

# Number of UK schools and hospitals liable to collapse rises

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The number of schools and hospitals in the UK found to have been built with dangerous reinforced aerated concrete (RAAC), which poses a “critical risk to life”, is rising.

RAAC is a lightweight, cheap concrete used widely between the 1950s and 1980s in public buildings including schools, universities, hospitals and housing, on flat roofs, walls and floors. It is susceptible to failure after contact with water and has a limited lifespan of 30 years, after which it can collapse without warning.

In 1982, RAAC production in the UK ceased amid safety concerns. However, there was no attempt to ascertain which buildings contained it or monitor and replace it. Despite warnings from building experts and roof collapses in schools, successive governments, Labour and Conservative, tried to ignore a life-threatening catastrophe waiting to happen because of the enormous costs remedial work would entail.

RAAC is just one deadly problem plaguing schools. Equally dangerous are “system-built” classroom blocks, while exposure to asbestos has killed tens of 1,000s from mesothelioma. System-built blocks are made of concrete, steel and timber, rather than brick and stone, with a similar design life to RAAC, used in construction between 1940 and 1980. The Department for Education (DfE) identified 13,000 such blocks in schools, but of concern regarding liability to collapse are 3,600 with concrete or timber frames.

*Schools Week* revealed that according to the National Audit Office, the DfE had not yet engaged specialists to carry out invasive inspections, despite agreeing a scheme to assess 200 schools last year.

The funding for the remedial work to make schools and public building safe conflicts with the Conservative government and Labour opposition’s commitment to NATO’s expanding wars in the Ukraine and the Middle East, for which no expense is spared.

Last week, the Department of Health and Social Care published a list of 42 hospitals confirmed to contain RAAC, up from its previous figure of 18. The list of schools and colleges found with RAAC rose to 214, an increase of 41 from the previous tally on September 19.

On the eve of schools reopening in September, the government was forced to close more than 100 found to have RAAC after an incident during the holidays involving structural collapse.

In May, National Health Service (NHS) Trusts received instructions from the government to assess their buildings for the presence of RAAC. As the list of hospitals confirmed to be affected grew, Sir Julian Hartley, chief executive of NHS Providers representing NHS Trusts in England, said, “This old concrete puts patients and staff at risk and the picture is getting worse.” The trusts were doing ‘everything they can, at huge cost, to keep patients safe.’

The BBC reported that seven of the trusts most at risk will not have their RAAC replaced until 2030, while other hospitals will have to wait 12 years.

Hartley said, “The RAAC problem is a symptom of a far bigger and long-running one. The NHS has a £10 billion-plus backlog of repairs.”

Decades of funding cuts have decimated the NHS, education and support services, to pay for the multi-hundred billion pound bank and pandemic bailouts, and a burgeoning defence budget which alone has soared over £5 billion annually.

In England the list of hospitals built using RAAC includes four in London, 11 in the North West, seven in the North East and Yorkshire, three in the Midlands, eight in the East of England and nine in the South East.

In Scotland, 254 hospital buildings are being investigated while RAAC was found in two hospitals in Wales. The Welsh government declared a major incident at Wthybush Hospital in Pembrokeshire, closing three

wards with RAAC in September.

Last week, a school in Wakefield closed after a survey revealed RAAC. St Thomas à Becket will remain shut and teach online, opening only to year 11 pupils from November 1. The academy was not on the list of schools with RAAC published by the DfE.

The DfE list includes a further three schools confirmed with RAAC which was “not present after initial tests”, placing a question mark over the efficacy of the initial testing conducted. The schools are Brandhall Primary in Sandwell, Cockermouth School in Cumberland and The Appleton School in Essex.

Government website gov.uk listing the “Education settings with confirmed RAAC and mitigations in place” indicates that most of the schools and colleges are now teaching face-to-face, with 12 combining face-face teaching and remote learning.

The government does not specify the nature of the mitigations, but comments to parliament by DfE Under Secretary of State Baroness Barran indicate a shoddy, patch-up job. As well as using portacabins as temporary classrooms for an unspecified time, she suggested “semi-permanent” timber be secured beneath areas with RAAC that could last for up to 10 years.

Across Scotland, 16 local authorities reported schools with RAAC, while surveys are planned in 120 schools in Northern Ireland. In Wales, a school in Conwy County, one in Denbighshire and two on the Isle of Anglesey closed due to RAAC.

Essex is the worst hit county in England, with 70 confirmed cases, an increase of eight since the last count. Interviewed in Clacton, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak blustered, “We’re already investing record sums into our schools, particularly to help our pupils catch up from the lost learning from Covid. We’re in the midst at the moment of the biggest ever tutoring programme that this country has ever seen which we’ve invested £5 billion to provide millions of tutoring hours particularly for our most disadvantaged children who suffered enormously as a result of the lost learning during Covid.”

This feigned concern for disadvantaged children is belied by further funding cuts schools face due to an DfE error in forecasting pupil numbers. James Saunders, head of an Essex school which will receive £50,000 less than expected, told the *Guardian*, “The impact of not just this error, but other funding shortfalls and cuts is that education is in danger of becoming reduced to a barebones boilerplate model or basic schooling.”

Heads face losing teaching assistants, who work with

SEND pupils (special educational needs and disabilities) as well as with the COVID catch-up program.

Tytherington secondary school in Macclesfield, facing a shortfall of £44,000, may abandon appointments for pastoral care workers tasked with improving attendance—a stated government priority—and SEND provision.

Farnborough College of Technology is one of six colleges (post 16 education) on the government’s list found with RAAC. With 3,600 students on role, remedial work at the college is expected to cost £800,000 to be funded by the DfE. The college, however, estimates the complete RAAC replacement project at “millions of pounds”, indicating the massive shortfall in investment needed to remove and replace RAAC across the whole school estate.

Abbey Lane Primary School in Sheffield learned this week that the government has reneged on its promise to pay £620,000 to remove and replace RAAC found on its roof.

The response of the National Education Union, ASCL, NAHT, GMB, UNISON, Unite and Community unions to the RAAC scandal was summed up by Trades Union Congress General Secretary Paul Nowak’s futile appeal to the Sunak government “to commit to a programme of capital investment that repairs and rebuilds our public estate.” For its part the Labour Party has made clear it has no “magic money tree” to spend on health or education.

The education unions will do nothing to ensure the safety of their members and their pupils. Throughout the pandemic they have acted as a second arm of government, enforcing the precipitous reopening of schools before the COVID virus was suppressed, so schools could act as holding pens while parents resumed profit making for the corporations. No mitigations are in place, so the virus has free reign to spread and mutate.

Contact the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) and NHS FightBack today.



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