



Guidance Note 2016.06.01: Use of equipment to locate underground cables and services

The days of just turning up to dig a couple of holes in the ground for some sign posts to go in are well and truly gone and it does you no credit to be turned away from a site for failure to show the correct competencies.

To do it by the book, the sign installer would be bound by Construction, Design & Management Regulations (CDM) and would be required to either submit a Risk Assessment & Method Statement to the Main Contractor detailing the works or if acting as a sole contractor, by drawing up a construction phase plan. When following CDM regs, it is a foregone conclusion that such precautions are necessary.

Generally nowadays, the rule is if you take any equipment onto site, the Contractor or Site Manager will be expecting you to provide proof of competence to be able to use that equipment. If you want to avoid or trace underground service pipes or cables, a Cable & Pipe locator (CAT3) equipment will do this quickly, accurately and safely.

Clearly, not every site manager goes to the full CDM requirements and requests specific qualification so many contractors have been using this equipment for years without qualifications. On a lesser scale, smaller footing excavations need not comply with the full range of CDM regs and it has to be accepted that not all engineers will carry a CAT3 scanner. If a hole is being dug by hand and with care, providing the site owner or manager has certified to you where any underground services are, then it should be adequate. However, nowadays, the use of 'should be adequate' is no longer a suitable defence when things go wrong.

In order to present your business as professional, competent and qualified, it would be a far better investment to achieve the accreditation to use the equipment instead of taking the risk and putting your livelihood in jeopardy.

The consequences of the equipment not being used correctly could be severe. If an incident was to occur that resulted damage to cables or services, the questions that would be asked are:

- Did the installers ask for underground services locations?
- Were the installers using the correct equipment and methods?
- Was the operator of the equipment used qualified to do so?

Certified training would demonstrate this competency.

We therefore recommend:

- That if your business is involved in the installation of exterior signs on sites that require the breaking of ground in order to install the sign, whoever is tasked to do this work is trained to use the necessary equipment and can demonstrate that they are qualified to do so.
- If you are using third party installers, that you obtain from them written confirmation that their operatives have the necessary training and competencies.
- Do not break ground unless you are absolutely sure as to the location of underground services in the vicinity. If not sure, ask!

- Anything requiring excavating deeper than 1.5 metres will require full site drawings from the client which must include services buried underground in the area that the installation is to take place.
- Any installation requiring more than just a steel/aluminium pole of up to 70mm wide e.g. requiring concrete footings, cages etc. should have a set of drawings locating underground services ideally supplied by the client or Main Contractor.
- To offset the risk, at contract set up stage, it would be prudent to put the responsibility back on the client/main contractor to ensure they provide service scan information to allow works to commence. It is in everybody's interest that this information is available.
- Consider contracting groundwork companies for their qualified personnel to scan with the client on the day to avoid issues.
- If having to dig more than 1.5m deep, we would not expect engineers to excavate beyond this depth as there is a high risk of the wall sides collapsing. To prevent this, the walls will need shoring up and these works should be carried out by a specialist civils contractor whose responsibility it will be regarding locating underground services.
- Training courses to use such equipment along with accreditation for those that pass the course, are available generally if not from the manufacturer then the hire companies (HSS Tool Hire offer such training).

Do not be caught out through lack of qualifications or not fully understanding the implications of ignoring your responsibilities, the gamble is not worth it.

This documents replaces Guidance Note 2015.03.01