

Money for war but no money for UK's crumbling schools

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Schools in the UK are not fit for purpose, and many pose a “critical risk to life”. Some have leaking roofs or lack heating and hot water. Others are riddled with asbestos or contain life expired concrete known as RAAC (reinforced aerated concrete), liable to collapse at any time.

Such is the state of the school estate in the UK after decades of funding cuts by governments of all political stripes.

Last summer the public spending watchdog, the National Audit Office (NAO), declared 700,000 pupils are learning in unsafe schools. At the same time, building companies responsible for maintaining schools or building new ones have fleeced the taxpayer to the tune of billions, given contracts under the Public Finance Initiative (PFI).

The BBC's *Panorama* documentary *Britain's crumbling schools*, televised last week, visited schools around the country, revealing shocking conditions under which teachers are expected to teach and children to learn. Yet the same teachers are bullied and vilified by government inspectorate Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills). Head teacher Ruth Perry was driven to take her own life in January this year while awaiting publication of an inspection at her school, Caversham Primary.

Assistant head, Jordan Philliskirk, showed *Panorama* around Scalby Secondary School in Scarborough, one of about 276 schools in the UK found to have RAAC in its structures. Used widely in many public buildings from the 1950s to 1980s as a lightweight and cheap form of concrete, RAAC has a life expectancy of 30 years, after which time it is liable to collapse without warning.

Two thirds of Scalby School's buildings have been condemned as dangerous because of RAAC. Estimated costs to transport children to a temporary site while the school undergoes remedial work, as well as building

costs, come to £1 million. The government will underwrite only some of the cost of the work, leaving the school having to find a staggering £300,000 out of its own budget.

Remedial work on four out of five RAAC schools risks disturbing asbestos. A *Sunday Times* investigation revealed the use of asbestos has caused 100,000 deaths from cancer the past 40 years. A video diary from a school in Essex described the problem of RAAC combined with asbestos “like a post-apocalyptic world”.

St Peter's Primary School in Devon is plagued by roof leaks and heating problems. Temporary classrooms from the 1960s have not been replaced. Head teacher, Steve Hitchcock, said the “sheds” among 10,000 temporary classrooms across the UK—are impossible to heat, and in continual need of maintenance encroaching the school budget.

The temperature can drop to 7° Celsius even with heaters on—health and safety regulations stipulate minimum temperature in classrooms of 16° Celsius. Pupil Sebastian says, “It's really hard to use a pen or pencil when you've got your gloves on”.

Another pupil: “It's so cold you start shivering; your writing goes really wobbly... because our hands are shaking so much.”

Hitchcock explained that four years ago the government surveyed all schools in England and graded them according to their condition. His school was graded A and does not qualify for refurbishment!

The cost for the remedial work to bring schools up to standard has almost doubled from £6 billion to £11 billion, equivalent to the money sent by the UK to pursue war against Russia in Ukraine. The government admits that on average £300,000 is needed for each primary school and £1.5 million for each secondary school in England.

Professor of construction engineering at Loughborough

University, Chris Goodier explained to *Panorama* that because of successive government cuts “the more you fall behind the more you need to catch up.” However, “The big worry is these buildings have children in them, and the more poor these buildings become, you are increasing the risk of a collapse, a fatality, or someone getting hurt.”

In 2015, Russell Scott Primary School in Greater Manchester underwent a £3 million rebuild by British-based multinational construction giant Carillion. It has since suffered faulty heating, ill-fitting windows, and fire doors which are not regulation fire doors.

The school is in a constant battle with the elements—sandbags are a common sight to prevent flooding entering the premises from the playground during heavy rainfall. Head Teacher Steve Marsland explained they even have sewage seeping through floors. He uses a monitor to check for dangerous levels of explosive gas.

Now 65 years of age, Marsland feels he cannot retire until the school is rebuilt. This will cost £10 million and was promised two years ago. “Our staff feel gutted,” he said emotionally.

Panorama cited local Labour Party MP Andrew Gwynne who said that Russell Scott “could swallow up all of that money” earmarked by the government for school repairs “and still need more”.

In 2018, Carillion went into liquidation, leaving the taxpayer to pick up the devastation left in its wake.

PFI contracts were introduced under the John Major-led Conservatives (1990-97) and expanded by Labour under Tony Blair (1997-2007). Private companies built schools, hospitals and roads and were repaid over up to 30 years, robbing the taxpayer. Companies and the banks made huge profits.

According to an NAO report, schools cost 40 percent and a hospital 70 percent more than had they been built by a public body. PFI projects will cost the taxpayer approximately £199 billion by 2040.

Balfour Beatty built the Oldham school and sold it on to the Amber Infrastructure group. Maintenance work was subtracted to Equans by site owner Oldham BSF Limited, whose majority shareholder is Amber. So convoluted is the PFI contract that it is nigh impossible for Oldham Council, responsible for providing education locally, to arrange repairs.

Sam Freedman, a former policy advisor to the Department for Education (2010-13) admitted to *Panorama* the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition made a “big error”—scrapping the Labour government’s

Building Schools for the Future programme. The Tories and Liberals were continuing austerity cuts begun by Labour after the 2008/9 global financial collapse, including Labour’s sanctioning of the trillion pound bailout of the UK’s failed banks. Freedman said, “issues like RAAC would have been picked up earlier” and schools would not be in such a parlous state.

“They [the government] ... are choosing to prioritise other things.” The “other things” are a pledge to increase military spending to 3 percent of GDP and huge tax cuts for the rich.

In 2021, the government began a School Rebuilding Programme, declaring it would rebuild 500 schools over the next 10 years. Two years on just four schools have been rebuilt.

According to senior research economist at the Institute of Fiscal Studies Ben Zaranko, “Weak growth and a very high level of spending on debt interest means that reducing debt in the next parliament will be more difficult than in any period since the 1950s.” UK national debt in relation to gross domestic product rose to 104.14 percent in 2023.

Zaranko suggests “difficult decisions” must be made, meaning more cuts in social expenditure. Many local councils, which administer the education budget, are facing bankruptcy.

In a January 25 press release, the National Education Union (NEU) wrote, “The Government’s latest data on school funding shows that 1 in 8 schools were in deficit at the end of the financial year 2022-23... the highest proportion of schools in deficit since at least 2010.”

It proposed no action. The education unions have overseen these catastrophic cuts to education, including selling out teachers’ pay and conditions in the recent national strike. All they offer are futile appeals to the government to change course and the hope that the forthcoming general election will produce a Sir Keir Starmer-led Labour government. This is even as Starmer has gone to pains to pledge that a government he leads will continue the pro-war, pro-business, pro-austerity agenda pursued by Sunak et al.

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