

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: The condition of school buildings, HC 1338

Monday 11 September 2023

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Members present: Dame Meg Hillier (Chair); Olivia Blake; Ashley Dalton; Mr Jonathan Djanogly; Mrs Flick Drummond; Mr Mark Francois; Ben Lake; Anne Marie Morris; Sarah Olney.

Education Committee member present: Mr Robin Walker, Chair.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General, and David Fairbrother, Treasury Officer of Accounts, were in attendance.

Questions 108-207

Witnesses

I: Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education; Jane Cunliffe, Chief Operating Officer, Operations and Infrastructure Group, DfE.

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General
Condition of school buildings (HC 1516, Session 2022-23)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Susan Acland-Hood and Jane Cunliffe.

Q108 **Chair:** Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Monday 11 September 2023. Today we have two sessions. The first is on a very important issue—RAAC in schools. When we met the Department for Education last, on 13 July, we discussed school condition, including RAAC and asbestos, and obviously since then there have been major developments, with schools being closed or advised at the end of the summer term that they would need to be closed and investigated for RAAC. This has meant that a number of schools have actually closed. Pupils are working from home; others have been relocated; and many temporary classrooms are either installed or waiting to be installed. We are going to be focusing today on updates to the conversation we had with the Department in July, based on what has happened over the summer, and we will hopefully get answers for the people out there who are having to deal with this very challenging issue.

I am really pleased to welcome back Susan Acland-Hood, the permanent secretary, and Jane Cunliffe, the chief operating officer for the operations and infrastructure group. They were here in July, giving us an update then, and obviously things have changed, so it would be helpful, at the beginning, just to lay out some quick questions about what the latest figures are. Can you tell us, Ms Acland-Hood: what are the latest numbers of schools affected?

Susan Acland-Hood: Thank you very much indeed. We published a list of the 147 schools where RAAC had been confirmed. That list was correct as at 30 August for the names of the schools, and a little bit later than that for the status of what is happening in those schools. We had originally identified 156 schools. For nine of those, an initial survey had said that RAAC was present and further investigative survey work identified that RAAC was not present, so that's the reason for the difference between the 156 and the 147. Then, within the 147 schools, 104 are providing full face-to-face learning for all pupils, either on their own school site or, in some cases, in buildings off the school site; 20 have arrangements that are partly face to face and partly remote; 19 had delayed the start of term by a short period; and four were in fully remote learning.

Q109 **Chair:** When you say "delayed the start of term", that means those schools are closed, effectively, for pupils.

Susan Acland-Hood: Within the 19, you have a variation. Most of those schools had given a date for the planned start of term.

Q110 **Chair:** Okay, but they are closed as we sit here now.



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Susan Acland-Hood: Some will be open by now, actually, but at the date we published the list, those schools had delayed the start of term: they weren't in remote; they weren't in face to face.

Q111 **Chair:** Can you tell us how many pupils were affected by school closure and not able to go to school last week or on the first days of term?

Susan Acland-Hood: Because we have a variation in the hybrid arrangements—in the schools that are hybrid, there's a lot of different patterns of arrangement, including not just some year groups in and some year groups at home; some, for example, are rotating—it's quite difficult to put a pupil figure on it.

Q112 **Chair:** Okay. And what about the number of pupils displaced to other schools? You mentioned some going to other sites. Is that other schools or other community buildings?

Susan Acland-Hood: It is a variety. In some cases, for example, the trust have accommodated pupils in other schools within the trust. In other cases, there are other school buildings nearby. In others, they are using community buildings or settings. Quite a lot of schools are using other space on the school site.

Q113 **Chair:** The Secretary of State has made a pledge about temporary classrooms being made available by the Department. How many temporary classrooms have you provided directly to schools as of now?

Susan Acland-Hood: In general, the temporary classrooms provided by the Department will be for those schools where we had critical RAAC confirmed before the change of policy—

Chair: So how many?

Susan Acland-Hood: I don't think we have a number for the number of classrooms.

Q114 **Chair:** We will come to the challenge of getting those classrooms in place, but how many suppliers are supplying the classrooms?

Jane Cunliffe: We have three central contracts for temporary classrooms. As the Committee knows, we already had some schools where we had deemed the RAAC critical, so we had put that contract in place to be able to deal with an expected increase in the critical RAAC cases. Now, we are able to use that contract for all the RAAC cases, so we can enable speedier delivery and pay for it centrally from our capital funding.

Q115 **Chair:** Last week, the Prime Minister said in the House of Commons that in a matter of days—perhaps a fortnight or so, a couple of weeks—we would have answers and know what the situation was in schools, and that the situation would be resolved in terms of classrooms and so forth. Do you concur with that view, Ms Acland-Hood?

Susan Acland-Hood: The first thing I want to say is a huge thank you to headteachers and responsible bodies for the amazing work that they have



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done. Again, we know that in those 104 of the 147 schools, where all the pupils are in face-to-face learning, it is not always—

Chair: The Prime Minister said it would be resolved in a couple of weeks. Do you think that that is a realistic timetable?

Susan Acland-Hood: I think for those schools that we know about now, we will certainly start to have all pupils in face-to-face learning in that kind of timeframe. We know that some cases will be more complicated than others and that there will be schools that get identified later, so for those schools the clock will start later for what we can put in place. We are talking to all schools that know they have a survey coming up to ensure that they have a contingency plan in place.

Q116 **Chair:** Some schools have had to buy their own temporary classrooms, because they have not been able to get them through the Department. Can you explain why that is?

Jane Cunliffe: Sometimes the responsible body has decided to get the classrooms itself. We allow that, where the responsible body wants to make such arrangements itself, but we have also put in place the central at-scale contracts to offer as an option to the responsible bodies.

Chair: We will come back to the detail of the temporary classrooms a little later. I will now go to Olivia Blake, MP.

Q117 **Olivia Blake:** Thank you, Chair. What changed? What was the new evidence, and how did it differ from the collapse in 2018?

Jane Cunliffe: As you know, there was the collapse in 2018, after which we issued the alert. Then, I think you all know, we started our questionnaire in March 2022 and the survey programme in September 2022, when we were getting the surveys back. As the Committee is aware and as we discussed in July, we then advised responsible bodies to close where the RAAC had been deemed critical, but to monitor where it had been deemed non-critical.

Our engineers in DfE have been looking proactively for cases and trying to further their understanding of RAAC. They identified two cases, one in a commercial setting and one in a school in a different educational jurisdiction. In both those settings, RAAC failed, but had been caught on a beam, so that the engineers were able to see what the beam looked like pre full collapse. In both those cases, the engineers were concerned that the panel affected would have been judged as non-critical on a visual inspection, which is what we were carrying out across the school estate.

Our engineers visited one of those sites in mid-August. There was then a third failure—a third case of failure—at a school in England in late August. That was RAAC that had been graded as non-critical. As a result of those cases, we were concerned that the measures that we had been advising responsible bodies to put in place for non-critical RAAC—that is, monitoring carefully, looking out for cracks and defects—were very difficult to achieve across the school estate, particularly where estate managers



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are not necessarily on site all the time. Therefore, Ministers decided to take a much more risk-averse approach in schools, because of the nature of the estate, and to say that all spaces with RAAC should be closed. It was those cases—

Q118 Olivia Blake: That risk sounds exactly the same as it was in 2018—an unexpected collapse happened—so I am struggling to understand whether it was a new risk, a different risk from what was there previously, or is it simply that you had not put the right mitigations in place for that risk?

Jane Cunliffe: We were following the Institution of Structural Engineers guidance, which said that where RAAC had been deemed non-critical, it should be monitored closely for any signs of defects. We were concerned that in those cases, the signs of defects would not have been clear, particularly where in the school estate there were not estates managers and things to monitor the RAAC regularly. The defects would not have been picked up, so we took a particularly risk-averse approach because of the nature of the school estate.

Q119 Olivia Blake: You mentioned beams. We have been looking at hospitals as well, and we have been out to PAC hospitals that have put in place beams to hold up all the RAAC that they have in their buildings. Why have the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care taken such different approaches, and do you think that has led to the sudden change that you have had to implement?

Susan Acland-Hood: One thing that the IStructE guidance says really clearly is that building owners need to take a view based on the circumstances of their own different buildings and estates, and that is what you see across the approaches to schools and hospitals. We have been following the IStructE guidance. We have been mitigating where the RAAC was identified as critical, and we have been recognising that with school estates, there are differences in what we can do in both directions. Hospitals are very large buildings; they typically have large estates teams. Their ability to do the monitoring and management is different from a school that may, even as part of an academy trust or local authority, be unlikely to have a full-time specialist team on site all the time that can do that.

Conversely, taking some spaces out of use for a period in order to do the mitigation is in some ways easier to do than it is on a hospital estate where, if you take some spaces out of use for any time at all, you are generating an alternative kind of risk to life. You would expect to see different management across those two estates. They are very different estates in terms of their monitoring and management and their use.

Q120 Olivia Blake: Given that, wouldn't you expect closures in the school estates to be much more likely, and shouldn't there have been a better plan?

Susan Acland-Hood: We were operating increasingly proactively on this risk, so we were already in a place where we were doing rather a lot more



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on this than we would typically do in other circumstances. The set-up of the way we manage is that the responsible body—

Chair: We remember that from our July discussion; we don't need to repeat it all.

Susan Acland-Hood: And we identified this as a risk that was particularly hard for them to manage. We have therefore been more active and more interventionist on this risk by doing questionnaires and surveys, and setting up a more active central programme to ensure that when there was a critical issue, we were stepping in and helping to manage it. There was a shift over the summer.

The other thing we looked at and thought about very carefully was whether we could change the nature of our investigations to give us more certainty about that distinction between critical and non-critical, which essentially would have involved many more, much more intrusive surveys. Again, there is a difference between our estate and some other kinds of estate. In order to do the intrusive surveys—this is particularly related to the bearing ends and how far your RAAC plank sticks out over whatever it sits on—you have to drill into the RAAC. In order to do that surveying, we would have had to have taken spaces out of use. It would have massively extended the length of time taken to identify the RAAC across the whole of the school estate. One thing we could see was that it would have been roughly as disruptive as doing the mitigation, so we thought we would go for the mitigation rather than the more intrusive survey.

Q121 **Olivia Blake:** It sounds like it is very different from the hospitals approach, and I am still none the wiser about whether this is actually a new risk or just a different approach to an original risk. Can you assure the Committee that there won't be further risks that suddenly change overnight in how they are mitigated?

Susan Acland-Hood: The understanding of RAAC as a material has changed quite a lot over time. One thing we have been trying to do, both as a Department and across the whole of Government—there is a co-ordinated approach to this across Government, organised by the Office of Government Property, which sets the overall strategy—is to keep very close to the developing understanding of RAAC. So I don't think I can give you an assurance that there won't be other changes in advice or views about it, but the critical thing that we were trying to do, as Jane has said, is actively stay close to the latest understanding and evidence. That was, in a sense, why there was a seeking out of cases with the characteristic of having had a failure that had been caught—so you could understand that the failure was part of the process.

Chair: Thank you for now, Ms Blake. We are very pleased to say that Mr Robin Walker is guesting with us from the Education Committee, which he chairs.

Q122 **Mr Walker:** Thank you. You mentioned four schools operating fully remotely from the figures you released last week. Is that still the case,



and, to your knowledge to date, are there any other schools that may have to operate fully remotely?

Susan Acland-Hood: We are surveying very rapidly at the moment. We are seeing schools identified and we are also seeing schools change their mitigations over time. We have tried to ensure that when there is new information for a school or for parents, it goes to the school and the parents first. There is then a significant amount of time—not hugely lengthy, but enough—for schools to manage that properly with the parents and do sensible things. We want to be really transparent and clear about this, but we also want to manage it really sensibly for the school. We have said that we will regularly publish the lists, but I will hold on giving information in between those moments.

Q123 **Mr Walker:** What is the interval you expect that regular publication to be at? Is it monthly or weekly—what do you think is a reasonable interval?

Susan Acland-Hood: We would expect to publish the next one a fortnight on from the last one.

Q124 **Mr Walker:** That is helpful. You mentioned the nine schools that were inspected and it was found that they did not have RAAC. Can you give a figure for the number of schools that suspected they had RAAC, and have subsequently had it confirmed?

Susan Acland-Hood: Again, I will hold those numbers until the moment of publication, just to manage that.

Q125 **Chair:** Can you give us a ballpark? Is it 10—is it a similar scale? It is to do with the rate of survey, partly, isn't it?

Susan Acland-Hood: It is to do with the rate of the survey, and also the rate at which the survey is finding. It is not an order of magnitude different.

Q126 **Mr Walker:** I guess the frustration is that the information we had at the last session was around the number of survey responses, and it was not clear what proportion of those survey responses were definitive. Of course, to get to the bottom of this we need to know which survey responses are definitive. I am aware of schools that have had a visit that has not been able to confirm anything, but because it did not access all areas, they have had to have another visit. To your knowledge, how many surveys are outstanding and still need to take place?

Jane Cunliffe: We have increased our surveying firms from three to eight, which I think the Secretary of State has said this week. We do have schools that need a return visit because of issues around access the first time. Some of those took place last week and some are taking place this week, as well as the new surveys. It is a very fast-moving situation. We are prioritising those return visits to the schools we suspect will have RAAC because of the characteristics of the first survey. Our technical team are going through those and allocating them to surveyors. Obviously, there are cases where there is an access issue, but because of the age of the building, for example, we think it is less likely to have RAAC. We are



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prioritising those return visits, and we have those eight surveying firms doing both new and return visits. We are absolutely getting through that work as quickly as possible.

Q127 Mr Walker: We have heard various assurances from Ministers as to when they expect that process to be finished. We have heard that “weeks” in general seems to be the focus. Do you have an end date for when you expect the surveying work to be finished? Separately, is there an end date for when you expect RAAC to have been addressed across the school estate?

Jane Cunliffe: The first stage is getting the schools to respond to the initial questionnaire. We had about 95% of responses at the beginning of last week, and that has gone up already to around 98%. We are getting that information in. We have increased our surveying capacity, so that as soon as we hear about a school that suspects it has got RAAC, we can get that survey done in weeks. We are hoping that over the next few weeks we will have identified the majority. We will also be contacting any school or responsible body that has not responded to the questionnaire to ensure that we can get through the identification phase as quickly as possible. Obviously, some of that is dependent on the flow of information through, and the return visits and being able to follow them up and get a definitive answer.

Mr Walker: That process does not necessarily sound like a few weeks.

Jane Cunliffe: What I can say is that we have enough surveying capacity now so that when we have a school that comes through with a suspected RAAC, we can ensure that gets surveyed within a very small number of weeks.

Chair: From when they get back to you?

Jane Cunliffe: From when they get back to us. We now have up to 98% of schools in that group in the target era that have got back to us. We are going to contact the remaining ones. Obviously, since last week we have had many more responses come in. We are confident that we will get through those in the next few weeks. We will be contacting anybody who has not got back to us with the questionnaire response as quickly as possible.

Susan Acland-Hood: To give a scale on the increase of pace on the surveys, when we were last before the Committee, we said we had a target to get through—

Chair: Six hundred by the end of the year.

Susan Acland-Hood: Six hundred by the end of the year. I can tell the Committee that we have already done more than 600 surveys.

Chair: But you now have a bigger number to do—and 300, if we recall, from 13 July.



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Susan Acland-Hood: Nevertheless, it is just an indication of the acceleration.

Chair: We will come to the impact on the whole surveying industry in a minute. Ashley Dalton has a brief question.

Q128 **Ashley Dalton:** I am still not clear on how many surveys there are. I understand that you have gone from three to eight surveying contractors, but how many surveys are there still to be done—that are currently identified and waiting to be surveyed? I am not asking you to predict how many schools are going to come back and ask for one; how many today, roughly, need to be done?

Jane Cunliffe: It is very fast moving. We are doing tens of surveys every day. I do not want to give an exact figure, and as Susan says we are also very careful about giving figures in a managed way, so that we can manage the situation. We have not found RAAC in about two thirds of all the surveys we have done, so we also want to be careful of not expanding the problem to make it broader than it is. We will survey everybody who suspects that they have RAAC, but at the moment we are finding that, out of the surveys we do, about a third have confirmed RAAC.

Q129 **Chair:** About a third of how many? Can you pin down the number a bit more tightly? Saying a number is not going to alarm more people. They know they are going to be surveyed for RAAC individually, so knowing the number is not going to alarm anybody.

Jane Cunliffe: I do not have the number as of today, because we are surveying very quickly, but as Susan said we have already done over 600.

Chair: Okay, so you have done 600.

Susan Acland-Hood: Over 600.

Q130 **Chair:** You have done over 600. How many are waiting their turn for their survey? You say you cannot give us a number as of today, but when is the last time for which you can give us a number?

Jane Cunliffe: I think we will look to release that information in a managed way, because the number is changing every hour. We are getting through those surveys as quickly as possible.

Q131 **Chair:** Tens or hundreds? There are so many thousands of schools in the country. Are we talking about tens or hundreds?

Jane Cunliffe: We are talking of several more to do, obviously, in the pipeline and being allocated. I think the fact that we have increased the surveying capacity so much indicates that we have several to get through in the next few weeks.

Q132 **Chair:** But “several” sounds to me like single digits. We are sort of being sophists, but we are not playing a game here. I do not understand what the problem is about telling us, even if it is a ballpark figure, or, “As of the middle of last week, we had this many surveys still to do,” because obviously you then have to go through contracting with the surveyor. We



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get that there might be a time lag in the information. As of this moment, someone might have let one in your Department that we do not know about—we get that. But when you say “several”, do you mean single digits, tens or hundreds? Even if there are eight surveying companies willing to do this, and you have 100 surveys to do, that means that some schools will be waiting down the track, which is really what we are focused on: what schools need to know. Let’s try it the other way. What is the timeframe between those you know need surveys—

Susan Acland-Hood: We are doing several hundreds a week. That informs the timescale that Ministers are given.

Q133 **Chair:** So the ones that you have not done could be several hundreds.

Jane Cunliffe: But we are getting through those over the next few weeks. If a school has informed us, it is already in our survey programme and already booked in with those firms; as soon as new schools come in and respond to the questionnaire, they will be booked in if they suspect RAAC. We are getting through at the pace that we described, to make sure that schools get an answer as soon as possible.

Q134 **Ashley Dalton:** Moving that forward, I think you said something like 97% of questionnaires have come back. How many questionnaires have not come back? How many schools have not responded?

Jane Cunliffe: It is 98%.

Q135 **Ashley Dalton:** Of what?

Jane Cunliffe: Of about 15,000 schools that have some buildings in the target era.

Q136 **Ashley Dalton:** Has somebody done the maths—I am assuming that you have already done it—to say how many schools you are waiting to hear from?

Jane Cunliffe: It is a few hundred that we are waiting to hear from, and we are actively talking to the responsible bodies for any that have not come in. Obviously, we had a lot come in last week, so we are just processing those through, but we are satisfied that we are getting very close to being able to identify the schools in that target era where they are likely to have RAAC and get the surveys done as quickly as possible. Now that we are down to a diminishing number, we will be able to follow up with those responsible bodies individually.

Q137 **Mr Walker:** A quick one: you pay for the cost of the surveying; do you pay for the cost of any disruption caused by the surveying? Also, who has access to the survey report once it is done? Is that the DfE, the responsible body, or both, and is it the governing body and the head teacher as well?

Jane Cunliffe: The responsible body and the DfE will have access to it, and, obviously, we do a check, but the firms do the quality assurance on the surveys themselves. On disruption, we have not had any incidents that I am aware of where the disruption from the visual inspection has been so



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great that a school has had to seek costs for that. Sometimes there are some of the return surveys, which are a little tricky, but we would of course be happy to follow that up with the school and look at that if there was a cost to it. For example, if it was the hall and they needed some double-height scaffolding or so on to do the survey, we would be very happy to talk to the school about that and see whether we could help with that. But I am not aware of any cases where that has come up.

Q138 Mr Francois: You did your survey, which went out to all the schools, and if they came back and said that they had RAAC, you tried to survey them. You put them into three categories, which was high—or critical—medium and low. Is that correct?

Susan Acland-Hood: Four categories: it's critical, high, medium and low.

Q139 Mr Francois: Okay. And the question we've been asked again and again is, "Why did all this happen just before the start of term?" Why didn't you deal with it long before then, over the summer holidays? My understanding—I would like you to confirm whether it is right—is that, just over a couple of weeks ago, when that beam fell into a classroom that was unoccupied because of the summer holidays, it was in a school that had been categorised as low—

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes.

Mr Francois: That was what really kicked the whole thing off, wasn't it?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes.

Mr Francois: And the system went into overdrive because you thought it was a low risk and then the ceiling came in.

Chair: I think the answer is yes, because you already said it.

Susan Acland-Hood: I just want to be very clear about this because I don't want to be misleading to the Committee. The decision was made on the basis of a collection of cases. The last of them was very late in the summer. Ministers were considering this over the summer and doing things like asking us to go and speak in detail to IStructE. We were having those conversations, but the third of the cases that were highly relevant—

Q140 Mr Francois: We are tight for time. No pun intended, but that was the straw that broke the camel's back, and that is why, to the layman, it all appeared to happen at the last minute, right? Now, there are surveys and surveys. The problem with RAAC is that you often cannot tell with a visual inspection whether it is dangerous. You have to intrusively go into the wall or ceiling and take a sample.

What a lot of the schools were told—you did visual inspections, then you told the heads, "Don't worry, you're clear", and they breathed out. I hear this from my own heads. Now you are going back to those schools and saying you're awfully sorry, but just to be sure, you need to go and do an intrusive inspection, so you've got to do nearly all of them again. Why didn't you just explain that five minutes ago, Ms Acland-Hood?



Susan Acland-Hood: I don't think that is quite right.

Mr Francois: Well, that is what my headteachers are telling me.

Susan Acland-Hood: There are two different things. Our survey programme is principally a visual inspection programme. That is one of the reasons why we are concerned about whether we can be secure in the judgments about whether the RAAC is critical, high, medium or low. But we don't have a programme of going back and doing intrusive surveys in order to categorise. We have moved to the position of saying that if RAAC is present, it should be remediated.

Q141 **Mr Francois:** Forgive me, but, as I said in the House on Monday, there is a dichotomy between what officials are telling MPs and what they are telling headteachers. A number of my headteachers have told me themselves—I know these heads—that they were told in the first case, "Stand down, we have done a visual inspection," but now they are being told, "No, we've got to come back and dig into the walls".

Chair: You are referring to earlier in the summer, Mr Francois.

Mr Francois: Yes, exactly. How many of these surveys have now got to be done again from scratch?

Jane Cunliffe: The surveys that we did don't need to be done again because they all confirmed the presence—or not—of RAAC. Previously, they were also grading the RAAC, but we are now saying, because of the change in guidance, "If RAAC is present, our advice is to close that area." We do not need to redo the surveys because the survey was confirming whether RAAC was there or not.

Q142 **Mr Francois:** So why are you telling headteachers that you do? Do you want me to read you the names of the schools and heads? Why are you doing that?

Susan Acland-Hood: I think there might be confusion between two different things here, or possibly even three. There are some schools that need a resurvey because of access issues, because it was difficult to get full access under the ceiling. That is different from doing a full intrusive survey, where you drill into the fittings. The further access is needed to establish where RAAC is present in the school. That is one area where we might have come and done a survey, then come back and said that we needed to do another survey.

The second thing that we are seeing is some responsible bodies saying they want to do intrusive surveys as part of their mitigation measures. If that is what they want to do, we are supporting that, but our programme does not involve resurveying with intrusive surveys, because we have moved away from the categorisation approach and towards mitigation. To do the full intrusive survey that is required to understand the bearing ends, you have to vacate the space for a significant period of time, and you have prop the area in order to make sure that you are not causing a difficulty. If you are going to vacate the space and put in a prop of some



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kind, you might as well mitigate, because you are highly likely, when you do the intrusive survey, to find at least one—

Mr Francois: Can I humbly suggest—

Susan Acland-Hood: We are clearly not getting the communication of this right, so let me take that away. We will talk to the individual schools and make sure that they—

Q143 **Mr Francois:** Forgive me, but as you know, I have had this for two years. You're right: you are not getting it right, with respect. A number of heads in my patch were rapidly promised mobile classrooms, and then they were told a few days later that they were not coming. Straight question, straight answer: since you did this, how many mobile classrooms have you provided to schools that are affected, Ms Cunliffe? What is the number?

Jane Cunliffe: I do not have the number with me today.

Q144 **Mr Francois:** Why not?

Jane Cunliffe: The contracts we have put in place centrally—we started them recently, over the summer, because we were worried about having the supply for the critical places already. The delivery of those will be dependent. I know that there is a school that has had delays because of the ground that we have to put the mobile classrooms on, and some responsible bodies will procure their own classrooms.

Q145 **Chair:** How many has the Department paid for and procured? You must know.

Mr Francois: We are the Public Accounts Committee. Give us some numbers.

Jane Cunliffe: I do not have the numbers from that contract today, but I am happy to write to the Committee.

Chair: You were called back to give us answers on these points.

Q146 **Mr Francois:** Yes, come on. Are we talking tens—30, 50, 80—or are we talking several hundred?

Jane Cunliffe: Obviously, we are working in a very live situation with a lot of these schools.

Chair: We appreciate that.

Jane Cunliffe: I will give you the number, but we do not have it today.

Chair: You must know. We would expect you to come with that, frankly, in the room today. We need to know how many you have procured, but you surely have a handle as well—Mr Francois was right—on how many the schools have procured instead, because that might be less for you to worry about.

Mr Francois: You mentioned Hockley Primary, which was absolutely,



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faithfully promised by your officials that there would be eight mobile relocatables there from 4 September. I was sitting in the Minister's office when I was told it. I go and tell the parents in all good faith, then find out that, sorry, they are not turning up till mid-November. Of course, all the parents are furious, because the MP told them in all good faith that it would be September, because the Minister and the officials told him that, sitting in the Department. This is my point: there is a complete disconnect between what you are telling Members of Parliament and Ministers, and what is happening on the ground. The fact that you cannot tell this Committee how many mobile classrooms you have actually provided since you took the decisions to close the schools—this is a recall session, so you have had plenty of warning—is what used to be known at school when I was a kid as a complete giveaway, isn't it?

Q147 **Chair:** "Isn't it" is not a question, but the point here is that we did expect some numbers on these issues. For every classroom that is late, you have responsible bodies—as we have all heard and have evidence on—buying their own, which might ease the contract that you are running, but you are fishing from the same pool, so it is important to get these figures.

Susan Acland-Hood: I completely understand the Committee's frustration on this. The central contracts that Jane is talking about were put in place over the summer, so there is a group of schools for whom we have paid—

Chair: These are the ones before the change in guidance.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. There is a group of schools for whom we have paid for mobile classrooms, who were identified before the change of decision. We will write to the Committee and give the number of mobile classrooms that we have paid for for those schools. It is true that the number will be small. The number will be small because, for the vast majority of those schools, as with the schools since the decision, they have found it possible to use other space. We have worked to try to get the right balance between remediation of the space in the school, which is often a better solution than a mobile classroom, and the provision of mobile classrooms. But we will write to the Committee and set that out.

Q148 **Chair:** So there are three—and then there are the ones that only needed it after the change on 31 August.

Susan Acland-Hood: In terms of those who have needed it after the change since 31 August, the Committee will understand that our target timeframe for providing a demountable classroom—which has to be given foundations and connected to electricity and water, and in many cases we have to seek planning permission—was two weeks. That is the most accelerated timescale we thought we could manage, and two weeks have not yet passed since the announcement. I just give you that piece of context. We are working with schools now to make sure we can order them as rapidly as possible, but two weeks have not yet passed.

Q149 **Mr Francois:** Do you appreciate that some parents are paid weekly—not



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everyone is paid monthly—and they now get a letter from the head out of the blue saying they've been told the school has to close, and they're going to have to take time off work to look after their child?

Susan Acland-Hood: I do understand. Again, the critical thing is that we have pupils in face-to-face learning.

Mr Francois: But in several of my schools, you don't.

Susan Acland-Hood: In Hockley, which is the school you're talking about, I believe all the pupils are in face-to-face learning.

Q150 **Mr Francois:** It wasn't just Hockley. They're not in face-to-face learning in Bromfords. They're not in face-to-face learning in Wyburns, right?

I have one more question, on communications, and then I'll hand back to the Chair. When all this broke, the schools were shut. MPs were given details of which schools were affected, but not necessarily to the degree. We had mobile numbers for some headteachers, but not for others—rang the school, and there was no one there. We were really anxious to find out. We tried to find out from the Department. I was ringing up one head and saying, "Do you by any chance have a mobile number for this other head so I can speak to them?" I found out that one of my schools was not going to open on Monday on Saturday morning. Do you know how I found out? I bumped into the headteacher in the gym. Do you think that is an acceptable level of communication from your Department?

Susan Acland-Hood: We made every effort we could to make sure that MPs understood the status of the schools that were affected in their constituencies, and we were communicating as much as we possibly could, with the schools, responsible bodies and MPs. As you observe, there were some challenges in the fact that term had not yet begun, so it was challenging to get in touch with some schools and responsible bodies, but we made every possible effort, and wherever we had information we passed it on.

Q151 **Mr Francois:** So why did I only find that out because I happened to bump into this person as I was about to get on the jogging machine?

Jane Cunliffe: As Susan said, we made every effort to contact MPs. We also established an MP line for people to call in and get information about the cases.

Chair: Obviously it didn't work in every case.

Q152 **Mr Francois:** One last thing: your Secretary of State said she was the only person who had been working hard on this. Some of your civil servants have worked incredibly hard on this. I'm sure you have too, and so did two junior Ministers: Baroness Barran has been knocking herself out on this for a year and so has Nick Gibb, the Schools Minister. There's a whole bunch of people who have been working really hard on this. Perhaps the Secretary of State owes some of her team an apology. Do you agree?



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Susan Acland-Hood: No, I don't. The Secretary of State has been generous, I think, in recognising work done in the Department. I don't think she intended to suggest that others had not been working hard. All I can say is, on behalf of the Department I am really grateful. I think schools, responsible bodies and teachers up and down the country, as I said at the beginning of the hearing, have worked unbelievably hard in what were very difficult circumstances at short notice. I am incredibly grateful to them, because the result has been that we do have most pupils in face-to-face learning, even in the schools that were affected. All I can say is that these things only happen when people are working as hard as they possibly can in partnership with each other and—

Mr Francois: The heads have worked their socks off. The problem is that what your officials tell them keeps changing by the day. Anyway, Dame Meg—back to you.

Q153 **Chair:** I think Mr Francois is paying tribute to those who have been working hard. The permanent secretary cannot answer for the Secretary of State directly, although that was a valiant attempt.

Can I quickly touch on the issue of when you contacted heads? In covid, I remember we sat in a room similar to this the day before the Christmas recess and asked why schools did not know whether they would be opening on 1 January. That was in term time, when you could reach heads. Have you learnt anything from the covid crisis about how to reach schools in the summer holidays? It sounds like it was quite a challenge to track people down.

Jane Cunliffe: Because we were dealing with responsible bodies in most cases, that was more straightforward—there was someone there, rather than the individual school. Because it was the week before term started, we were able to speak to all of the schools. We also assigned them the caseworker and that got going quite quickly. We were able to make those contacts and we were also able to work with them on the mitigations to make sure that that was confirmed for the list we published. That also worked because we were reaching out to the responsible body, which often then had contacts for the headteachers.

Q154 **Chair:** Do you think the contact tree was better than it might have been before covid?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, I do. I think it's still something we should keep an eye on, though.

Q155 **Chair:** I think we are hearing from different places that it wasn't always perfect. I will move on briefly before I pass back to Ms Blake. On the temporary classrooms and the kitting-out of them, a temporary classroom on its own—a building—isn't enough if you've got a science lab or a DT room. Who is paying out for the kitting-out inside the temporary buildings?

Jane Cunliffe: For all capital costs for temporary classrooms, you order either a standard classroom or a more specialist one, like a science lab. That will all be funded.



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Q156 **Chair:** Is it a capital cost if you are hiring it?

Jane Cunliffe: If you are hiring it, it's a revenue cost. For example, with hiring another premises, we have said that we will support schools with those revenue costs and they just need to talk to their caseworker about that.

Q157 **Chair:** Okay. Just to be clear, whether they buy one or hire one, the schools will not have to take that money out of their core budget and it will be paid for through the Department.

Susan Acland-Hood: We have slightly different positions on capital and revenue, but for hire of portable classrooms we can capitalise that cost, so it counts as capital. If it counts as revenue, we do have one stage of checking that the expenditure is properly related to this, that it's reasonable and so on, and that the school doesn't have a very, very high level of reserve. However, we are setting the most generous bar we can on that and we will continue to do so. Again, if colleagues have concerns about whether those costs are being decided on quickly, we can—

Q158 **Mr Walker:** On the transport costs, you said those will be looked at on a case-by-case basis. Is that on the same basis that you just mentioned?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. We will err on the side of generosity and our assumption is that we will meet all reasonable costs.

Q159 **Mr Walker:** When you provide your next update, will you be able to provide any figures on the number of schools receiving assistance with transport?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes.

Q160 **Olivia Blake:** Just going back to the surveys and the access issue that you highlighted, is there a record for why access was difficult in each case? I have picked up that asbestos is an issue. Is that the main concern with the initial surveys?

Susan Acland-Hood: I will hand over to Jane in a minute, but there are a range of reasons. Sometimes it is as simple as a very high ceiling.

Q161 **Olivia Blake:** Is it recorded on each?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. We will record, because that helps us to plan the return surveys. As Jane says, we also prioritise the return surveys based on what we found in the first surveys. It is frequently the case that we have been able to check a significant proportion of the school and then a small proportion hasn't been able to be checked. We would prioritise based on what we found in the first part of that activity.

Jane Cunliffe: I can cover asbestos as well. Some of the return visits are due to asbestos, so we have asked all schools to make sure that they have their asbestos management register there for when the surveyor arrives, so that we can work around that as much as possible. Some of those return visits are because the access was more difficult because of the asbestos. That will be something that the technical advisory firms—the



surveying firms—are working on with the school, to work out how they can get enough site to check whether RAAC is present or not. It is not all of the cases, as Susan said. There are other access issues, such as height of ceilings, plasterboard in the way, and so on.

Q162 **Olivia Blake:** Just quickly on liability, if staff are trying to access resources to fit out their classrooms, if there was an incident who would be liable?

Jane Cunliffe: If they were—?

Olivia Blake: If they were trying to get equipment to stock their new classrooms—their portacabins?

Jane Cunliffe: Do you mean who would fund the equipment?

Susan Acland-Hood: No, I think this is about if they are going into a closed bit of school to get things to put in the temporary classrooms. What we have done in those cases is to make sure we're supporting them through our technical advisers and PDs with advice about safe access to those spaces.

Q163 **Anne Marie Morris:** Is the School Rebuilding Programme going to be impacted in terms of which schools are in it and whether or not it needs to be expanded to take account of the challenges you have just found?

Susan Acland-Hood: We have a School Rebuilding Programme of 500 schools, of which 400 are named and there are 100 slots that do not yet have a school allocated to them. It is helpful to read this into the record. We will not be taking named schools out of the School Rebuilding Programme. If a school is one of the 400 that has been named, it will be rebuilt under the programme. We expect that we will prioritise RAAC schools for the remaining 100 slots in the programme. We have always done the School Rebuilding Programme on the basis of an assessment of risk, so if another school has a risk that is manifestly as critical or more critical, that does not mean it will not be able to get access.

The Chancellor's commitment to also make sure that longer-term work can be funded means I would expect that we could be looking at an increase in numbers of schools coming through the School Rebuilding Programme, but that will depend on the assessment of need as we work through with each school. We will work through the short-term mitigations and get the work done, and then we will assess for each school what the need is for longer-term work.

Q164 **Anne Marie Morris:** Am I right in concluding that, because of what you said about prioritisation of the RAAC schools, some schools that might have been in the early phase might get bumped—they will still be in the scheme, but they will be bumped and will get it later? Secondly, there will probably be more than the 100 vacancies that need to be filled and therefore you will be going to the Treasury to say, "We need some more money to make sure all the RAAC schools are covered and so that we do not let down any of the 100 that have been promised."



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Susan Acland-Hood: When I was talking about the prioritisation, I was talking about how we fill the 100 slots. It is possible that we might need to look at timing and phasing, but we will seek not to interfere with timescales already given in detail.

In terms of whether we need to be able to go beyond the 100, I cannot tell you definitively now because that depends on the assessment of need in each of the individual schools. We have some schools that will not need full rebuilding; they will need a repair or replacement of a part. The agreement that we have with the Treasury is that any expansion of the School Rebuilding Programme that we need or any rebuild that we need to do will be the first call on resource in the next SR, so the bulk of the cost falls into the next SR. The remediation we have to do now, which falls into this SR, we can manage within the Department's existing capital budgets. We have agreed with the Treasury that as we look at negotiations for the next SR, this will be our first priority for the capital spend. That is the basis on which they are comfortable for us to make the commitment that we will rebuild or refurbish.

Jane Cunliffe: We have a commitment, as you know, to 50 schools a year. We are confident we have capacity to do more than that through our supply chain. That means that if the RAAC schools go into those 100 slots, we will make sure that those that need a full rebuild get rebuilt. We are confident we have capacity to do more each year if that is the best way of ordering it.

Q165 **Anne Marie Morris:** How much notice will you give any school that currently has a timetable within this programme that that timetable will have to change because of RAAC?

Jane Cunliffe: We announced 239 schools in the School Rebuilding Programme in December. We are currently working with each school to work out the scheduling, because there are lots of things around planning, sites and covenants.

Q166 **Anne Marie Morris:** How much notice will you give them of a change? You are in the process of negotiating a timeframe.

Susan Acland-Hood: Our starting point is that we will seek not to make changes to any school that has a firm timetable.

Q167 **Anne Marie Morris:** Is that realistic?

Susan Acland-Hood: There are a number of schools with which we are still working on a timeframe, anyway.

Q168 **Chair:** So there could be a hidden delay but because there is no firm timetable, it would not be recorded as a delay.

Susan Acland-Hood: We need to prioritise and we think that is the right thing to do.

Q169 **Chair:** If you are bidding for capital at the next spending review and this is the priority, that means other things will not be in your bidding for the



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spending review, so there will be a trade-off. What will you not be bidding for? What will not happen?

Susan Acland-Hood: It means that we and the Treasury are clear that this is the first priority. That is not an unhelpful thing to go into a spending review knowing. It does not stop us bidding for other things and it does not stop us making a really good case. It means that we are able to plan now to know that this will be the first priority for us and for them. The alternative would effectively be to have to wait until the spending review to be able to give that clarity that we would be able to meet the commitment to rebuild and replace.

Q170 **Chair:** We know the state of the public finances. If this is the main draw on capital funding, there will be other things that do not happen.

Jane Cunliffe: The School Rebuilding Programme is in any case a 10-year programme and most of the costs that fall into the next framework will be in the School Rebuilding Programme. That will always be the first call on any capital envelope. That will be slightly increased across the programme that we expect now by the impact of the RAAC schools.

Q171 **Chair:** What is the order of magnitude it would be increased by?

Jane Cunliffe: We don't know yet because we need to assess each site and see whether it can be refurbished or rebuilt. We do expect to use the remaining 100 slots and possibly more, but we need to do that site-by-site analysis. If it is a school with one block, for example, it might be quicker and better to refurbish that if the rest of the school is in a good condition, so we will do that analysis as soon as the mitigations are in place.

Chair: Thank you for that for now.

Q172 **Sarah Olney:** A lot obviously hinges on the return of the questionnaire, certainly initially. These questionnaires were sent out to schools and then you took action if the returned questionnaire or its contents indicated that there was an issue. How confident are you that the questionnaire was the most robust way to collect information in the first place? Do you really think that headteachers, or whoever it was that you sent the questionnaire to, were well qualified, well positioned and sufficiently knowledgeable about the contents of their buildings to be able to give you the answers that you needed?

Jane Cunliffe: We sent the questionnaire to responsible bodies, who usually, depending on the size of the responsible body, will have an estates team. We issued guidance to help schools identify that, but we did say that it should be by an estates manager. We did say that if you are unsure, you should get assistance from an appropriately qualified building surveyor and, furthermore, if you are not sure, please contact the Department for Education and we will send someone from our surveying programme. It is definitely not the case that we were expecting heads to definitively answer on that questionnaire. We are obviously concerned where some of those questionnaire responses came in and said there was no RAAC, and particularly for schools that were in that target era. We have always intended and will go back to do a sample of those questionnaires



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that came back as negative. We will ask our surveying firms to do some sample checks to see that those responses are adequate.

We also have some inconclusive responses where we have had questionnaire responses with some free text. We are going through those with each of the responsible bodies to follow up. It might be, for example, that the responsible body has described the type of construction of their roof. Our technical experts will look at that and say, "Is that a roof that is very unlikely to have RAAC or that might have RAAC?" and then we will put that into the survey programme. We have been as thorough as we can be with that and, obviously, we have said that if you are unsure, just tell us that you are unsure and then we will send a surveyor out.

Q173 **Sarah Olney:** Would it not have just been easier, particularly for those responsible bodies that, as you say, do not have an estates team, to arrange to send a surveyor?

Jane Cunliffe: Some of them will have sought help from a surveyor who they have worked with before. Some of them will of course have come through as a suspected case and, as we have said, about two thirds of those suspected cases so far have turned out not to have RAAC. I think we have taken a cautious approach and have encouraged people in our guidance that if they are not sure to come through.

Q174 **Sarah Olney:** When you say "cautious", do you mean cautious in the sense of not wanting to commit to paying for a surveyor when you do not need to, or do you mean cautious in the sense of being as certain as you can be about the existence of RAAC? What version of cautious do you mean?

Jane Cunliffe: I meant about being as certain as we can be. For example, if, as it says in the guidance, the school cannot do the investigations, we have said, "Please just contact the Department for Education" so that we can check we have not got false negatives among that. We will then do this sample check against the questionnaires that responded no, and obviously with buildings in that target area, because if their buildings were built later, we would be less concerned about it.

Q175 **Sarah Olney:** Are you now allocating more funding to assist those people who have sent back questionnaires where it is not clear whether they have RAAC or whether they are qualified to know if they have RAAC? Are you now stepping up surveys for them?

Jane Cunliffe: Yes, our central survey programme is where we have increased from the three firms we had to eight firms. We are paying for that centrally from the Department, so all those surveys are covered for all the schools.

Q176 **Sarah Olney:** What about those schools who might have had to pay for their own survey to respond to your questionnaire? Are they now going to be recompensed?

Jane Cunliffe: It is a mixture. Obviously we are happy to talk to any schools where they would like to be refunded for surveys they have done



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for RAAC. Some of them will have done it as part of a broader structural survey, for example, that they were doing as part of their responsible body role, but obviously we are happy to talk to schools if they have incurred costs, particularly in responsible bodies where there is quite a high incidence of RAAC. We know that that is an issue and we will pick up conversations with those responsible bodies.

Q177 **Sarah Olney:** What is the remaining risk either that schools did not identify RAAC because they were not qualified to be able to, even though they did reply to your survey, or that they have not yet responded to the survey? To what extent do you think there is still an unknowable number of schools with RAAC? Are you sending surveyors to all of them?

Jane Cunliffe: We have got 98% of the responses in from the schools in the target era.

Q178 **Sarah Olney:** Yes, but you cannot be sure that they are all robust responses, with fully qualified—

Jane Cunliffe: That is why we are going to do the sample check. If that sample check shows, for example, that lots of the schools that had responded to say no had—

Q179 **Sarah Olney:** Are you now doing the sample check, or had you always planned to do the sample check?

Jane Cunliffe: We had always planned to do it. At the moment, our surveying capacity, just for the next few weeks, is really focused on those questionnaire responses where they say they suspect that they have got RAAC, and then we will ask the firms to do that sample check. Obviously if that sample check shows that some of those negative responses did have RAAC, we will have to consider how to filter those negative responses, such as for age or type of building, and revisit those schools. But we are absolutely committed to identifying it as quickly as we can.

Q180 **Anne Marie Morris:** Ms Cunliffe, why did some schools feel able to ignore those questionnaires?

Jane Cunliffe: We have now got a very good response rate, and in any case we were up to about 95%.

Q181 **Anne Marie Morris:** That is not my question, though. My question is why they did not respond. Why did schools feel that they did not need to? Could they not be bothered? Were they worried about the cost? Why did they not respond?

Jane Cunliffe: Sometimes it is because they were sure that they did not have RAAC. We asked for a response, but some of them did not respond. It is a whole variety of reasons, I think, but we are confident we are getting there. The vast majority of responses are in now, and we will be chasing the remaining ones.

Q182 **Anne Marie Morris:** It is rather worrying. It makes me begin to wonder who is ultimately responsible for the safety of school buildings. Don't get me wrong: I am not asking who is responsible for actually going in,



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making sure for their school body that the buildings are in reasonable shape, and doing a schedule of repairs. Who is ultimately responsible for the safety, which is a different but related question?

Jane Cunliffe: It is the responsible body that is legally responsible for the buildings—the safety. On the issue of RAAC, we have taken a more proactive approach with responsible bodies and have done the surveying programme centrally. That is different from the approach we take on other issues such as asbestos, where we work with responsible bodies but they follow guidance from the Health and Safety Executive, as we discussed last time.

Q183 **Anne Marie Morris:** Thank you, Ms Cunliffe. That is helpful. Given what you said right at the start, which is that schools do not have the expertise to actually know what they are looking for, it would seem inappropriate to ask a school to be responsible and accountable when it does not have the tools, the resource or the knowledge to be able to ask the right questions. So I ask you again: who is responsible? It clearly cannot be the schools, because in your own words they do not have the tools to be able to make that judgment.

Susan Acland-Hood: Can I just say that I think there is a really good rationale for keeping responsibility close to the school? There are a whole set of issues on which the responsible body is much closer to the day-to-day operation of the school and can understand much better not just the estate but the impact of shifts that are made. I think your question is a really good one—

Chair: I think we get the point.

Susan Acland-Hood: It is about striking a balance, because there is a case for holding responsibility close to the school.

Chair: You have said that a few times. We get that.

Q184 **Anne Marie Morris:** We understand that, Ms Acland-Hood, but I think this gives rise to a question—particularly as we are looking at the Government stepping in—as to who should be responsible. It seems to me that the Government thinks it is responsible, which is why it stepped in. Should there not be some much more proactive rather than reactive approach, led by Government—led by the Health and Safety Executive—so we actually know what the state of our buildings across the country is, so there is a proper record of them and so the Government can support those bodies to get this right?

Susan Acland-Hood: We have condition data collection, which is effectively a very large survey programme that looks at the overall condition. I think getting the right balance is about making sure that we have a good central understanding and can give good-quality support and advice, but also that we do not remove responsibility and agency entirely from those who are closest to the schools. I think that is a challenge, and it is something we have to keep looking at and testing to see whether we have the right approach.



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I agree with you: I think the fact that on issues like this we end up taking a more proactive approach means it is right for us to keep asking ourselves the question: have we got the balance right overall, and should we look at it?

Q185 **Mr Francois:** Quickly for the record, one of the reasons that so many of the schools are in Essex is because Essex County Council very diligently—Ms Cunliffe is nodding, in fairness—harried the schools and trusts to return the questionnaires. They diligently did that, and then got closed.

Susan Acland-Hood: And there are lots of schools in Essex because of the timing of rebuilding—

Mr Francois: We understand that. Fair play to Essex County Council for having been so diligent.

Susan Acland-Hood: I completely agree with you. I pay tribute to Essex County Council, which I think has been an outstanding responsible body on this.

Q186 **Olivia Blake:** How do you plan to manage the risk of the false negatives you mentioned?

Jane Cunliffe: As we said, we are of course concerned that where questionnaire responses have come in in that target era and said, “No, we do not have RAAC”, we will do a sample check of those. That will include surveyors going out to some of those sites. We will obviously look at the reasons given for that confidence that RAAC was not there. For example, it might be that they have had a new roof, so they know that it has been removed, but we will do that sample check. We have the surveying capacity focused on the suspected cases as an order of priority, but we will do that sample check on the risk for false negatives. If that sample check shows that there were false negatives, we will have to think about what we do and whether we need to do more surveying.

Susan Acland-Hood: We are keeping a really careful eye on this. We are seeing a lot more false positives than false negatives, so our guidance really did encourage schools that if they were not sure, they should—as it were—err on the side of caution and suggest that they might have it. We would then do the check. As I say, we see that with two thirds of the schools that tell us they suspect they have RAAC, when we go and survey them, they do not have RAAC. That is not a criticism: we think that that is excellent. We think that suggests that schools are rightly being cautious.

Q187 **Chair:** That is part of your mitigation against the risk.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. The second thing is that although one would not wish it to happen like this, there is the fact that significant attention—I think we can safely say—has been drawn to this issue in recent weeks. We have seen some schools re-submit their questionnaire because they want to make sure that they are being as cautious as possible. Again, where they do that, we will act on the latest answers.

Q188 **Chair:** Some schools have been asked for questionnaires that they have



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submitted. Can you explain that discrepancy?

Susan Acland-Hood: There are three things going on there. The first thing is that in some cases, we are just working through with the responsible bodies if they think that they have submitted and we think that they have not. We are just working through, "What happened?" Sometimes it is as simple as—

Chair: Some admin error.

Susan Acland-Hood: Or even a kind of, "We pressed the button and it looked like it had gone". We think the biggest contributors to that are where a school has changed responsible bodies. Particularly where a school has moved to a new academy trust and was part of a new academy trust from 1 September, we wanted the new responsible body to submit on behalf of that school, even if a questionnaire had been submitted by a previous responsible body, because we want the responsible body to know what is being said about the school that they are now responsible for. That caused some of the difference of view about whether they had—

Q189 **Chair:** Talking about schools changing hands, on this Committee we have looked at the free schools programme, among other things. We concluded that there was a vast escalation in prices on some public sites to meet the target of 500 free schools. Were those free school sites surveyed for RAAC and asbestos before being purchased?

Jane Cunliffe: Obviously the majority of free school sites are surveyed. I think there were some where surveys were difficult to do before the site was purchased, but I do not have all the detail.

Q190 **Chair:** Sorry, but if you bought a house, you would have to have a survey to do it. Was it because the taxpayer was paying for it with cash that it did not need a survey?

Jane Cunliffe: I can write with details. I think it is a very small number of sites where because of the particulars of the site—

Q191 **Chair:** It is easy to say in hindsight, but it was pretty obvious at the time that very large sums were spent. I am trying to verify one of the sites that we bought for apparently £33 million that is now worth maybe £20 million, but when I verify it I shall send you the details, Ms Acland-Hood. These are vast sums of money spent on sites that were sometimes not actually turned into free schools, and some of which have closed or been taken over by other bodies. That amount of money was much less than was spent on capital funding for schools that are in difficulty. Do you think the balance was maybe a bit wrong—building new schools while other schools were falling apart? Many of them were in areas where there are now surplus places.

Susan Acland-Hood: The 10-year period that we have just been through saw one of the biggest expansions in pupil numbers since the second world war, so there was a strong need for more pupil places. The free schools programme was partly there to provide more pupils with places in response to demand and partly to provide high-quality places—



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Q192 **Chair:** We are not a Committee that discusses policy. Free schools were a Government policy. Whatever anyone's individual views—whether they were pro, against or neutral on free schools—the Committee's concern was the cost of the sites and the conversion costs for many sites, some of which are not even great sites and have not turned out to be very useful or good for pupils and so are storing up problems for the future. There was a lot of money spent on them, wasn't there, compared with capital funding on existing sites? Not all.

Susan Acland-Hood: We always try to keep the right balance between the funding we spend on new places and that on maintenance and refurbishment. I think it is right that that balance changes over time. You were asking me earlier about the next spending review and the right balance of priorities. We are about to enter a period where we are not going to see high levels of pupil growth and so you would rightly expect the balance to shift back in the direction of—away from the creation of large numbers of new places. But on individual value for money—again, I hear the question you are asking, Chair—I am always happy to look at cases where we think we have not got value for money. I am really keen, as an accounting officer, that we are getting good value for money and I will always pursue that.

Q193 **Chair:** Well, it may be too late, as property prices have seemed to be dropping. Can I just touch on the impact on wider sectors before I go to Mr Walker to conclude? You have now got eight surveying firms working to you. You are pretty much hoovering up the market for temporary buildings, or you and the schools are. The announcement was late, so there has been a snowball of chaos. You close schools and you need new classrooms. You have other public buildings now needing surveying. It has started this whole snowballing effect. There is a lack of surveyors, presumably because you have eight firms working for you and not available for them—so pity anyone in any other sector. Children's education has been massively disrupted. Do you regret making this decision, or Ministers making this decision in the timeframe they did—all in one go, to have these schools now needing this support all at the same time?

Susan Acland-Hood: No. All of us could wish that the information had become available at a different moment, but having the information that we had and that Ministers had—I think it would have been very difficult for them not to take the decision that was as cautious as possible and put pupil safety front and centre. You talk about doing it all at once. I think it would have been extremely difficult for Ministers to—

Q194 **Chair:** But you were doing it in stages before. You had 300 surveys when you saw us in July and yet it was not until some later surveys that this happened. Ms Cunliffe, were there any issues with those earlier surveys that meant this problem that you have highlighted did not arise before? We saw it in hospitals; we saw what was happening in hospitals, so it was not unknown.



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Jane Cunliffe: There is no issue with the surveys. As we said, the only difference now in the surveys is that previously the surveyors were saying, "Yes, there is RAAC" or "No, there isn't RAAC," and they were grading the RAAC. We are now saying the surveys are a simple yes or no, because of the change in the guidance—

Q195 **Chair:** But hospitals are mitigating. They are looking at it and saying, "That RAAC is dangerous, but we'll do this and this"—X-ray the roof, put up props, not put patients on the first floor; all sorts of things—"to manage it." They are going through a lot of mitigation. It is costly—£685 million over five years. Was that not an option, even with this very big challenge?

Susan Acland-Hood: That is what we are doing. We are identifying RAAC; we are moving children out from under it; and then we are mitigating it.

Q196 **Chair:** But you were not doing it before.

Susan Acland-Hood: We were. What we were doing was immediately moving children out from under the RAAC that was graded as critical, and we were mitigating that critical-graded RAAC very quickly. We were also working with the responsible body to mitigate other identified RAAC. I think the challenge was that, given what Ministers saw over the summer, they became very uncomfortable that we were not immediately moving the children out from under the RAAC that was not graded as critical. That is the distinction. The mitigation was happening in any case, but it was a bit about pace.

Q197 **Chair:** I think we are still puzzled as to exactly why the decision was made when it was, but time—well, we knew this was a recall. We will, I am sure, be talking more about this and we know our sister Committee will. I will bring in Mr Walker in a moment. My final comment before going to him is: this has had an adverse impact on children's education, and they are the same children as suffered under covid. Are you going to be providing extra funding to the schools where they have had to go remote or have major disruption? One head of an academy chain told me that some of her pupils cannot do their DT assessments, because they cannot get into a classroom with the equipment that they need. That is a big impact on a young person's life. What are you doing about that?

Susan Acland-Hood: Again, our first priority is to support schools to get as many children into face-to-face education as possible and to make it really good quality face-to-face education. And we hear that in some places, people may appear on our list as in face-to-face education but there may still be challenges. That is why we are trying to work towards—

Q198 **Chair:** What resources are available to help those schools and those pupils particularly?

Susan Acland-Hood: The caseworkers assigned to the schools, who are working with them on the individual circumstances, can support them in getting access to support from the Department on educational matters, not just on building matters. Schools can always talk to their caseworker—



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Q199 **Chair:** Talking to the caseworker, getting educational support—does that mean money, where that is necessary?

Susan Acland-Hood: If that is what is needed.

Q200 **Chair:** Okay. Is that on a case-by-case basis? Are there criteria? Are the criteria for schools on what would qualify published, so that they know what to ask for? Or is it just about the pushy headteacher, the luck of the draw, or the good caseworker who puts the case well? How do you make sure that it is fair?

Jane Cunliffe: We have a process of revenue funding, which we have explained we will look at. Of all the costs associated with this situation, we expect to fund the vast majority, and we would expect that to come through the caseworker. As we get more of those, we will have more examples. We know about transport and renting premises. We will make sure that the casework team have those examples, as—

Chair: That is really helpful for headteachers who might be wanting to know right now. Mr Francois has schools in that very category.

Q201 **Mr Francois:** On that point, heads are telling me that, until today, many caseworkers did not have the devolved authority to take spending decisions, to authorise the outlay of revenue funding. I understand that the policy has changed today, which I am sure everyone will welcome, but can you confirm that?

Susan Acland-Hood: We are still asking the caseworkers to work with their counterparts in the ESFA to make sure—

Chair: The Education and Skills Funding Agency.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. But we have said both to the caseworkers and to our ESFA colleagues working on this as clearly as we possibly can that the presumption should be in favour of meeting all reasonable costs. If you are seeing a change, that might be the continual communication—

Q202 **Mr Francois:** One school got into a massive email exchange about who would pay for the cost of six temporary whiteboards. That is real life. You closed the schools; you should pay for it. It is a very simple principle, isn't it?

Susan Acland-Hood: There is a key thing that the Committee would expect of me in all circumstances. Again, we really do not want to introduce friction into this, and if it has felt like an unreasonable process, I will look into it and make sure that we learn from that. What I have wanted to make sure of—again, there is a bit of an accounting officer head on this—is that there has to be at least a small, quick check that the expenditure is reasonable and related to the issue.

Chair: That can be quite streamlined.

Susan Acland-Hood: Really streamlined. We have seen one or two schools seeking things that look like they go quite a long way beyond—



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Chair: We would expect you to have some checks, but Mr Francois's point is checks, not an—

Q203 **Mr Francois:** We just need some common sense. Lastly, if the Committee accepts that Ministers had to take an extremely unpalatable decision because conditions had changed and suddenly the risks appeared to be worse—if we accept that—do you accept in return that communication from the Department not just to MPs but, critically, to headteachers, could have been a lot better? Would you meet us halfway on that?

Susan Acland-Hood: We will do everything we can to communicate as well as we possibly can. I hear the concern, and I understand why people are worried. We did speak to every responsible body that was affected. We were also checking that they had communicated immediately with their headteacher. We are always ready to learn how we could do it better. It was quite a challenging thing to do in the timeframe that we were doing it in—

Q204 **Mr Francois:** After the King Edmund School issue, you promised that lessons would be learned, but it looks as if that is not what happened.

Susan Acland-Hood: We are getting quite good feedback from quite a lot of responsible bodies and schools that have been worked with on the support that they are getting—

Chair: Lessons from how MPs were communicated with in covid have perhaps not all been learned.

Q205 **Mr Walker:** On the subject of lessons learned and on value for money, how do we make sure that in future building programmes—indeed, in current building programmes—we do not use life-limited materials in public buildings that will be used for multiple generations? Are you confident that the Department guidance for school buildings right now is up to standard on that? Will there be a lessons-learned process, given that RAAC—after asbestos and other wonder materials of the past—has shown that life-limited materials in multi-generational public buildings are a bad thing?

Jane Cunliffe: Yes. We obviously keep that under really close review with our technical team. On RAAC itself, the understanding of that as a material is evolving very quickly and we are in very close and regular contact with Loughborough University, which is doing the research on it, and IStructE. Yes, we aim for our buildings now to have a design life and we make sure that that is very well known and documented. There is a design life, and obviously that can be extended as we discussed last time with regular maintenance.

Q206 **Chair:** Regular maintenance is one of the issues here. We will be producing a Report on this in due course, building on this but also on the original session, which was about the condition of school buildings more generally. Let us not forget that there are 700,000 pupils in inadequate buildings and that 38% of buildings in England are not fit for purpose.

Obviously, it is really important to us and to our constituents, and to



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heads and pupils and parents out there, that you keep Parliament informed about this. We are more than a bit disappointed—disappointed is politely putting it—that you came without numbers on some of these issues. How do you intend to keep Parliament and this Committee, and our sister Committee, jointly informed about progress?

Susan Acland-Hood: We will set out with Ministers the strategy for publishing both the future list of schools, which we talked about, and the data and information that sits alongside that. We want to do that in a regular rhythm, as we would with other important management information.

Q207 **Chair:** Are you talking about every couple of weeks at the moment?

Susan Acland-Hood: We will write to the Committee.

Chair: Okay. Both Committees will be pushing. One of your Ministers has the delight of appearing in front of the Education Select Committee next week, possibly with a guest from this Committee. As two Committees, we are committed to pursuing this on behalf of the pupils of this country, who are having a really difficult time at the moment. I thank you very much for your time. The uncorrected transcript of this session will be available on the website in the next couple of days, and we will be producing our Report on this, which is now likely to be after the conference recess.