. This is attributable to a combination of factors, including:

- Mandatory repair and reinstatement work.
- Post-repair testing and commissioning.
- Compliance inspections mandated by regulatory bodies.
- Use of specialised materials and components.
- Additional excavation and reinstatement activities.
- Engagement of certified personnel and specialist contractors.
- Involvement of third-party inspection and verification services.
- Compensation to affected parties, such as business.

These elements collectively contribute to elevated direct and indirect costs, underscoring the importance of proactive utility detection and avoidance strategies during planning and execution phases.

General best practice standards

A good service avoidance procedure needs a number of elements, including:

- A meaningful strategy of objectives and performance measurement.
- A competence system to ensure the right people with the right skills are in place to carry out the work, in addition to supporting the work teams.
- Links to sources on information on the locations of both underground and overhead services, both private and owned by statutory providers.
- Policies on local detection and avoidance of utility services at the site level.
- Emergency plans in the event of damage to ensure that losses are minimised and people kept safe.
- A robust audit and monitoring system to ensure the processes are followed

The QBE Toolkit

The toolkit has been designed to assist organisations in developing their processes and procedures for managing the risk of incidents involving both underground and overhead services.

The toolkit contains several sections based on different elements of an overall service avoidance strategy as described above and is not intended to be an overall system. Clients can consider the whole toolkit or sections specific to their improvement programmes. The toolkit contains guidance in addition to template documents and forms that organisations can use and develop to support their management systems.



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