

Raac concrete public safety crisis widens in Britain with every type of building affected

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Almost every type of publicly-owned building in Britain is impacted by the Raac concrete scandal.

Prior to the school term beginning, the Conservative government was forced to fully or partially close over 100 schools due to the danger posed by the presence of Reinforced Autoclave Aerated Concrete—a pre-cast, porous type of concrete that is susceptible to structural failure, particularly when exposed to moisture.

Following concerns over the safety of the material, which has a 30-year life span, construction with Raac was stopped in Britain in the late 1990s, after decades in which it was routinely used as a cheaper building material, mostly in flat roofs but also in walls and floors. The vast majority of buildings containing Raac are still in use despite it having reached or surpassed its life cycle.

The government was forced to act after a school ceiling collapse during the summer holiday, fortunately with nobody in the building. Hundreds more schools are currently being inspected after reporting the suspected presence of Raac in a government survey.

But the problem could be wider still. The Department for Education (Dfe) is now sample checking schools which reported no Raac in case a mistake was made—professional inspectors were not used for the initial survey. Jane Cunliffe, chief operating officer at the DfE, told MPs, “If that sample check shows there were false negatives, we will have to think about what we do and whether there’s more surveying we need to do.”

Meanwhile, new schools are closing a week into the start of term. On Monday, a school in Teesside closed to almost all its pupils after potentially dangerous concrete was found in several parts of the building. The same day, Middlesbrough’s Kader Academy closed its doors to all pupils except those in its nursery.

Not just schools but hospitals, social housing, university buildings—including student accommodation—airports, police stations, courts, shopping centres and concert

venues are affected. Buildings have been closed at 41 hospitals and 13 universities. At least 10 concert venues and theatres have also been forced to shut.

Seven hospitals are made “made nearly exclusively” of Raac. These are Queen Elizabeth Hospital, King’s Lynn; Leighton Hospital, Crewe; James Paget Hospital, Great Yarmouth; Frimley Park Hospital, Camberley; Hinchingsbrooke Hospital, Huntingdon; Airedale Hospital, Keighley; and West Suffolk Hospital.

On Monday, ITV reported on the appalling situation at Withybush Hospital in west Wales, which has been forced to close six wards and has more than 150 props holding cracked ceilings up across the site. The hospital is still being used by the local population of 120,000. The chief executive of west Wales’s health board said attempts to make the hospital safe—with the presence of Raac known of since 2019—had been like “trying to rebuild an aeroplane while it’s in the air.”

On Tuesday it was announced that Raac had been discovered in part of the Houses of Parliament, following announcements of its presence in both of London’s main airports, Heathrow and Gatwick. Heathrow’s Terminal 3 was opened in 1961, and Raac was first identified on the site last year. Heathrow management claim there is no safety threat describe the terminal being used by almost 20 million people annually.

This week the National Concert Hall of Wales, also known as St David’s Hall, was forced to close with all events cancelled this month and into October. The building in Cardiff, often packed to its 2,000 seat capacity, has Raac planks in its ceiling. The Classic FM website noted, “Construction for St David’s Hall began in 1977, and the 2,000-seater hall opened in 1982—meaning the Raac planks found in the ceiling of the concert venue have been there for over 40 years.”

Many more buildings are likely affected as Raac was originally available to buy on the open market, so would

have been extensively used in the private sector too.

The immediate danger to life is manifest. It was revealed by the *Telegraph* last week that cracked Raac planks had been found in a still occupied block of flats in Southampton built in the 1970s. The planks formed “both supporting and internal walls of the property,” reported the newspaper. A source explained, “The life expectancy of this concrete is 30 years, and it’s been nearly 50 years. The planks could potentially collapse without demonstrating signs of distress, as we’ve seen in schools. But these planks already have cracks, and they’re not even safe enough to repair. It needs to be condemned.”

On September 8, the Open Democracy website reported from the Knights estate in Basildon, Essex, which “was the first example of Siporex (another name for Raac) being used for housing in the UK and is still standing.” The estate contains 18 homes. “The much larger Laindon 1, 2 and 3 ‘Siporex estate’ was built nearby using the same material shortly after Knights, but was demolished in the 1990s after years of structural issues.”

One Knights tenant told reporters, “There’s a metal bit sticking out and a massive crack and you can see through to the outside from our house. If we’re inside you can actually see daylight.”

In a study of the widespread use of Raac in Essex, one of the most populous counties in Britain with over 1.8 million residents, the *Sunday Times* noted that Raac was treated as a “wonder material”, and “widely used after the Second World War.”

The newspaper noted, “In Essex, which had been heavily bombed in the war, swathes of public buildings were quickly erected using Raac panels.” However, following the building of the trial Knights estate in 1962 and the 950 houses built at the Siporex estates, “Concerns were immediate. Before construction had even finished, one councillor suggested that ‘a bulldozer should knock the lot down’, claiming that the homes would end up being demolished within 20 years. Within four years families were complaining of cracks in the walls and ceilings.”

But it would be another 27 years before the estate was finally demolished as unsafe. As far back as 1984, even a Tory MP, Sir David Amess, with the estates in his Basildon constituency, was warning about the dangers of the material that “cracks as one walks on it”.

The danger is amplified by the widespread presence of asbestos, which releases deadly fibres when disturbed. The vast majority of schools and hospitals are expected to contain the material, but in most cases the location is

unknown.

This July, Tory MP Mark Francois related in Parliament how several schools in his constituency had been found to contain Raac. One of them, King Edmund School in Ashingdon, “had to have a large block demolished because of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, or Raac.” He added that it was only “when they demolished the building” that they “found that it contained a large quantity of asbestos, which no one realised was there. The school had to be completely closed while the area was thoroughly decontaminated.”

The worsening Raac safety crisis is the result of decades of austerity, deregulation and cost-cutting carried out by successive Tory and Labour governments.

The *Financial Times* editorialised last week that the “‘crumbling concrete’ affair” was “a legacy of years of underspending on construction and maintenance,” which was “compounded by Conservative ‘austerity’ policies in the 2010s.” It noted, “As in many parts of Europe, postwar reconstruction, baby booms and the expansion of the welfare state drove a surge in public investment in Britain through to the 1970s,” adding, “spending later dropped in most countries. But the decline in the UK after Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government arrived in 1979 was sharper than most.”

The editorial added, “Though Tony Blair’s Labour government [1997-2007] began to rebuild capital spending, a study last year found long-term average net public investment dropped from 4.5 per cent of gross domestic product in 1948-78 to 1.5 per cent in 1979-2019. Even under New Labour, Britain’s investment share was smaller than the OECD average or most G7 peers.”



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