

RELEASE



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TIME FOR ACTION ON PRODUCT SPECIFICATIONS AND SKILLS TRAINING

By Derek Muckle, President, BPF Pipes Group

There has been a great deal of discussion around technology, products, training and skills for plastic pipe installations by utilities for a long time. And the need for a coherent approach has not diminished or gone away. Specifying products in the right way to suit real world working conditions, and giving people the skills and knowledge to deliver good infrastructure remains a priority if we are to ensure we have an infrastructure which meets the future needs of the UK, giving trouble-free operation for at least 100 years – something easily achievable with plastic piping systems.

In water distribution pipes, faults tend to show up faster than other utilities. That's because the sector uses materials at the upper ends of the performance spectrum, something that is low risk and acceptable when you specify wisely and install correctly. What it also does is provide insight into construction behaviour and skills which will be evident elsewhere, but perhaps just in a different time frame. If it goes wrong, it's not as simple as blaming the product, or the people who installed it. That may be convenient, but the evidence shows it's not fixing the problems.

European standards were introduced into the utilities industry to produce a level playing field for products some time ago, which removed at a stroke the 'learning from experience' and cumulative knowledge of our utilities sector, customers and suppliers. What we previously had was real experience, which informed our design needs for electrofusion fittings, for example; experience that linked to how we build our new infrastructure here in the UK. You might call it 'real world tolerance' although most people would say it is simply asking for something that you know will work for you. A European wide specification claims to do none of this, as it disclaims responsibility for products meeting the standard being suitable for the use you intend to apply them to.

Unique UK conditions

In developing standards for emerging pipeline products in the 1980s, the UK water industry took the trouble to carefully specify electrofusion fittings, for example. Many test programmes and practical trials underpinned these standards, and reflected our weather patterns and typically British conditions. They introduced things about ease of assembly and tolerance to gaps and misalignment, so that work arounds were not invented on site. Most importantly, the UK was the only country that considered trench environments might be dirty and some of that dirt might find its way into pipeline joints, so it developed tests to ensure fittings were tolerant to this. It might all sound trivial but we no longer ask for this, which really means we are not setting the specification at the front end for what we want, and what we need, to complete installations right first time without early life failures.

That is not making the case for a radical change to the way the UK utility sector operates, it's a call for a basic engineering and procurement skillset to set the standard for what is really needed to get effective working systems.

Invest in pipelaying skills

It doesn't matter what pipeline material you talk about, or what jointing technique you specify, this principle remains the same. People need skills and expertise to install a fit-for-purpose pipeline. Nobody is born with an inherent ability to do this, and the cycle of passing down skills has been broken in areas, so cannot be relied upon universally. Partial automation of processes helps reduce the burden of knowledge and allows resources to be focused on the things that matter. But an insight is still needed into what matters and why. So, if we want pipeline systems with reliable joints intended to last at least 100 years, it seems a small price to invest a few days in the careers of our pipelayers to give them that knowledge and know that they can apply it.

With that said, why is it we still seem stuck on getting acceptance of training and competency schemes for those involved in constructing these long life assets?

BPF Pipes Group members are keen to move forward on the development of standards and codes of practice that support the deployment of plastic pipe systems intended to give trouble free, reliable lifetimes in excess of 100 years. It's one of those things that is the real strength and benefit of the technology. And they are well placed to support and share the knowledge that delivers this into training and competency schemes. But they cannot do it alone and

some form of industry collective responsibility and action is needed if we truly want to deliver assets with trouble-free lifetimes well in excess of 100 years. You'll get these from a plastic solution, which has got to be something we have a value for investing in to get right-first-time installation.

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PHOTO-CAPTION: Getting it right during installation is about much more than just training

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About the BPF Pipes Group

Part of the British Plastics Federation, the BPF Pipes Group is a trade association representing manufacturers and material suppliers of plastic piping systems across the UK. Committed to sustainable construction, its aims are to provide a forum for the exchange of technical expertise between member companies and to promote the importance of plastic as a pipework material, for the full spectrum of above and below ground, pressure and non-pressure applications. It also plays a key role in initiating and disseminating research and informing and influencing the standards bodies pertaining to plastic pipe systems. It works closely with the BPF and TEPPFA, the European Plastic Pipes and Fittings Association.