MAIN HEADER

construction products association

I don't really want a boiler be it gas, oil, solid fuel, condensing or combi. As for micro-generation – who on earth actually wants to run a power station in their home be it solar thermal, PV, micro-wind, micro-hydro or biomass? The mechanical ventilation sector has more acronyms than an advert for a top of the range BMW. And don't even start on heating and hot water controls – the bridge of the Starship Enterprise looks simpler and I don't have a spotty, male adolescent at home anymore to programme the thing.

If you are still with me, my point is that your customers don't actually want any of the stuff that HHIC members make. What they do want is plenty of hot water and a comfortable environment inside their home, as cheaply as possible and preferably without making them feel guilty about killing off polar bears or causing flooding in Gloucester. If that could be done through magic fairy dust, that would be fine. As it is, we can't do fairy dust yet so we have to resort to other more technical means.

And that is the point – HHIC members deliver the means to an end and not the end itself. I recall a director of a boiler company telling me about four years ago that his company was not a boiler company anymore but a hot water and internal environment company. As new technologies were developed such as micro CHP, fuel cells and solar, they would morph into the company's portfolio of technical solutions for the same end. The customer would buy the brand, not the technology.

Of course there are individuals and companies who still see the technology that they produce as the end in itself. Indeed, there will always be those consumers who make a buying decision based on technology, but this doesn't apply to the majority.

So, as we move towards zero carbon new homes and hopefully lower carbon from existing homes over the next few years, the way that heating is offered to consumers needs to change, along with the combination of products. If you have a new home with almost no heating demand and solar thermal for a good proportion of hot water, why would you want a boiler as well? If a home is plugged into a community-scale Combined Heat and Power network, the homeowner would generally not want his or her own solar thermal system. It is likely that homes of the future will have a mix of products rather than just a boiler. For instance a low carbon home might have mechanical ventilation with heat recovery, solar thermal, some PV and an immersion heater.

As a consumer I would not want four control systems or meters. I certainly wouldn't want to have to optimise the different systems nor have a controller with an instruction manual that weighs more than I do.

As an engineer I know that it is a lot easier to design a complex-looking solution to a problem rather than one that appears simple but hides a lot of sophisticated thinking. However, my ideal control system would integrate all the various systems without any fuss. It would know that when I went on holiday I did not need hot water but did need some control over temperature, albeit with wider swings than when I was at home. I would like to be able to talk to it, rather than fiddling with a set of buttons and an illegible display. It should be possible to walk into the spare bedroom, for instance, and change the room settings from there. And make it wireless or use the mains wiring rather than demand its own wires. And make it affordable, not a 'premium' product.

Industry needs to rethink its approach to technology and the consumer. Easy-to-use, integrated systems are vital to make low and zero carbon homes a reality. Never mind the low carbon agenda for hot water, heating and microgeneration, unless we get the user interface right for those awkward carbon life forms known as humans it won't work. And that really will upset the polar bears and inhabitants of Gloucester. ●