

Underground Cable Near-miss

Version 1.0

Context

FAME H&S Notices are real-world examples of incidents, provided anonymously by FAME members, that highlight learning opportunities for the sector to improve our health and safety working. However, they are not designed to replace existing guidance and this information is provided without any representations or warranties, express or implied. Please seek appropriate Health and Safety Advice.

The Incident

A FAME member was undertaking trial trenching in a ploughed field. Service drawings obtained from the client were used to inform a trench plan. There was no indication of any services within the field. A CAT scan of the trench undertaken by a trained operative prior to excavation yielded negative results.



It was only due to the alertness of staff who spotted an anomalous deposit of sand and stopped machining. A spade-dug test pit revealed a dark layer under the sand and careful machine excavation resumed, exposing a grey plastic cable duct.

There was no warning tape and the cut for the duct was almost invisible. The duct ran towards what looked to be a recently installed telecom mast. The discovered service was reported to the client who was unaware of its presence or of the mast. The position and the orientation of the service was recorded, and the trench backfilled.



Key Take Aways

- Uncharted services may still be encountered, even in remote and unlikely places.
- Warning tape may not be present and that clients may not be aware of recently installed services.
- Always ensure a visual search of the site is conducted for utilities markers, disturbed ground or other evidence of services being present.
- A CAT scan of the trench prior to machine excavation and at regular intervals should always be carried out by trained and competent staff—never rely on plans alone. The service was not live, but had it been, it should have been detected in this way.
- No injuries were sustained, however, utility strikes can and do cause death and massive structural damage. Unlimited fines can be levied, as well as criminal prosecutions and prison sentences handed down for those found to be in breach of H&S Legislation.

IMPORTANT: for FAME members working in the UK - HSE now recovers the costs of time spent dealing with material breaches of health and safety law. This is known as Fee for Intervention (FFI). FFI generally applies when an Inspector finds something wrong that they believe is serious enough for them to write to you about. A fee is charged for the time spent by the Inspector in sorting it out, currently £160 per hour of their time.

Resources

From the HSE (UK):

[HSG47: Avoiding danger from underground services.](#)

From HSA (Republic of Ireland):

[Code of Practice for Avoiding Danger from Underground Services](#)