

Good Morning. I am Alex Akitici, Streetworks Manager at Skewb and I have worked in utilities for the last 22 years.

Today, I am going to provide you with insights into my lived experience, talk about what innovation means to me and raise awareness of how we can make street works inclusive, accessible, skilled and safe for all.

Losing consciousness is a terrifying thought for any of us. But for me, it happens frequently. The first time it happened, more than 10 years ago, I thought I was dying.

I wake up on supermarket floors, outside my house, in the middle of a road, nearly everywhere I go. I can collapse at any time, and almost always without warning. I could even collapse during this speech... but hopefully I won't.

In 2015 I was diagnosed with Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, which I now know is a condition which affects more than 13,000 people in the UK and affects everyone differently.

I am in constant pain and covered in injuries because of the frequency of my collapses. I have hurt my hips, shoulders, toes and elbow, and cut myself countless times as I've fallen to the ground.

I now have a dog, Bluebell, who stays with me while I come around from a collapse. And a couple of years ago, I came to the difficult decision of spending most of my day in a wheelchair, to prevent further injury and standing causes collapse.

Life in a wheelchair means I see first-hand how far we still have to go to create an inclusive society for all.

I've been accused of "faking an illness", I've been stared at, and I've had to take on the mental load of people's judgement, as well as the anxiety and depression that living with a health condition can cause.

### **INNOVATION AND WHAT IT MEANS TO ME – FOOTAGE OF ALEX NAVIGATING A STREET WORKS SITE**

The theme of today's conference is "Innovation" and I'm sure we will hear from a lot of people today looking to the future of the utilities industry.

But for me, innovation means finding ways to affect change, today.

There are currently more than 16.1 million people living with a disability in the UK. This represents nearly a quarter of the population and that number is likely higher.

Leaving the house for many, can cause anxiety. The UK's infrastructure is still not accessible for all – many tube stops do not have disabled options and a lot of buildings don't have a ramped entrance way – meaning more than a quarter of the population are being refused access, just for having a health condition.

Accessibility issues exist across many platforms but the one area where we can, in this room, affect change is street works.

I have visited sites that are compliant to the Red Book but they are not accessible. Ramps are not securely fastened, there is debris in the road which I have collapsed on, cutting myself, and

a lot of the time I am forced to take the road because footways are not accessible due to existing infrastructure.

It should not be accepted that someone has to risk their life, using a live road, just to get where they need to go.

Disability can affect anyone, at any time. I spent 8 years trying to come to terms with my condition, I didn't want this to define me, but I've realised rather than trying to find acceptance from society, I can use what this is teaching me to share with others so we can shape street works, and society, for the better.

I volunteered to lead the Community Pillar for HV30 where we are looking at how we can affect positive change in street works. With the help of Gary Hawkins from Cadent and Mark Mixture from Thurrock Council, we have also set up Magic Fall, an initiative which looks at improving accessibility in street works operations.

Since joining Skewb, I have found a company which truly means it when it says it wants to make a difference. With their support, we have created an awareness training video, which we are launching today and looks at Red Book guidelines through an inclusion and diversity lens.

My dream is for our video to be used in street works across the country and to become mandatory for every street works employee.

Skewb will be showing it at our stall today, along with a QR code to the link for you to use in your own training courses and presentations.

As part of the Hauc Vision 2030 Community Pillar we decided to focus on 3 areas within street works. They are Road Worker Abuse, Building a skilled and diverse workforce, and Accessibility and Inclusion.

### **Road Worker Abuse**

No one should go to work and feel unsafe, and yet 16% of road workers suffer abuse daily. That number is thought to be even higher as a lot of incidents go unreported.

As part of the HV30 pillar we believe that steps need to be put in place to protect road workers. We need to create a culture where road worker abuse is not tolerated. Everyone in street works should feel safe, respected and able to stop works where conditions are unsafe.

The HAUC App has a section where road workers can report any form of abuse and the Community Pillar have also written to the Home Office and instigated a petition to request that this is added to the Crime and Policing Bill that was created for Shop Workers.

The perception around street works being unmanned and causing unnecessary disruption needs to change. The public need to be aware of the importance of the works and the safety requirements for completing them, which can sometimes cause delays. There also needs to be clearer messaging around why sometimes works can appear unmanned when there is a valid requirement.

Through the Community Pillar, we believe more community engagement needs to be introduced to bridge the gap between the public's perception of street works, and the reality for staff.

### **Building a Skilled and Diverse workforce**

The street works industry also currently faces recruitment challenges with new entrants not being equipped with the tools they need to succeed. The vision is to make street works an attractive career with structure for progression, a minimum accreditation for all operatives and apprenticeship options into the industry for all aspects.

We need to build a diverse workforce that is able to cover the constantly increasing demands for street works.

As part of the HV30 vision we will continue to strive to ensure that we can recruit a skilled and diverse workforce, providing robust training to achieve optimal success.

This is just some of the work HAUC is doing to make sure that street works is inclusive, accessible, skilled and safe for all, you can also access the HAUC App for further guidance on how we can accommodate vulnerable road users.

If you would like to see Skewb's training video, make sure to head to our stand today, where I will also be sharing more on the work we are doing as part of HV30 and how you can help,

Every one in this room has the power to affect change in street works and I encourage you to take the first step today by thinking about what YOU can do differently.

I would also like to thank my colleagues within the Community pillar in creating the vision, this was great team work.

Thank you for your time.