



Every two months, SGS Baseefa Technical Manager Ron Sinclair MBE gives his perspective on the latest developments in the world of standards.

Coronavirus, IECEx and Standards

I am writing this shortly after the start of April, probably three or four weeks before you will read it. In terms of the health crisis, things are moving at such a rate that what I write now may or may not be relevant in four weeks' time. We shall see.

In common with many people, I am working from home. I am lucky that we are well set up for communications: VPN, Skype, Teams, etc., but also, like most people I suppose, I miss the casual conversations in the office which so often help to quickly resolve technical issues that might not seem important enough for a more formal remote conversation.

In terms of international meetings, the first reaction came from IECEx in late January. We had been scheduled to hold a week of meetings in Shanghai during May. In conjunction with our Chinese hosts, the decision was taken to move the meetings to Dubai. This seemed a safe arrangement to make at that time, but things have moved on. The possibility of meeting in Dubai no longer exists and there is little possibility of finding a further acceptable location.

Therefore, a reduced number of meetings will be held electronically during the same period, with the IECEx Secretariat organising this from their homes in Sydney, Australia. I have full confidence that the Secretariat will have organised it well and that the meeting of the IECEx Service Facility Certification Committee

will run smoothly for up to three hours. I will also participate in five other meetings where I am not chairman.

Timing of such meetings with an international participation is not easy. We have settled on a late afternoon and an evening session of three hours each, based on UK time. This means that very few participants will be working through the night, although the Secretariat in Australia will have a very early start to their day.

IECEx still hopes to be able to hold its annual management meetings in Niagara in late September. If this can't happen, I assume we will go for postponement, as five days of electronic meetings of well over 100 people, most with voting rights, would be very difficult to manage.

During early February, IECEx quickly developed an Operational Document to cover the sort of international disruption caused by Coronavirus. Routine QA visits have to be postponed, routine ExCB assessments by the IECEx assessors also have to be postponed. However, IECEx has to maintain sufficient activity by using remote video, etc. in order to ensure that confidence in the IECEx system is not eroded. The document has been issued as a draft for guidance at the moment and should be formalised by the executive at its electronic meeting in May, ready for formal approval by the Management Committee in September.

The European Notified Bodies Group for ATEX (ExNBG) followed this up immediately by issuing a similar document in relation to the ongoing surveillance activities that support conformity with the directive. Since many bodies are active in both schemes, using identical processes, it is important that the same criteria apply.

In contrast to IECEx, our main standards committee, IEC TC31, has taken the decision

to cancel the two weeks of meetings that should have been taking place at the UL facility just outside Chicago at the end of April. It was decided that, in the majority of cases, the benefit of meeting face to face could not be adequately replaced by electronic meetings. Some work will continue electronically on an ad-hoc basis, based on the view of the convenors of the various working groups and maintenance teams, but most work is postponed.

IEC TC31 and its subcommittees should have been meeting for plenary sessions at Frankfurt in late October, early November, along with more meetings of the working groups. Because the April meetings were cancelled, the decision is that the October/November slot will be replaced by rescheduling the April meetings and holding them at UL, as originally planned. This should enable participants who held flight reservations and hotel bookings for April to transfer them to the later meetings.

There will therefore be no plenary meetings this year and any essential formal votes will be conducted by correspondence.

It is hoped that, come 2021, things will be approaching normal and that, with an April session for the maintenance teams and working groups, and the plenary sessions in October, we will be back on track.

I am sure that, however things are at the start of May, the sooner we are all back to normal, the better. ■

About the author

SGS Baseefa's Technical Manager Ron Sinclair is a vice-chair of the European Notified Bodies Group for ATEX (ExNBG), as well as Chair of the IECEx Service Facility Certification Committee and a member of the IECEx Executive. He is chair of both the UK and European Standards Bodies operating in this area.