

Achieving the right highway environment

Mick Barrett (safety, health, environment and quality (SHEQ) director) and Neil Hargest (operations manager) from JSM discuss the challenges facing utility service providers working in highway environments

Utility service providers face a variety of challenges while working in highway environments. These environments can be extremely dangerous to staff and potentially the public at large. Ultimately, no amount of signs and barriers can protect an operative from a collision with an oncoming vehicle. Therefore, it is imperative before sending anyone to work in highway environments, that they are adequately trained and appropriately briefed to ensure they are capable to deal with the challenges that are likely to arise.

Utility service providers can have projects on 'A' roads and motorways where speeds can reach 70mph and working near fast moving vehicles naturally presents an increased number of health and safety factors, which if not recognised and monitored carefully can lead to serious accidents.

A major challenge rises when teams are initially setting up their work sites for a project. As there is no substantial protection from oncoming traffic this is when operatives are at their most vulnerable. In most cases to set up a site, a workman will carefully step out into the road dressed in their full personal protection equipment (PPE) kit to erect signs and barriers as they are being guided by other operatives situated at both ends of the intended site. Even though JSM have not had any incidents while constructing a

site, accidents do happen. Lack of observation from drivers can also cause accidents. Currently, there is no set industry standard on how to safely erect worksites on highways, but JSM is continually researching innovative ways in which we can make this process safer for the public and workers alike.

Beating the weather

In addition to the speed of traffic, the weather can also be a challenge to overcome. Extremely windy weather alongside the tailwind of fast moving cars can create a force that displaces traffic signs and cones and moves them into the path of oncoming traffic. This could pose a risk to both the team member who has to retrieve the apparatus and also to the driver and car occupants. A method many companies have adopted to prevent this from occurring is holding their apparatus with sandbags.

Working in highway environments in city and urban areas can provide a variety of challenges too. In recent years the installation of purpose built cycle lanes (e.g. London's Cycle Superhighway) has seen a restriction on the speed in which we can deliver necessary materials to our sites. The removal of traffic lanes has resulted in a temporary increase in congestion in certain areas which inevitably slows the process of a contractor's delivery services. Utility service providers constantly have to plan their worksites keeping in mind road restriction times for larger vehicles

and social and cultural community events that could be planned, such as demonstrations, bike rides, marathons, commemorations and parades. Operating around these events can be tricky if they have not been made aware beforehand. They could have the ability to affect the completion time of a project thus possibly incurring additional fees for the contractors.

The occupancy challenge

Another major challenge in highway environments is the occupancy of other utility services infrastructure residing in footways and carriageways. This is a frequent obstacle in city and urban areas. To overcome this issue it is recommended to hand excavate the area that requires digging. This process is longer and at times needs an extended permit from the local authority but minimises the chances of 'striking' other services.

In the telecommunications sector, local authority permits are granted with the assumptions that an average amount of meterage can be installed in any particular day as contractors are paid per metre of installation, however, in reality this might not always be feasible because some excavations need to be carried out with extra care. Contractors might be faced with a hurdle under the surface which is discovered once the digging has commenced. For example, it is common when working in London to come into contact with the London Underground as they can have very shallow buried infrastructure.

This could have a knock-on effect with the public perception of utility constructors. Sometimes it's felt that workers only work when they feel like it and are happy to leave sites unattended. When in truth they could be off site preparing for their next move as delivering a full project takes a significant amount of planning.

Even though there are numerous challenges facing utilities service providers on a daily basis, JSM is continually researching for and deploying new guidelines to overcoming them putting health and safety first. 🛑



Mick Barrett



Neil Hargest

