

# Deadline to make schools safe from crumbling concrete shifted to 2029 by UK Labour government

Margot Miller  
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The removal of potentially life-threatening reinforced aerated concrete (RAAC) from schools and colleges should be treated as an emergency, but the Department for Education (DfE) in England is not planning to remove it for years.

Labour's Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson has announced that RAAC will not be removed from these settings until the scheduled end of this parliament in 2029. Phillipson had the gall to boast that this meant she was "setting clear timelines for the permanent removal of RAAC from schools and colleges."

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. After prolonged contact with water, it is liable to degrade. It has a limited lifespan of 30 years, after which it can collapse without warning.

The dangers first manifested themselves in 2018 when the flat roof of a primary school collapsed. This occurred at the weekend when the building was empty, so no one was injured. Had it happened during a school day the consequences could have been horrific.

After further wall and ceiling collapses in schools in 2022 prompted an investigation under the then Conservative government, 237 schools were found to contain RAAC. In September of that year the Office for Government Property warned that RAAC was "life expired and liable to collapse."

It took a further year to order the partial or complete closure of 104 schools, after three sudden RAAC-related roof collapses without any visible signs of deterioration.

Of the schools with RAAC, 123 are part of the school rebuilding programme and six will no longer use the part of the building affected. The remaining 108 are receiving grants to remove the material.

Remedial work to potentially save lives and prevent injury is progressing at a glacial pace under the Labour government, which came to office in July last year.

According to the Department for Education (DfE), as of this October, RAAC was removed from just 62 schools and colleges, and 41 schools have been rebuilt.

Phillipson said work will begin on schools with RAAC that are part of the schools rebuilding programme (SRP) during this parliament, meaning some won't be touched for up to another three years.

The SRP was launched in 2020 by the Tory government, a grudging acknowledgement of the dilapidated state of the school estate. Under the SRP, "major rebuilding and refurbishment projects at school and sixth-form college buildings across England" are to be completed, "with buildings prioritised according to their condition".

So far just 518 rebuilding projects are underway. Phillipson announced in June that a further 250 schools would join the *SRP over the next decade*. There are over 24,000 schools in England.

Schools with RAAC awaiting rebuilding are operating with mitigation measures in place which may be jeopardising the safety of staff and pupils. *SchoolsWeek* reported that St Joseph Catholic Primary school in Buckinghamshire had to delay school opening at the beginning of term after experts, ahead of the rebuild, "questioned whether building reinforcements fitted seven years ago met latest best practice standards".

On October 28, a parliamentary education select committee questioned children's minister Josh MacAlister and senior DfE official Jonathan Dewsbury on SRP delays, RAAC funding and research into the state of older buildings. Dewsbury said the government was "not aware of any pupils learning in environments that were unsafe", adding that it would publish its long-term strategy for the school estate "very soon".

The DfE, however, warned in its 2024-25 annual report of possible school building collapse as "critical – very likely." It reported this initially in 2021!

The National Audit Office (NAO)—in a report on the

Condition of School Buildings in June 2023—warned that “following years of underinvestment, the estate’s overall condition is declining and around 700,000 pupils are learning in a school that the responsible body or DfE believes needs major rebuilding or refurbishment.”

Dewsbury declared any problems were due to lack of maintenance—putting the onus onto school management or employers who are responsible for ensuring the safety of the school estate, not governments which provide the funding.

Decades of neglect and lack of investment in education have left school buildings in a desperate state and a danger to life and limb. The RAAC issue is the tip of the iceberg. While plans to remove RAAC are totally inadequate, the government is ignoring dangers from “system-built” school structures, as well as the existence of asbestos in school buildings.

In another statement at odds with reality, Dewsbury said in relation to system-built school structures—previously identified by the DfE as a key safety risk—that early investigations revealed “no systemic issues.”

System-built or prefabricated schools were erected after the Second World War, quickly and on the cheap, leaving behind few records. Made from concrete, steel and timber, rather than conventional stone and brick, and erected from 1940-80, their shelf life is 30-40 years. An NAO report last year identified 3,600 system-built school blocks out of a total 13,800 that “may be more susceptible to deterioration”.

Incidents of collapse or structural weakness in system-built schools were recorded at Abby Lane Primary in Sheffield, Angel Road Junior in Norfolk, Winston Churchill School in Woking, and Burnside Academy in Sunderland. In 2023, the NAO said these structures could remain in situ safely beyond their design life if adequately maintained, but this would incur great expense.

Two years ago, Institute of School Business Leadership CEO Stephen Morales warned the sitting Tory government that given the level of investment in the SRP, it would take 400 years to replace every school. Inheriting the Tory’s schools rebuilding plan, Dewsbury backtracked, saying the government aims instead to “practically maintain” them.

Schools also harbour the hidden danger of asbestos. As a fire retardant, asbestos was used extensively after the Second World War in the fabric of public sector buildings.

Though banned in the UK in 1999, it remains in situ and as buildings deteriorate the invisible but deadly fibres become exposed to the air. Government policy is to manage it in place. If inhaled, the tiny needle-like fibres lie dormant, leading to mesothelioma, a nasty and fatal lung cancer, as well as asbestosis, maybe 15-40 years after exposure.

A joint Education Union Report published in October last year noted that 431 teachers under 75 years died from

mesothelioma between 1980 to 2021. The report estimates that 1,400 teachers and support staff in the UK have died from mesothelioma and anticipates 25,200 student deaths in the future. The number of deaths is expected to rise as buildings deteriorate further.

Governments both Tory and Labour have balked at a plan to remove asbestos from schools and colleges—estimated to cost £11.6 billion. In January 2025, as part of a wider report on maintaining public service facilities, the NAO identified a £13.8 billion maintenance backlog in English schools as of October 2024.

Under Labour this crisis will worsen, with the Treasury confirming a vastly inadequate rise in the annual school and college maintenance budget from £2.4 billion to just £2.9 billion by 2034-35.

The education unions, whose stated policy is for the removal of asbestos, have not lifted a finger to mobilize their members over this life and death issue, merely urging members to write to their MPs.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, education spending as a proportion of national income was cut from 5.6 percent in 2010 to 4.1 percent in 2024-25. The National Education Union reported data showing that 74 percent of schools suffered budget cuts in 2024-25. Since 2010 spending per pupil on education fell in real terms by £558.

The tens of billions of pounds required to make safe schools and colleges and fund high quality free education for all are available, but in the wrong hands. This demands the expropriation of the wealth of the super-rich and a struggle against a government committed to austerity, which is diverting vast sums into war and rearmament spending.

To take forward this fight contact and join the Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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