

Plumbing skills shortage

Manufacturers have to take responsibility, says Midlands-based company Thomas Dudley Ltd.

The inherent problems arising from the worsening skills shortage in the plumbing trade have been well documented. Trade associations and other industry authorities have repeatedly voiced their concerns, the Construction Industry Training Board forecasting that the UK needs at least 29,000 new qualified plumbers over the next five years.

Four out of ten plumbers not qualified to work alone!

In order to be "able to carry out work unsupervised", plumbers must be qualified to at least NVQ Level 3. At present, only around 60% of plumbers are qualified to NVQ Level 3, with almost 90% only being trained to NVQ Level 2. It takes an average of four years to reach Level 3 meaning the skills shortage is a problem to which there is, and will be, no quick answer.

The problem is further compounded by the fact that around 5,000 plumbers retire each year, whilst annually the trade only attracts 2,000 new trainees.

The picture becomes increasingly worrying when viewed on a regional basis: (see table below).

How are manufacturers responsible?

Manufacturers can help in several ways. Several larger organisations have introduced training programmes and increased their recruitment of trainees. However, a less obvious but equally effective solution can be found in the development and design of products that are easier and quicker for existing qualified plumbers to install.

Helping improve installer efficiency is no longer a 'nice to have', but a fundamental



The Vantage concealed cistern from Thomas Dudley is supplied factory assembled making installation easier for the plumber.

responsibility of all manufacturers in the sector. One manufacturer who has embraced this responsibility is Midlands-based Thomas Dudley Ltd (TDL) – long established manufacturer of plastic WC cisterns and flushing components. The company's Vantage concealed cistern was officially launched last September following an exhaustive development programme.

Joint Managing Director, Ivan Isherwood, explains: "We first started working on the Vantage concept early last year, in

response to the obvious requirements of the market. The product has been developed with the plumber in the forefront of our minds and we have included many time-saving features which enable the cistern to be quickly and easily installed."

The Vantage is supplied factory assembled, removing the need for the plumber to build up and position the float valve and flush valve on site. Snap-fit fixing brackets are supplied, and once screwed in place the cistern is simply clipped in. A Speedfit elbow is provided as standard allowing instant connection of the water inlet pipe, and the 90° tight radius bend flushpipe allows easier installation at low levels (cistern fits under 800mm high units).

TDL provided installation demonstrations at last year's PHEX shows at Derby, Manchester and Chelsea. Said Ivan Isherwood: "The shows were used to demonstrate the simplicity and speed with which the product can be installed."

TDL will be exhibiting at the 2003 series of PHEX shows in the UK. For details of dates and venues, please see page 89.

Region	Total Qualified Plumbers in Employment 2002	Average Annual Requirement for New, Qualified Plumbers 2002-2006	Cumulative Requirement for New, Qualified Plumbers 2002-2006
London	12,700	700	3,500
South East	17,800	1,200	6,000
East	11,800	700	3,500
South West	11,200	600	3,000
East Midlands	8,200	500	2,500
West Midlands	10,500	500	2,500
North West	10,300	400	2,000
Yorkshire & The Humber	9,000	500	2,500
North East	4,500	200	1,000
Scotland	9,600	400	2,000
Wales	5,500	300	1,500
TOTALS	111,100	6,000	30,000

Source: CITB Employment Model, 2001, Business Studies.