

Many UK schools structurally unsound, posing danger to life

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5 December 2022

Schools and other public buildings in the UK could be in danger of collapse because they have not been subject to regular safety inspections or properly maintained.

This “risk to life” emerges in the context of a devastating funding crisis in education, threatening staff redundancies, larger class sizes, restrictions to the curriculum and the elimination of support services.

Governments have ignored warnings about the risks to schools since at least 2018. Neither have the education unions acted to ensure the safety of their members and children in their care.

The Office of Government Property (OGP), responsible for public buildings, issued a “Safety Briefing Notice” in September regarding the potential dangers of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC). It made the stark warning that “RAAC is now life-expired and liable to collapse”.

RAAC is a foam concrete material used in internal and external construction. Invented in Sweden in the mid-1920, it has been used globally for 70 years—increasingly so since 1980 due to its many ostensible advantages. These include thermal efficiency, fire resistance, and the fact that it is lightweight making for speedier construction and cost efficiency.

The roof of Singlewell Primary school in Gravesend partially collapsed in 2018—luckily at the weekend with no casualties. Most concerning, the roof only showed signs of stress 24 hours before the incident. The Standing Committee on Structural Safety responded to this potential tragedy with a safety alert on the “failure of RAAC planks,” recommending that those installed before 1980 should be replaced.

This committee, an independent body established in 1976, is supported by the Institution of Civil Engineers, the Institution of Structural Engineers, and the government’s Health and Safety Executive to review building and civil engineering matters regarding the safety of structures.

After the collapse at the Gravesend school, the local Kent Council informed other local authorities, advising them to check for RAAC in their schools. The Local Government Association contacted councils in relation to RAAC in schools—including its use in the structure of flat school roofs—and myriad public buildings including hospitals and high-

rise structures.

Four years on, inspections and remedial work to ensure school buildings are safe from collapse have only just begun. This is despite other serious incidents, including:

- In February 2017, when a wall collapsed at Oxfords Primary School, Edinburgh.
- On May 10, 2018, a teacher and three pupils, aged between six and seven, suffered minor injuries after part of the ceiling fell in a Year 2 classroom at Nechells Primary School, Birmingham.
- In October 2019, part of the roof and brickwork collapsed at St Anne’s Catholic Primary School in Sutton, St Helens.
- Sandhurst secondary school in Berkshire suffered a partial roof collapse over a walkway on November 15, 2020.
- In September 2021, Ford Primary School run by the Horizon Multi Academy Trust in Plymouth suffered a partial collapse of the school hall roof.
- A ceiling collapsed at a second floor Year 3 classroom at Rosemead Preparatory School & Nursery in Dulwich on November 15, 2021. No one sustained serious injury, but one child was detained in hospital under observation.

According to digital newspaper *Schools Week*, the government pledged to replace RAAC in hospitals, but the Department for Education (DfE) is downplaying the potential dangers, informing schools applying for building improvement funding grants next year that “not all RAAC is dangerous.”

Hodge Hill primary school in Birmingham needs part of its roof decking removed, but the government’s surveyor questioned the presence of RAAC.

As there seems to be no official record of the materials used to build schools, the DfE sent out a survey to state-funded schools in March year asking if RAAC exists in their buildings. The survey was recirculated in October with an instruction to respond urgently. Schools may be unaware they have RAAC as it is often concealed from view. The OGP advised: “RAAC planks may look the same as pre-cast concrete and may be hidden above false ceilings.”

President of the British Association of Construction Heads, Graham Hasting-Evans, estimated that up to half of four million non-residential UK buildings could be affected by RAAC.

He concluded that RAAC is being ignored because “nobody wants to face up to” a “ticking time bomb... People are worried about Grenfell—there are companies thinking ‘I’m going to go bust because I’ll get sued.’” He added, “it’s not just about cladding, it’s about the structural integrity of the building itself—if it was built with a reinforced concrete frame and that concrete isn’t strong enough, the building starts to fall apart.”

The use by contractors of aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding—a known fire hazard—was responsible for the inferno that engulfed Grenfell Tower in London in June 2017, killing 72.

Ian Harrington, partner at Eddisons chartered surveyors, said that for some schools the RAAC problem is “so bad you’d have to remove the whole structure.”

This year the government allocated only £498 million for its condition improvement grant to address safety issues in academies, sixth-form colleges and voluntary aided schools. Urgent work concerning RAAC is outstanding at Royal Grammar School in High Wycombe, The London Oratory School, Sandbach School in Cheshire and Chesterton Primary School in Wandsworth, due to RAAC.

Maintained schools, which are local authority run, must apply to cash-strapped councils for such repairs. *Schools Week* reported, in a piece by investigations and features reporter Jessica Hill, that Norfolk County Council investigated 58 schools built from 1955 to 1980 and did the necessary RAAC remedial work. Sheffield City Council has earmarked £520,000 to make good the roof of an extension at Abbey Lane Primary School because of the “risk of collapse”. Sale Grammar School in Greater Manchester had an RAAC roof removed, costing £400,000.

This level of dilapidation is only the tip of the iceberg. DfE data indicates a third of schools were built from 1960-1980, when RAAC was universally used. The government’s own figures suggest £11.4 billion is needed to get school buildings to an adequate standard including for safety.

Basic maintenance and repair work not related to RAAC costs councils millions of pounds. Last year Salford City Council was hit with a bill of more than £500,000 for roof repair works at just two schools. The council said that “serious leaks” could have occurred resulting in closure of the schools without the repairs. The *Manchester Evening News* reported that one of the schools, Hilton Lane Primary School, had timber cladding and windows which had deteriorated, and ground works were also required “to improve drainage which has caused flooding at the site.”

During the summer, emails leaked to the *Observer* sent by senior officials at the DfE to Downing Street during Boris Johnson’s premiership warned many school buildings posed a “risk to life”. This year, however, less than half of the 1,100 schools which applied for the government’s 10-year rebuilding programme were successful.

Since 2010 in the aftermath of the banking crash and bailout,

capital spending on schools declined 25 percent, or 29 percent when adjusted for inflation. In 2019, the *Guardian* reported one in six schools in England were in urgent need of repairs, to rectify such problems as fire hazards, asbestos, faulty wiring and plumbing and damp.

While endless sums are squandered bolstering company profits during the pandemic and the energy cost crisis, and for the war in the Ukraine, this is being paid for via savage budget cuts. Joint National Education Secretary Mary Bousted said that the latest round of austerity will mean “more children coming to school hungry and cold and unable to learn”, and schools “having less funding than in 2015”.

But from the beginning of the pandemic the education unions lined up with the Conservative government and Labour opposition to put profit before lives, ensuring lockdowns were prematurely lifted and schools reopened. Today, staff and children are herded into unsafe classrooms, many of which are also proven structurally unsound.

The unions refuse to mobilise their members in effective action, despite workers’ readiness to fight, whether on pay and conditions, and health and safety. The education unions have strung out strike ballots for months, meaning there will be no industrial action this year over pay and the intolerable workload facing their members.

Rank and file committees of educators, independent of the unions, must be established under the democratic control of workers themselves. To provide a fully resourced education system which guarantees the health and safety of staff and children requires above all the struggle for socialism.

All who want to take up this struggle should contact and join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

The Committee’s Twitter page can be found here.



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