

School building safety is ‘a critical risk’

05 July 2023  Scott Mounfield

A new acronym for many in the sector “RAAC” (Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete) has brought into sharp focus the challenges that the sector is facing with the condition of the school estate.

The [National Audit Office \(NAO\)](#) has reported that around 24,000 school buildings are beyond their initial estimated design life and around 700,000 pupils are in a school that is believed to require major rebuilding or refurbishment, which can adversely affect pupils’ experience.

The Department for Education (DfE) has concluded there is a “very likely and critical” risk of injury or death from a school building collapse and has recognised RAAC as one of the greatest risks to school estates.

As such, the safety of school buildings is currently assessed as ‘a critical risk’.

Funding requirements

The DfE advised a minimum funding of £5.3 billion per year in its 2020 spending review to address the highest risks associated with building failures, with £7 billion per year being identified as the ‘best-practice’ level of funding.

However, the UK Treasury later provided the department with an average of £3.1 billion per year, substantially lower than the recommended amount.

Given that the DfE’s own assessment is that there is an £11.4bn backlog of repairs and remedial work required, the provision of funding below the recommended level further exacerbates the issues facing school estates.

Even where funding is available, NAO analysis found some schools were not aware of the funding, and schools in smaller academy trusts where the responsible bodies are not automatically allocated capital funding, may be missing out too.

Asbestos

The NAO’s recent report highlighted the prevalence of asbestos-related safety risks in schools. As of March 2023, 93% of schools had responded to a DfE asbestos survey and more than 80% of those schools had identified asbestos.

RAAC - liable to collapse

RAAC is an even greater cause for concern in educational buildings. This lightweight concrete is known to have been used in the construction and modification of educational buildings from the 1930s to the mid-1990s.

Issues with RAAC relate to its durability and structural stability, posing a risk of crumbling or collapse as seen in 2018 when the roof of a primary school in Kent suddenly collapsed. The safety briefing notice regarding the risks of RAAC, provided by the Office of Government Property stated that “RAAC is now life-expired and liable to collapse”.

A five-stage approach

Recognising RAAC as one of the greatest risks to school estates, the DfE has published [non-statutory guidance](#) aimed at those responsible for educational buildings, setting out a five-stage approach for the identification and management of RAAC.

In addition, earlier this year the DfE issued questionnaires to responsible bodies to examine the issue of RAAC in schools, though the NAO has reported that 58% of schools had either not responded to this, had not completed works or were simply unaware of the risks.

It's vital these risks are taken seriously and investigated...

The DfE previously announced that funding would be provided to schools where RAAC is present to mitigate immediate risks, however, investigation into the potential issue of RAAC across school estates is vital to mitigate risks to pupils and staff in educational buildings.

It's crucial that the risks posed by RAAC are taken seriously and investigated accordingly, with appropriate management and remediation strategies adopted to ensure the risks posed by RAAC are mitigated.

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