

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Unsafe concrete in education settings, HC 1817

Tuesday 19 September 2023

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Education Committee Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Miriam Cates; Anna Firth; Nick Fletcher; Kim Johnson; Andrew Lewer.

Public Accounts Committee Member present: Mr Mark Francois.

Work and Pensions Committee Member present: Siobhan Baillie.

Questions 1-100

Witnesses

I: Baroness Barran, Minister for the School System and Student Finance, Department for Education; and Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Baroness Barran and Susan Acland-Hood.

- Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to today's session on unsafe concrete in education settings. We are taking oral evidence from Baroness Barran, Minister for the School System and Student Finance at the Department for Education; and Susan Acland-Hood, permanent secretary at the Department for Education. I am pleased that on this occasion the Education Committee is joined by two guest Members: from the Public Accounts Committee, Mark Francois—who has stepped out for a moment, but will rejoin us shortly—and from the Work and Pensions Committee, Siobhan Baillie. You are all very welcome.

Minister, I believe you wanted to make a short statement to start. I thank you for the information that we received ahead of this meeting, but I point out that we received it with about 20 minutes to go before the meeting, which means that Members may not have been able to digest it fully. I have also received a written answer to a question that I put in last week, but again, when that written answer came in just last night, it felt perhaps like homework handed in a little late. I welcome the extra information that you have provided, but you might want to expand on it in your statement to make sure that all Members are aware of it.

Baroness Barran: Absolutely. Thank you, Chair, and I thank all members of the Committee for their interest in this extremely important subject. I put on the record our thanks to all the headteachers, trust leaders, local authorities and dioceses who have been working tirelessly where RAAC has been identified in their schools. I also thank neighbouring schools for providing space. There has been an incredible effort, thanks to which, 85% of the schools affected by RAAC are offering face-to-face education for children. That would not have happened without those efforts.

As the Committee knows and I am sure agrees, the safety of our children is paramount. We have been working on the issue of RAAC for some time, but when new information emerged over the summer, we took a precautionary approach and asked schools with confirmed RAAC to close the areas that included it. We are extremely aware of the timing of that announcement, and I am happy to go into more detail as to why we made the announcement when we did. We have, however, been working incredibly closely with schools and responsible bodies to make sure that any disruption to children's education is minimised.

Many of you will know from cases in your constituencies that no two cases are exactly the same. We are trying to provide a tailored response to each individual case. Every school or college with confirmed RAAC is allocated a caseworker. We have a team of 80 caseworkers, with project delivery teams on the ground. The first contact that a school or responsible body will have will be with the caseworker, and then normally very shortly thereafter, there is a visit from one of our project directors. They work together to put in place a mitigation plan so that children can return to face-to-face education as quickly as possible.



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We published new data this morning, which included the number of settings with confirmed RAAC. That has gone up by 27 cases since the data we published at the beginning of the month. I am pleased to say that the number of cases where pupils are in face-to-face education has gone up by 43. That underlines the work that has happened on the ground for children who, when we last published data, were either in hybrid or remote arrangements, or had had a delayed start to term.

We have an increase of schools, from 20 to 23, where pupils are in hybrid arrangements. We have one school that is fully remote, out of the 174. There are then two exceptions to prove the rule: one we learned about very recently, which is in the middle of the triage process at the moment, and one that was originally identified as having RAAC, and through our quality assurance process we have established that it is a different form of pre-cast concrete—not RAAC—so that school was taken off the list.

I apologise for not getting the data to you sooner. We are making good progress with surveying, with over 100 surveys a week. As I say, we would not be here without people all around the country who are really stretching every sinew to get their kids back into face-to-face education, and we are deeply grateful to them.

Q2 Chair: Thank you; that is useful. In terms of the sequence of events leading up to the advice going out to schools, I think we are all agreed that it is very unfortunate that this landed when it did, right on the edge of the start of term. I remember, including when I served in the Department with you, Baroness Barran, the many conversations we had about avoiding announcements that hit people towards the start of term. For the benefit of Members who were not present at the Public Accounts Committee, because officials did talk us through some of the sequence at that session, could you provide us with a brief outline of the timeline of events and when decisions were taken in the run-up to that announcement to schools? Why did you feel that it was right to make the announcement when you did?

Baroness Barran: As the Committee will be aware, RAAC is not a new problem. We had the information in 2018 about a school in Kent—actually, it happened in 2017, but obviously they did not know that there might be a more systemic issue. The Department became aware in 2018 that a RAAC plank had failed at a school in Kent, and at that point, together with the Local Government Association, we put out a warning notice.

In the NAO report, there is a timeline for some of this. We then put out updated guidance over the years—most recently, prior to this advice, at the end of 2022. We have also done a lot of work, particularly this year, on raising the profile of the responsibility that responsible bodies have in relation to the school estate through a number of different channels. I am happy to come back to that if the Committee would like me to.

Right at the end of July—I think it might have been the last day of term or the first day of the holidays—we as Ministers received advice relating to an incident that had happened in a school in the UK, but not in England. A



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RAAC plank had failed but had been wedged and therefore did not crash to the floor. In the previous incidents that we are aware of, the planks always came down, so it was much more difficult to assess the quality, grade or deterioration of the RAAC. In this case, the plank was suspended, so we were able to send up our technical experts and they spent two days examining and assessing the state of the plank. They judged that it would not have been graded as critical prior to its failure.

Prior to that, as the Committee will remember, our advice to schools had been that if they have RAAC graded as critical they need to vacate that area, and we will work with them to mitigate the RAAC so that the area can be made safe and pupils, staff or whoever uses it can use it safely again. That was the first incident we were aware of that made us question whether that advice was still appropriate. We were then made aware of a commercial setting where a similar thing happened—

Q3 **Chair:** Was the commercial setting also in July?

Baroness Barran: To be honest, I don't know the date of when it happened but that is when we were informed of it. Obviously, the communication between a commercial setting and the Government might not be quite as streamlined. And then, about three and a half weeks ago, a similar thing happened at a school in England where, in that case—it being the school holidays—workmen were drilling into the planked light fittings and large pieces of the concrete started to come down. Again, that would not have been graded as critical.

Essentially, we triangulated three things. We know about the impact of a failure of RAAC—there is a very small chance, but it is a real chance. In term time, the impact of that is clearly not something that, as Ministers, we want to countenance. We also know from the formal guidance from organisations such as the Institution of Structural Engineers that quite an emphasis is put on the responsibility of the building owner to assess how they should mitigate and treat cases.

Q4 **Chair:** That is particularly difficult, with responsible bodies who have very varying levels of expertise.

Baroness Barran: Correct—that is exactly what I was going to say. Our judgment was that responsible bodies have varying levels of expertise and that it would not be appropriate just to say, "You, the responsible body, make your judgment."

The third thing—of course, this is not true in every case, but is true in the vast majority of cases—is that the time to remediate is typically quite short. There is the exception that proves the rule, and we can talk about those that will take much longer. However, of the 52 cases that we dealt with earlier in the year where there was found to be critical RAAC and we addressed that, together with the responsible body, the average learning loss was six days for the children in those schools. That does not help the school where it was much longer, but it gives the Committee a sense that, although there will be the exception, for the vast majority remediation is pretty quick.



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So when we triangulated the potential impact of a failure in term time, the varying capacity and capability of the responsible bodies in relation to estates management, and the time to remediate, our decision was clear as Ministers. Obviously, as junior Ministers, we took the initial decision. We then did some further technical investigations and the advice then went to the Secretary of State, which I think was in the third week of August. That was when she took the decision, which was finally ratified through No. 10.

Q5 **Chair:** You just said the third week of August—that was before the final event, was it?

Baroness Barran: Yes, the final event—the advice went to her on 21 August—

Chair: And the final event—

Baroness Barran: The final event was two or three days later.

Q6 **Chair:** In retrospect, knowing what we know now, given that the first of those events happened in a school—though, admittedly, not in England—and demonstrated that RAAC that previously had been rated as non-critical was a problem, could the Department have acted quicker and given schools more time to prepare for the beginning of term, if it had acted on that single case?

Baroness Barran: I genuinely think the answer to that is that we could not have acted quicker. Clearly, the advice we received went through a range of options, from immediate closure to staged closure and, if you like, a warning period. As Ministers, our advice to the Secretary of State was that we should take the most cautious route. I do not know, permanent secretary, whether you want to add anything to that.

Susan Acland-Hood: It is a really important question. We were made aware of that single case, but it took some time to get access so that people could go to look at it. Ministers also asked us to spend some time with the Institution of Structural Engineers to talk it through, because there was also a countervailing risk of taking too big a decision on the back of an individual case.

The time between the initial advice that said, "There is something here we think we should look at and worry about", and getting to the point at which the Secretary of State made that decision was spent making sure that we had really thought our way through all the options, and that we had the right technical understanding—so from sending people to visit and also sitting down with the Institution of Structural Engineers to work things through in deep detail. It has been observed—I would not characterise it like this, because, as the Minister said, the Institution of Structural Engineers is clear that building owners and those responsible have to take a risk judgment within their guidance—that what we are doing now is at the very cautious end of what is consistent with the IStructE guidance.



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We saw that, and we wanted to sit down with the IStructE to make sure that we were getting that judgment right. There were really extensive conversations with them about, for example, alternatives that might have involved doing many, many more fully intrusive surveys, by which I mean not just surveys where you take off a piece of the ceiling tiles to look underneath at the concrete, but ones where you actually drill into, for example, the bearing ends of the concrete. In those cases, the reason that there had been a failure that was not visible was that the failings were at the bearing ends, and that is very difficult to see from underneath. Other types of deterioration in RAAC can be seen much more readily, including bowing, evidence of damp and cracking. This was specifically about failures at the bearing ends. In order to be very secure in a judgment of non-criticality, you would have to be drilling into many, many concrete planks across the school estate. We wanted to test that that was not an alternative that would mean less disruption. When we tested it, it was not, but we had to go through the process of checking.

Q7 **Chair:** That process was going on over July. It is striking that we have heard—

Baroness Barran: Sorry, that process—

Susan Acland-Hood: That process was going on through August. The initial advice was at the very end of July.

Q8 **Chair:** Okay. We have heard previous suggestions that the final case, the case that came in at the end of August, was the straw that broke the camel's back—the one that made the difference—but you are saying that actually the recommendation was made to the Secretary of State before that, and that that final case was the proof that you had to act quickly and to get an announcement out fast, once the decision was taken.

Susan Acland-Hood: I would say that it was still material to the decision. It is true that the advice was before that happened, but the advice was being considered both by the Secretary of State and No. 10. When that case came in, it made the decision making more straightforward.

Chair: That is helpful. I will hand over to Andrew about surveys.

Q9 **Andrew Lewer:** Given the late update that the Chair referred to, which has presented us with some challenges this morning, will you, for the record, give us the figures on how many schools have now been confirmed to have RAAC, and on what proportion of responsible bodies have now responded to questionnaires?

Baroness Barran: As of 14 September, we have 174 confirmed cases, and we have a 98.6% questionnaire response rate, out of—not responsible bodies, unfortunately, but buildings—the 15,158 buildings built in the RAAC era.

Q10 **Andrew Lewer:** Do you know, or have some idea, why some responsible bodies have not yet responded?



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Baroness Barran: You mean despite me writing to them repeatedly? Honestly, we are now at the point where we will just ring them up individually. Luckily, it is a very small number, but those calls are starting imminently.

Q11 **Andrew Lewer:** It is worrying, but the word here is “responsible”, isn’t it? We are talking about responsible bodies.

Baroness Barran: Absolutely.

Q12 **Andrew Lewer:** That is where the issue comes in of the centralised DFE. We are talking about people in a DFE office deciding on the condition of every school building in the country, versus bodies on the ground being responsible. I wonder about that, in the sense that DFE is taking on something for which responsible bodies are responsible. If they do not have the expertise, that is their responsibility as well.

Baroness Barran: I understand why you ask that, but this is about having a consistent approach to the condition surveys; I think you are referring to the condition data collection surveys. We are halfway through the second one, which will complete in 2026. That gives us a consistent understanding of the condition of the school estate, which, among other things, allows us to judge how we prioritise the allocation of capital funding for the school rebuilding programme. If we had every responsible body doing the survey for themselves, it would be almost impossible to get that overview. That is in no way to dilute or distract from the fact that they are responsible for their buildings. Actually, I would like to thank the ones who have carried out that responsibility with incredible thoroughness. However, we are aware that some are not doing regular surveys of their school estate. That is troubling, because we give them condition funding to spend, and we would like to know that they are spending the money where it is most needed. It varies tremendously.

Q13 **Andrew Lewer:** The other element in the questionnaire that is arguably just as concerning—it is certainly important—is about those who have responded to the questionnaires by saying that they do not know whether they have RAAC or not. That may just be a tick-box response, or they may think, “We are being hassled about not responding, so we’ll respond by saying, ‘Dunno’”; or it may be that they have not got the expertise to make an accurate assessment. Will you chase those who have not responded at all, which is a small number? Also, I wonder what number have responded either in a vague way, or by saying, “We just don’t know”, and what action is being taken about them.

Baroness Barran: We are going through those at the moment, and I am not in a position to give you a number on that. It may well be human nature that some responsible bodies err on the side of caution at this point. They know that if they say they are not 100% certain that they do not have RAAC, they will get a DFE survey. It is definitely not the end of the world if we absolutely are at a point where we know the state of every school built in the RAAC era. We have to think about those responsible bodies whose capabilities regarding the school estate we have particular worries about. That is a job probably not for today, but for the medium



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term. There are a number of options there. We have a capital advisers programme that supports trusts in the management of their school estate. There are a number of different approaches that we could take. You make a fair point, but job No. 1 is working through those bodies and making sure that everyone who needs a survey gets one.

- Q14 **Andrew Lewer:** This isn't an anti-single school trust pitch. It is just curious to me that someone would say, "We don't know", because obviously they don't need in-house for everything; they should know, or have access to people who know, if they do not.

Baroness Barran: There are definitely examples in single-school trusts, but there are also a couple of local authorities that have not done this systematically, so this is not just a size issue.

- Q15 **Chair:** Can I just come back on that point? You have published figures on the number of schools that have responded. A significant proportion of those schools may have said, "We don't know." It is kind of irrelevant to know how many people have said, "We've filled out the survey but we do not know the situation." Surely you ought to be working to a point at which you know in how many schools there is uncertainty about RAAC, and therefore how many surveys will be needed. That has to be a pretty crucial piece of information for the Department, hasn't it?

Baroness Barran: Absolutely, and that is what we are working through as we speak.

- Q16 **Chair:** When do you think you will have an answer on that?

Baroness Barran: I am more than happy to come back to the Committee with answers, or to write. The reason why I can't give you a firm date today is that with the change in the guidance, we have had a big influx of correspondence from a number of local authorities, trusts and dioceses that we are working through, so this isn't an absolutely stable picture. The other thing for the Committee to be aware of is that when we designed the questionnaire back in March last year, the aim was to answer a different question. The aim was to say, "Should we or shouldn't we be worried about the capacity of responsible bodies to deal with RAAC?". It was asking a lot of questions that weren't quite as clear as, "Do you or don't you think you've got it?".

We do not want to change the communication that we are having with responsible bodies, but it is a bit more labour-intensive to work through all those. Unsurprisingly, as the Committee can imagine, we have had a big influx of updated responses. As I say, I am more than happy to write when we have clarity on that, or to come back to the Committee and give evidence again.

Chair: We would welcome that. To follow up on that, I will bring in Kim.

- Q17 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. Baroness, you have just confirmed that 170 cases have now been confirmed. I want to pick up some questions on surveys. Professor Chris Goodier from Loughborough University, one of nine experts, has raised significant concerns about the



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lack of expertise. From your point of view, what will be the impact on the ability to have surveys completed in a timely fashion by people with the relevant expertise? He is concerned that people will go in without that expertise, making the situation 10 times worse.

Baroness Barran: Well, hopefully not 10 times worse, but I absolutely take your point. To be clear, I think you said around 170. For the record, it is 174 confirmed cases. To make sure I have understood correctly, is his concern about the qualifications of those undertaking the surveys?

Kim Johnson: Yes.

Baroness Barran: We have eight firms that we have contracted with to provide surveys, but we are offering responsible bodies another option. If they believe they can book their own survey with the appropriate level of qualification quicker than we can get our surveyor in, for whatever reason, we encourage them to do that, and we will refund the cost of that survey, so that they are at no disadvantage. That is where the importance of our quality assurance process comes in. In my opening remarks, I mentioned one school that had been judged to have RAAC, but when we did quality assurance and a follow-up, it was found not to—thank goodness; we like it when it goes in that direction, obviously. You will also remember that there were nine schools in the last publication of the list that had initially been judged to have RAAC, which we then quality assured.

That is to say that Professor Goodier is right to be concerned, and that is why we have a quality assurance process. That is also why there is a bit of a delay, which I know some schools can find worrying and frustrating. We obviously keep it as short as we can, but there is a delay between a surveyor going in and doing the survey, and the school getting the final advice as to whether it has RAAC, because we have to do that QA process for the reasons that he has raised with you. We work closely with him and have a huge amount of respect for him.

Susan Acland-Hood: I was going to say exactly that. We have worked very closely with him, and he has been quite complimentary about the quality of the expertise in the Department on this issue.

The shift from trying to grade RAAC to the focus of the survey, which is identifying whether RAAC is present and moving to remediation if it is, helps a bit with the security of the survey. It is much easier for a surveyor to make a judgment on whether RAAC is present than for them to securely make that grading judgment.

Baroness Barran: Earlier this year, when we were aiming to identify the critical RAAC and take that out of use, we initially used surveyors and then structural engineers to confirm the grading. What we found was exactly what Professor Goodier is saying: surveyors were pretty good at identifying RAAC, but were much less good at grading it. Now we don't need to grade it. We do not need that second structural engineer overlay. We were having to do that ourselves earlier in the year.

Q18 **Kim Johnson:** You mentioned that everyone who wanted a survey would



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get one. Are you confident that there is the capacity to carry out those surveys as and when? How many schools are still waiting for the results of those surveys?

Baroness Barran: I am not sure that I have the figures on how many are waiting for results, but I could certainly get those. We are clear that all the schools that were on the list of 4 or 6 September—

Susan Acland-Hood: All the schools that we were aware needed a survey on 4 September have either had it or will have had it by the end of this week.

Baroness Barran: The good news is that we are really working through. We are doing well over 100 surveys a week. Obviously, we cannot predict the future. As I said, there is a time lag on the quality assurance, but we are working through them really well, and backlog is not a worry. We have other worries, but backlog is not this week's one.

Q19 **Kim Johnson:** You also mentioned that you have 80 caseworkers. Is that 80 in total, working with the 174 schools?

Baroness Barran: Yes, that's right. Again, to put it in perspective, there will be schools on that list that are in very strong trusts, or very strong local authorities or dioceses. We ring them up and say, "Can we help?" and they say, "Thanks for the offer, but we are fine. We have space in other schools in our trust." I spoke to a primary school just outside Gateshead. It had to close completely, so the children were going to two other trust schools and another diocesan facilities. There are examples of the schools sorting things really quickly, because there is capacity in the wider body. There are others that are much harder, and those might be, to Mr Lewer's point, single-academy trusts. If you have to close a large secondary, and you are in a central metropolitan area and have no outside space, that by definition is difficult. That is where we really wrap around them, not just with the caseworker, but also with the project director, and make sure that they have our most experienced team, because those are properly hard to sort out.

Q20 **Kim Johnson:** Can you briefly say what the skills and expertise of those caseworkers are?

Baroness Barran: Permanent secretary, do you want to add a bit? I know a few of them, but you probably know in more detail.

Susan Acland-Hood: The caseworkers have a relatively wide range of generic skills. Their job is to hold the case, to communicate with the school, to make sure that they understand the challenges, and to sort problems out for the school.

We also have project directors assigned to every case. As Baroness Barran has said, the case holding for both caseworkers and project directors varies according to the size and difficulty of the cases. Some of them will have more cases, and some will have fewer and spend more time on each. The project directors are part of our specialist capital teams. They are the ones who have the detailed and specialist capital skills. The caseworkers



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are more about making the connections and joining the schools up with the support they need.

- Q21 **Nick Fletcher:** Can I just clarify something? In the current surveys, are you asking whether a school is a RAAC school, or are you surveying on the condition of the RAAC?

Baroness Barran: The answer is the former. The question is, "Is there RAAC?". The answer is yes or no; then the question is, "Where is it?". We need to know which parts of the school are affected. We have all sorts of cases. Happily, in one very large secondary, it was in a disused store cupboard, but we know about Kingsdown School in Anna Firth's constituency, which is a special school for children with very profound disabilities, and that had a very specialist response. I think I am right in saying that the whole school had to be vacated initially, so there is everything on that continuum.

- Q22 **Nick Fletcher:** I am assuming there are no records from when these schools were built.

Baroness Barran: If you knew how many times we have asked that question—

Susan Acland-Hood: There are, but they are not comprehensive.

Baroness Barran: They are not comprehensive, is the short answer, but some schools have gone back and found originals. In the case I mentioned earlier—I think it was Brand Hall, but we can correct the record if that is wrong—which last time we thought had RAAC—

Susan Acland-Hood: Brand Hall is right.

Baroness Barran: They went back and found some building records and found that it was called Bison, not RAAC. That was very helpful, but that is not uniformly what happens. Equally, I heard of a case last week of a school that had converted to an academy, and there had previously been a RAAC survey, but it had not been given to the trust that took on the school. We have every humanly possible permutation.

- Q23 **Chair:** On giving surveys to trusts, when you gave evidence to the PAC, you said that the surveys would be shared with the responsible bodies when the DFE commissioned them. I have come across at least one case where a school that is its own responsible body has been told by the surveyors that it cannot see the survey because it belongs to the DFE. Can you ensure that that is not happening? It is really important, if schools are being asked to prepare the groundwork for a second visit, that they have the information about where they need to prepare. That information will be in the survey.

Susan Acland-Hood: Absolutely. If you let us know about that case, we can sort it out individually. That should not be happening.

Baroness Barran: I wonder whether there was a delay because of the QA gap, which I referred to. There could be up to two weeks while it is being



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quality assured. That might have been it, but we will obviously follow up on that.

Chair: That would be useful. For schools that are their own responsible body, the more information they have, the better. They can then work more effectively with the Department to address the issues. That seems very important. I will bring in Anna Firth.

Anna Firth: I will ask some general questions about regional differences, and the impact on schools and pupils—

Baroness Barran: Some Essex questions.

- Q24 **Anna Firth:** Yes, about Kingsdown School in particular. Many will know that a third of the pupils affected by RAAC come from Essex. There are 31,255 pupils affected in 53 schools. Some might be interested to know why Essex is a particularly bad case. I am more interested in knowing whether you are providing additional support for Essex, and in general terms what that additional support looks like.

Baroness Barran: Mr Francois will know that we have had numerous conversations about other schools in Essex.

Mr Francois: We have.

Baroness Barran: Why has Essex kind of floated to the top in the way that it has? There are some reasons that I think we can be confident about, and others are a little bit more hypothetical.

The thing we can be clear about—it was Essex that I was thinking about when I said that some local authorities had done an outstanding job—is that Essex has done an outstanding job. If the Committee has time to go back and look at what the guidance has repeatedly said to responsible bodies—know whether you have RAAC in your estate and do regular condition surveys—it will see that Essex has done all of that. As you will know, it had already mitigated for it, in the vast majority of its schools, and it is now intensifying its surveying programme. I think one reason why Essex has become visible is because it did such a good job and, honestly, we say that many times a day in the Department.

- Q25 **Anna Firth:** I move on to my second question, if I may, Minister. In Southend, we are very grateful for the commitment of the Department to engage with Kingsdown School and we are looking forward to your visit, which we hope will take place next week. However, as a generality for Essex as a whole, are you providing additional support for the areas that need it?

Baroness Barran: If I may add one sentence, the other hypothetical thing is this: was there something about the post-war building in Essex that meant you ended up with more RAAC schools? We don't know that and we won't know that until we have finished all the national surveying.

In terms of the additional support, I think the main challenge that is thrown up when you get a cluster of schools is the capacity of



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neighbouring schools to absorb them. As you both know—forgive me if there are other Essex MPs on the Committee; I don't think there are—most schools in Essex appear to be bursting at the seams and there isn't a lot of spare capacity. That is the main difference when you get a cluster of schools in an area with other local schools that are very full.

That is one aspect and, as you may be aware, we have our regions group director, Jonathan Duff, who is co-ordinating a lot of the work in relation to some of that co-ordination with the local authority, with trusts and with yourselves as MPs. We are making sure—not in every case, but in those particularly complicated cases like Kingsdown—that we put our most senior and most experienced people on those cases. If there is more that you think we could be doing, obviously we are open to that, but the point is that if we saw that situation emerge in another part of the country, we would do the same thing.

- Q26 **Anna Firth:** Have you considered having the same caseworker for the school as for the MP? At the moment—I don't know whether the situation has been similar for others—Kingsdown School and I seem to be dealing with different people. It would certainly be helpful if we were dealing with the same person.

Baroness Barran: Let us take that away and see—

Susan Acland-Hood: I can say something briefly about that. One of the things we have done is put a single key point of contact for Essex in our technical team as well as in our regional team. Early on, we were trying to make sure that the caseworkers' time was really protected, in order to deal with and work with the school. That is why sometimes if you ring the MP hotline, you won't always get through to the caseworker, but you should always get through to somebody who knows what is going on at the school.

I am really happy to take the point away. I think the thing that we have been really keen to do is to make sure that caseworkers can face the schools and responsible bodies and keep doing the work at the greatest possible pace. But I hear the point, and we can look at that again.

- Q27 **Anna Firth:** I want to ask one more general question and then I want to ask about some particular things. The general question is this: are you in a position now to tell us how many schools have been provided with temporary classrooms, please?

Baroness Barran: I did have that—

- Q28 **Chair:** That was the point of the answer to a written parliamentary question that I received last night, but if you can improve on that, it would be very welcome.

Baroness Barran: Could I loop back to that, because I know it's in my notes here somewhere? I am not sure that we have a specific number. What I can say is that I was sent some numbers last night. Of the schools where the mitigations are complete, only a small percentage required temporary classrooms. I hope we will get a chance to discuss that,



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because there has been a particular focus on temporary classrooms that is maybe a little bit disproportionate to how often they get used. It is a small minority.

Q29 **Mr Francois:** They are hardly used at all—that is the entire problem. In a minute, we might go into that.

Baroness Barran: It is because the vast majority are either repurposing space within the school or using other space in other local schools.

Mr Francois: No.

Chair: We will finish Anna's questioning and then come back to Mark on that, because I think it is important to go into the detail.

Q30 **Anna Firth:** This is no criticism of you, because I know how hard you are working on this. However, it is incredibly frustrating when this question was asked a week ago by the Public Accounts Committee and in writing. On 11 September, a simple question was tabled: how many mobile classrooms have been provided to schools? If it is a small number, it should be easy to count. We got the answer at 9 pm last night, when we were preparing for today's hearing, and it is a non-answer. This information really must be provided as quickly as possible.

Susan Acland-Hood: Shall I come in on this?

Baroness Barran: Yes, please.

Susan Acland-Hood: I am sorry that it is frustrating, and I do understand that. I am very happy to give numbers, but I would like to set them in the context that the Minister describes.

If you look at the first set of cases we had before the summer, when we were acting on critical RAAC, we found that in many cases it was better to focus on remediating space by putting things like a timber frame on the ceiling. That gives you a better solution than putting children in a temporary classroom, and it can be done relatively quickly. What we do not want is to see the success measure for the programme as the total number of temporary classrooms delivered; what we want is the total number of spaces that are usable by children. I will give you the number, but I want to set it in that context.

Of the cases we had before the summer, only seven required on-site temps. That is those we knew about before the summer. Combining those we knew about before the summer and those we are working on now, we are aware of at least 29 schools that we think will require temporary accommodation. Of those, 11 are in place—that is a mixture of those provided centrally and those provided by the responsible body. Again, we say to the responsible body, "If you think you can do it faster and better than we can, of course you should get on with that and we'll pay for it."

Again, you should take these figures with some caution, because what project directors will do when they have a school that might have a need for temporary classrooms or might be remediated through timber framing



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is that they will often make an order for the temporary classrooms in a belt-and-braces way.

I will give you this figure because I want to be transparent, but I do not think it is a target, if that makes sense. If we can remediate through timber framing on the classroom ceiling, that is often a better solution. But at close on Friday, project directors and caseworkers had made inquiries requesting potential orders—29 is not the number of rooms, but the number of schools—relating to 180 single classrooms, 68 double classrooms and a mix of what are brilliantly referred to as “hygiene facilities”, which I think means loos.

Q31 **Anna Firth:** That is 248 facilities. If that was available at close of play on Friday, why didn’t we get that answer yesterday?

Susan Acland-Hood: That is the orders that have been made requesting—

Anna Firth: Yes, but you had this information at close of play on Friday. A written question was put in on 11 September.

Chair: By me.

Q32 **Anna Firth:** By the Chair. Why wasn’t this information provided?

Baroness Barran: This is the information, accurate as of close of play on Friday. We also got it last night.

Susan Acland-Hood: We have been assembling the data. We also got this information last night.

Q33 **Chair:** It would have been a much more helpful answer to my written question, I have to say. On this issue, though, there is also the question of how quickly those classrooms can be available. I want to bring in Mark on that.

Susan Acland-Hood: The answer to that is going to be very variable, according to the context.

Q34 **Mr Francois:** That is the number that you have ordered but you closed some of these schools several weeks ago. You closed some of those in the summer. How many have been delivered? Because if you order them, it takes a number of weeks to build them. Then you have to transport them. There is a shortage of cranes to crane them into place. How many? You closed some of these schools weeks ago, or parts of them. How many of these mobile classrooms have actually been delivered and are now being used?

Susan Acland-Hood: I do not have the most up-to-date figure for delivery, including the schools that were identified after the summer.

Q35 **Mr Francois:** Why not? Forgive me; you have been asked—I am guesting on behalf of the PAC this morning—multiple times at the PAC and in written questions. You have now told us how many have been ordered.



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Susan Acland-Hood: We did also give you the number. I said that there are at least 29 schools that require them. Eleven of those have temps in place.

Q36 **Mr Francois:** Yes, but how many classrooms?

Susan Acland-Hood: I am very sorry, but I don't have the figure because it is changing very rapidly at the moment.

Q37 **Mr Francois:** Do you have an approximate figure?

Susan Acland-Hood: It is sufficient that 11 of those schools have what they need in place.

Mr Francois: That could be one classroom each.

Susan Acland-Hood: It will vary a lot by school.

Q38 **Mr Francois:** I will tell you why this is unacceptable. Hockley Primary School is in my patch. I have learned from bitter experience that, if you want to find out what is really going on, you ring the headteacher, not the Department, because the headteacher has to deal with all the angry parents, not your civil servants.

By the way, Baroness, having dealt with you for two years, I pay tribute to everything that you and Nick Gibb have done on this. I know how hard you have both worked, but I was in his office in July and was promised faithfully eight temporary classrooms at Hockley Primary for 4 September. The civil servants on the screen—of course, none of them were in the Department—said, "Yep. We will sort all that out. That will all be there." A week beforehand, I got an email saying, "I am terribly sorry. When we said 4 September, we meant mid-November." Now this is after I, in good faith, having had it from the Minister in his office, told all the parents, "Don't worry, they will all be there for the 4 September."

Your officials came up with some guff about it being all to do with the ground being too soft. No; that was nonsense. They just did not have the classrooms. How do I know that? I was on a class with some of them last week and to try to mollify me, one of your capital Department civil servants said, "Mr Francois, I can assure you those classrooms are being built now." I said, "That's good, but if they are being built now, how are you then going to deliver them on 4 September?" So to use polite language, someone has been telling fibs, haven't they?

Susan Acland-Hood: No, absolutely not.

Mr Francois: Yes, they have.

Susan Acland-Hood: That is absolutely wrong. May I take you through the sequence of events at Hockley Primary School?

Q39 **Mr Francois:** No, just tell me how many mobile classrooms you have actually delivered. And then do not give us some waffle about how you don't know; you are the permanent secretary. How many are in place now?

Susan Acland-Hood: We have temporary classrooms on site at 11 schools.

Q40 **Mr Francois:** We know that. How many classrooms does that make up?

Baroness Barran: I wonder if it is helpful for us to follow up in writing for each of the 11 schools because the other variable in this is that sometimes schools will say, "We have got a contract of our own. We can get them quicker."

Q41 **Mr Francois:** Yes, Baroness; you're right. I have learned this the hard way, but your officials don't like that. They don't like the schools making their own arrangements. They only want it done the DFE way. That is what happened at Hockley.

Susan Acland-Hood: May I talk through the position at Hockley?

Chair: Briefly, and then I will bring Siobhan in.

Mr Francois: I am happy to do that, but I don't want to take up the whole morning.

Susan Acland-Hood: It is quite a serious suggestion that people have not been telling the truth, so I think it is quite important that we go through it. I would be very happy to sit down and talk through this in more detail with you, the headteacher or anyone else. My understanding is that initially the trust thought they had identified a contractor that could deliver more quickly. It is true the DFE will review those packages with the supplier.

Mr Francois: Yes, and they had a disagreement and it wanted to use a different contractor.

Susan Acland-Hood: I can give you extremely specific reasons why DFE officials were concerned about that proposition. It was because it did not have a turnkey element, it did not cover the fitting on site, there were a lot of things missing from the bid and they hadn't looked at the grounds or the foundations.

The reason they were promised earlier than they could be delivered was that that supplier had not gone through what we would expect to be gone through. Because that school is in the school rebuilding programme and will be fully rebuilt, we have worked with the supplier for the school rebuilding contract. The temps that will be delivered to the school—I completely accept that it is intensely frustrating that they will come later than the school would have hoped—

Q42 **Mr Francois:** A few months later.

Susan Acland-Hood: But they will be temps that will be very good quality and they will be in place for the school until its rebuilding is complete. That may not have been true of the initially delivered, even if they had been able to be installed on the ground.

Q43 **Mr Francois:** Why don't you write to us? Suffice it to say, I find your



answer unconvincing. Why don't you write to us on it?

One last quick one about Bromfords, which is a secondary school in my patch. At the moment, they are going to have at least one year group they cannot educate on the site or elsewhere; they are going to have to be at home. Bear in mind that some parents get paid weekly and not monthly. If you are told by the head that you have to take multiple weeks off work because there is nowhere for your child to go to school, that is a big thing. For the record, I can see, Baroness, that you are nodding; you understand that. Bromfords are being told that they may have to wait many weeks to get their temporary classrooms. When will the temporary classrooms arrive at Bromfords in Wickford?

Baroness Barran: The date we have for reopening, we think, will be no later than 20 November.

Q44 **Mr Francois:** That is two months away. What are the parents supposed to do for the next two months for that whole year group?

Baroness Barran: I am not sure that we can answer that in terms of what they can do. Putting temporary classrooms in sounds like a quick fix, but it very often is not, for some of the reasons—

Q45 **Mr Francois:** Precisely, Baroness, because what I believe has gone on here—I will then hand back to the Chair—is that Ministers have been given these reports on RAAC and you have acted ultimately on child safety. Everyone can understand that. However, where I think there has been a problem is that you have been told that lots of mitigations are in place when those mitigations were not actually available.

The ground truth when you speak to the heads is very different from what your civil servants tell you and what your civil servants tell me. The most generous interpretation I can put on it is that there has been a lot of miscommunication. I have already given you the less generous interpretation. I would urge you to double and treble-check everything because at the end of the day, as I will come on to later, it is children's education that is suffering.

Chair: And you will write with more detail, I think, on that particular case. Siobhan Baillie, I know you have to step out so I want to bring you in, and then we will return to Anna.

Q46 **Siobhan Baillie:** Yes, there is an element of schools and parents wanting to see action, isn't there? The temporary classrooms are going to be the lightning rod, as they are measurable, of all the steps taken.

I am interested in Mark's comment about where schools are able to source their own classroom and they are taking a very constructive, thoughtful and sensible approach. I have Marling School in my patch, which has all the DT classes out. That is equipment-heavy, it has a huge impact on the school, teachers' health is struggling and so on. They know that they just need two temporary classrooms. They need the green light from the Department. They even know the amount of money, which is low numbers given what you are dealing with elsewhere.



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Is it the case that the Department is “Computer says no”? Or is this about what we can do as MPs with the caseworkers to make that case and just get things done quickly? Fixing the roof in my DT block at Marling will take a number of years, probably. I think we can get this done and you can get me off your books as well. What is the situation? How can schools work with you?

Baroness Barran: The situation—I will try and make this as simple as possible—falls into two or three categories. There is a school that I am aware of—not in your constituency but in the west midlands—where they need three, large and let’s call them generic temporary buildings or units because they need to replace their hall, which is now out of use.

It is quicker for them to use their own local supplier and we think that those will be, start to finish, four weeks from order to reopen. There is good access. Mr Francois mentioned cranes, and there are places where it is impossible to get those units in. It is messy in the real world, as we know. They have hard standing so, unlike the Hockley situation, they can put them down straightaway. That is probably as quick as it can be, and that is four weeks from the get-go.

Right at the other end is the school in Somerset that has to replace 15 classrooms and all its science blocks. That has to go on quite soft ground, and it is a big design job to work out where everything goes, where the utilities come in and what the planning is. We speed these things through as quickly as possible, but we are effectively building a whole new school in temporary buildings. We cannot just railroad that through the community.

Q47 **Siobhan Baillie:** Is the Department able to make the cost-benefit analysis of, “Yes, temporary classrooms are the right answer” quickly, so that we can just get on with it?

Baroness Barran: I am hearing about individual cases that do not feel like that—we need to know about them, and we are aware of Hockley, but are keen to know about others. Cost-benefit is of course important, but getting children into the classroom is the most important thing. Everything we thought about in terms of funding for schools is, “How do we cut one more day off the time any child is at home or in hybrid education?”, so please let us know, or let me know personally, if there are any hitches. The intention is to sort this out quickly.

It is, however, fair to take the permanent secretary’s example where a trust thought it was doing the right thing by dealing with the supplier, but the situation was more complicated, so it set us back, with all the frustration that has caused. There will be the really obvious “Bring in your own supplier”; there will be the obvious “We’re rebuilding the whole school”, which is properly complicated and does not happen in three weeks; and there are the ones in the middle, which are messy.

Q48 **Mr Francois:** To make an analogy, the problem is that the Department, or parts of it, are still on a peacetime footing; you need to move to a wartime footing. You need to slice through all the usual “Computer says



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no" bureaucracy—that is a good way to sum it up—and move to a wartime footing, doing these things far more quickly, because it is actually about the education of the kids. May I offer you that thought to take away?

Baroness Barran: Absolutely, and point well made.

Chair: I want to bring Anna back in—she has waited patiently—but I want to make one other point. You expanded the number of surveying companies that you are working with to meet the demand, but I think it is right to say that you are working with the same three people for temporary buildings as you were at the start of this process when you were considering a much smaller number of schools. Surely there is a logic to you perhaps expanding your number of contractors in that space. I will leave that there and hand over to Anna.

Q49 **Anna Firth:** All the context that we have gone through has been perfect background to my questions. I want to mention Kingsdown School, because it is the only special school in the country to be affected severely by RAAC. As you know, those children have profound needs: we have cerebral palsy on site, the full range of autism spectrum conditions, and complex neurological conditions, involving a lot of specialist equipment, including wheelchairs of the sort that need to control almost every movement a child makes; and some classrooms need to have special temperatures, or special lighting and sound. This is a very special case, and I make no apologies for bringing it up in some detail.

There is a question of the short term and of the long term. In the short term—this is why I am asking so many questions about demountables—there is still no confirmed date for when three very necessary demountable classrooms will arrive on site. I went to the school yesterday, and what the headmistress Louise Robinson has achieved in the past two weeks is nothing short of a miracle. It has been phenomenal what she has done to get all those children receiving face-to-face tuition.

More than 50% of the school is out of use, and yet they need all those specialist facilities. They cannot access them, because the corridors are out of use. There are acrows everywhere, and obviously with children in wheelchairs and some on actual stretcher beds from time to time, corridors with acrows don't work. That cannot be even a short-term solution.

First of all, when are these necessary demountables going to arrive? As we have heard, they are going to be an adverse load, so there is going to have to be accommodation for that. A crane is going to be needed. Southend airport will need to be notified when this load comes along. There are going to be electricians, plumbing and IT. It's very complex—and they needed these yesterday. We understand the difficulties. They have made incredible arrangements with one of the nearby schools, Eastwood Academy, which has been incredibly helpful.

As you know, I, in the course of one day—Friday—managed to find 40 car parking spaces, so the demountables can go into a car park. Those spaces will be provided next door by David Lloyd, who are more than



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happy to help. The whole community is here behind them. We need a date, and we need a date that we can rely on.

Baroness Barran: I am going to have to write to you, I'm afraid, with a date, but I will do. Obviously, I will endeavour to give a firm date, but if we can't provide one, I will explain what the steps are that need to be gone through, and absolutely make an undertaking to ensure that you are kept fully updated on that. Obviously, we are visiting the school together on Monday, which I think will help me to understand really well.

Anna Firth: Thank you, Minister. As I have said before, the engagement we have had from you and from Nick Gibb has been fantastic.

Mr Francois: Hear, hear.

- Q50 **Anna Firth:** I know that you are working as hard as you possibly can on this. But the fact that it is so complex underpins why we all need a single point of contact—somebody who knows or will know this school inside out, quite literally, and is one person that we all talk to.

The second thing is that I think it's obvious from what I have said that this school will not be able to operate properly and give these children not only the education that they need but the provision for the medical needs that they have—the physiotherapy needs that they have, and all the different therapies that are on the site—in the long term with only 50% of the school available. What are the plans here? This cannot go on for months and months for children with these profound needs, so what is the plan, please?

Baroness Barran: Can I just clarify the situation on the temporary units, because I have one date, not two? My understanding—I know you are very close to this, so correct me if I'm wrong—is that we are procuring three temporary specialist classrooms and a staffroom, which is four temporary units, and that the three specialist classrooms and staffroom are on track to be completed by the October half-term. My notes confirm that, as you say, they are going to be placed in the staff car park, and then the staff are going to use David Lloyd. Forgive me that I couldn't—

- Q51 **Anna Firth:** That is correct, but I just want to be sure that you—not you personally, Minister, but your team—have taken on board all the complications around getting these classrooms there, and up and running.

Baroness Barran: We have daily gold command meetings, and Kingsdown is definitely a school that has been mentioned—maybe not at every one, but when we first took the decision, it was the first case we spoke about.

- Q52 **Anna Firth:** Thank you very much for that, but can I push you, please, on what the longer-term plan is here, because you cannot have these children trying to access physiotherapy rooms—at the moment, the kitchen is out of use, because the corridor is out of use. We are approaching winter—



Baroness Barran: Of course—

Anna Firth: When these children will need to have hot food. Sorry to carry on, but these children cannot really be taught for anything longer than a few weeks in temporary demountables, with thin walls, that will not necessarily be able to be heated and lit to the—

Baroness Barran: We need to be clear about the quality of the demountables, and I will go back and check. They tend to be extremely high quality and high specification. We will go away and check these particular ones. I can be pretty confident that they are not going to be cold in them, but I absolutely hear your concern. There is a practical thing, which is that we are trying to get the mitigation in place so the school can function a bit closer to normal, and then of course the next urgent thing is to look at the long-term solution. But we need to sort stage one first. We are not kicking it down the road, and we can start to talk about how we will approach that on Monday, but we do need to sort the first job first.

Anna Firth: I think I have made my point.

Q53 **Chair:** You talked about propping as one of the potential mitigations. How long is it safe or reasonable to expect props to remain in place in a classroom setting?

Baroness Barran: I have learned so much about mitigations in the last month. Props, which most people think of as metal or timber posts that hold the ceiling up, to the best of my knowledge are used in a tiny minority of cases. Where they are used, the space is taken out of use. I was at a school on Friday that has a four-storey block, and the whole top floor will be propped. There will be props at 1-metre intervals, so that space will come out completely.

More typically, we use “propping” as shorthand, but it does not look like the kind of propping we all imagine. That is where you put in effectively a timber ceiling—that is the simplest way of explaining it. You build a timber ceiling underneath the RAAC and then you put back the ceiling tiles. You would not know it was there, and if anything happened it would come down on the timber and is completely safe. To all intents and purposes, it looks like a completely normal ceiling. That is the more common approach. Depending on the size and complexity of the space, that typically takes about six weeks between design and installation.

Forgive me, Chair, if I have mis-anticipated where your question might be going, but some schools will go through different phases of mitigations. I think we shared with you photographs of some of the semi-rigid structures, which might look like a marquee from the outside, but when you are inside they look like a normal classroom. They are warm and soundproof. You might have those for a few weeks, if there is space. Then, either your ceiling has been covered over in timber or your temporary units have arrived, and so on.

Q54 **Chair:** Is that timber solution a permanent solution?



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Baroness Barran: Let's call it semi-permanent. It will last 10 years, I think.

- Q55 **Chair:** The whole problem we are dealing with here is where building materials were put into schools with a lifespan much more limited than the schools themselves. If the solutions last for a finite period of time, we need to have a clear plan to replace those solutions.

Baroness Barran: Of course.

Susan Acland-Hood: The commitment from the Treasury has been clear that we will be rebuilding or repairing spaces that have RAAC such as to remove the RAAC. The good thing about the timber solution is that it is as comfortable and reasonable to be under as the classroom is, and it has a long enough life for us to ensure we have exactly the right long-term solution in place. It takes the clock off, but it does not mean we will not want to do a permanent fix.

- Q56 **Chair:** You mentioned the gold command meetings. Who is chairing those?

Baroness Barran: The Secretary of State chairs those.

Chair: Thank you. Nick is going to come in on the impact on schools.

- Q57 **Nick Fletcher:** Obviously, we need to get kids back into school, but we need to get them into a safe school. I am interested in whether we have looked at netting above suspended ceilings. You talked about putting the timber frames in, but obviously we use netting when we are working on fragile roofs and things like that. I do not know if that has been looked at, but maybe it is something that could be.

It is a real issue for parents, if they have got children at home. Have we looked at other buildings within the community, and is that practical at all? Even if that is not practical for the younger children, maybe they can go in the other classrooms and the older children can go elsewhere. Is that something that you have looked at?

Baroness Barran: Exactly. Yes.

Nick Fletcher: With the ones that are having to work from home, what are we doing with regards to hybrid working and PCs? With covid, obviously we have had some experience of this before. There are three issues there that I would like you to expand on a little for me.

Baroness Barran: I have not heard about netting as an option and RAAC planks—as it sounds like you know—can be 6 feet wide and up to 8 metres long. They were particularly brought in because of their span. I don't know how strong netting is, but I don't think that, as a child or a member of staff, I would be particularly comfortable under a net, unless there was something underneath it, but that's a personal view. We can follow up and find out if that is being done and how long it would last for, to refer to the Chair's point that we don't want to—

- Q58 **Nick Fletcher:** It's used in construction when you're working on a roof



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above, so that if an individual fell through the roof it would catch them. If it's safe enough to catch an individual falling through a roof, I would hope it would be safe. It could especially be of us on the corridors, when we are talking about the SEND buildings. Obviously, it is the acrow props that are in the way of the corridors, whereas the netting might not. You obviously need somebody who is a lot more educated than me on that, but it was just an idea for you.

Baroness Barran: Absolutely. I just know from the school that I was at on Friday that they were talking about needing to prop to a weight that could take not just the roof but the snow that would sit on the roof, and they were talking about multiple tonnes per square metre of strength, which is more than any of us weigh.

In terms of community facilities, the answer is that there should be no difference to a school, and a school that doesn't have space that it can repurpose, or a school that doesn't have a trust or a local authority with space that they can give them in another school, should not be penalised financially for the fact that they have to go out and rent something. So if we are going to pay for their temporary classroom, we are also going to pay for where they need to use community facilities. The example that I mentioned earlier was of the trust in Gateshead, where they are using two of their schools and a church hall. It's far from ideal, but all the children are in face-to-face education.

The third question was: will we pay for the IT? Yes. The two biggest groupings of requests that we have had so far—and it's early days—are for transport costs, where children need to go in a minibus to the church hall, for example, and for laptops, dongles and so on.

Q59 **Nick Fletcher:** Is this what your caseworkers are doing? Are they speaking with the schools and the local councils? Are they being the go-between?

Baroness Barran: Correct. They are co-ordinating that. The reality of the way that we are organised—I can reassure you that, as Ministers, we have asked, "Could we make it simpler?"—is that within the Department, we have a group that looks after capital funding and we have a group that looks after revenue funding, which is the ESFA. Responsible bodies need to talk to the ESFA and say that they need funding for something—like the things you have suggested, such as renting the church hall—and have that conversation. That is paid normally on a monthly basis, but if responsible bodies have cash-flow problems, we can do it faster. To go back to Mr Francois's point, there is the lightest possible audit trail, so that both the responsible body and the Government have a record of what we have spent on.

Chair: I will bring in Anna on this point.

Q60 **Anna Firth:** Very quickly, Minister, I am delighted to hear you repeat what was said at the Public Accounts Committee, which is essentially that all reasonable costs will be reimbursed. However, there is concern about exactly how that will take place and how fast.



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For example, for Kingsdown School, invoices are still coming in, but they already total over £27,000. The school will not be able to meet some of those, because the intrusive survey was incredibly expensive; it went on for several days. They won't be able to meet the costs out of normal revenue spending, so what will be the fast route? When will they receive a refund and how that will be dealt with?

Baroness Barran: They need to talk to the ESFA. The ESFA's normal payment run—I was going to say print run—is monthly; I am looking at the permanent secretary to check that I am right. However, it is very clear that if a school or a responsible body is faced with cash-flow difficulties presented by that monthly timing, they should talk to their point person within the ESFA and we can do more urgent payment runs.

Anna Firth: Thank you very much.

Chair: Mark, were you signalling that you wanted to come back in?

- Q61 **Mr Francois:** Only very briefly, on the point about the difference between a peacetime footing and a wartime footing, Baroness. The head of Wyburns Primary, which has been trying to relocate, has been working her socks off, as others have. At one point, the school was being challenged over the cost of £50 for a whiteboard, and the Department was reluctant to cover it. If the school had asked to build a helipad, I could well understand why the Department would have bumped it.

I understand that you are issuing updated guidance and saying that all reasonable costs will be covered, but some of the heads have found—at least in the early weeks when they were desperately trying to re-provide—that there was a lot of “Computer says no” about revenue funding. I am sorry to hammer the nail to split the wood, but we really need a wartime mentality. In some cases, heads have actually had to dip into their own pockets to pay for vital supplies that the Department would not sign off. Surely, please, we can do better than this.

Baroness Barran: We can do better than that, and we are doing better. Where I think you are right is when you say that there was a bit more resistance in the early weeks. As Ministers, we have been crystal clear that we want this to be friction-free and that we should not be quibbling about small amounts of money. All of us—as a member of the PAC, you will know this better than most—will ultimately be accountable for what we spend, so we need an audit trail, but we absolutely need the children to be back in class. If anything helps that happen, we need to make that work.

- Q62 **Mr Francois:** Amen to that, but can you please make sure that that promulgates down the chain?

Baroness Barran: I need to know if it is not working like this, but my sense is—the permanent secretary has been in the same meetings—that, as Ministers, we have been crystal clear about this. I think that message got through.

- Q63 **Nick Fletcher:** I want to go back to the caseworkers. You said there was a dedicated caseworker for each school. We have 174 confirmed cases,



but we have 80 caseworkers. Are they taking on two each now?

Baroness Barran: Some of them, as I said earlier, are really very independent. First of all, some of the cases are not that complicated—so a school that has space it was not using, has one classroom with RAAC, has closed the classroom and has reopened the one that it was not using does not need much casework. We are grateful for those ones. At the other end, you have Kingsdown or some of the very large secondaries, which are much more challenging, and the caseworker and the project director. The caseworker, as the permanent secretary said, is the co-ordinator of everything that is going on, but the project director brings technical expertise about what mitigations will or will not work, and is there physically, on the ground, visiting the school and working with it to try to resolve it.

Q64 **Nick Fletcher:** Are the caseworkers liaising with each other as well? Are they sharing best practice and coming over common—

Baroness Barran: Susan, do you want to talk about the training and lessons learned? Obviously the first few days were not absolutely 100% perfect.

Susan Acland-Hood: That's right. We increased the number of caseworkers very rapidly at the beginning of the process, so we had people who were new to the activity coming into casework, which I think may have explained why some of them were cautious on revenue funding requests, for example, early on. We have been doing a lot of work to train them. They also have a collective meeting at the beginning and end of each day where they share experiences and ask any questions.

One of the things we are trying to construct is about making sure that, if a caseworker is coming up against something tricky, they are sharing that with others so that others can learn immediately, so we are not doing it one to one. We are doing that in a kind of battle rhythm sequence, so they meet at the beginning and end of every day and then work on the cases in between.

Chair: We need to make some progress, so I will hand over to Kim. If we can make the answers clippier, that will help to get the Committee through its questions.

Kim Johnson: We all know that RAAC is just part of a much bigger problem. The cancellation of Building Schools for the Future and the reduction of capital funding during 13 years of austerity have resulted in shocking school building conditions. This has been highlighted by Unison and six other teaching unions. It is impacting on both pupils and teachers, and has led to children not being at school and learning remotely. You mentioned on 4 September that any child who is eligible for free school meals would be eligible for a voucher. Can you provide any information about the voucher scheme and whether the vouchers would provide a nutritious, healthy meal for children during a cost of living crisis?



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Baroness Barran: That is a very good point. Although I understand why that has been raised, there are schools that would have been part of Building Schools for the Future. We don't need to rehearse whether it was good value for money and all the questions that have been raised about it, but there are also schools where RAAC has been found which were part of Building Schools for the Future, so we need to be fair about that. It did not address RAAC in those schools and we are now doing so. That's just for the record.

Kim Johnson: Thank you for the clarification.

Baroness Barran: It is what it is. In terms of free school meals and the vouchers, those are being organised, as I understand it, by the individual responsible bodies in schools. It is not centrally through the Department.

Susan Acland-Hood: That's right. We have a relatively tried and tested system for this. Schools will be making their own decisions about whether they provide a voucher or a meal. In some cases, they will provide a meal rather than a voucher. We are very clear that where children are not in school, they should have access either to that meal or that voucher.

Kim Johnson: What would that meal consist of?

Susan Acland-Hood: It will vary school by school. They will all do different things.

Kim Johnson: Will it be a healthy, hot nutritious meal?

Susan Acland-Hood: It will be a healthy, nutritious meal. It will meet the school meal standards.

Q65 **Mr Francois:** Baroness, you mentioned earlier that the Secretary of State is now chairing gold command—

Baroness Barran: Can I just clarify that? Forgive me—our chief operating officer chairs, but Ministers all attend. That is technically accurate, isn't it, perm sec?

Susan Acland-Hood: I can talk through the rhythm of the day. We have a ministerial gold meeting at the beginning of every day.

Q66 **Mr Francois:** Right. Who chairs that?

Susan Acland-Hood: That is chaired by the chief operating officer, but attended by the Secretary of State and by Baroness Barran and on occasion by—

Q67 **Mr Francois:** Sorry—you have a ministerial meeting that is not chaired by a Minister.

Susan Acland-Hood: We find that Ministers are able to contribute to the meeting and ask lots of questions better if there is someone else holding the ring and chairing it. It is relatively normal practice in a gold meeting. Our chief operating officer is the gold commander for the activity. We have a gold ministerial in the morning—



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Mr Francois: Not in any meeting when I was in the MOD. Anyway, go ahead.

Susan Acland-Hood: Then we have operational bronze, silver and gold through the day and then back round to the ministerial gold in the morning. We have a battle rhythm that runs through the day.

- Q68 **Mr Francois:** Okay. One group that we need to give credit to is the headteachers. In many cases, the first that the heads knew of this was when they got a call and/or an email from the Department on Thursday that said, "Your school is not opening on Monday." For any headteacher, that is an absolute nightmare. Some of these heads have been working 16-hour days. They have cancelled their summer holidays. They have dipped into their own pockets. For instance, the head at Kingsdown, which Anna mentioned, and some of my heads—they have worked incredibly hard, so the Secretary of State's remark that heads needed to "get off their backsides" was particularly insensitive. I think what she meant was about returning the questionnaires. To be fair, that was the context in which she said it, but if you are one of the heads who has been working their socks off, you can see why that would not have gone down terribly well. Baroness, would you like to take a quick opportunity this morning to tidy that up and clarify it?

Baroness Barran: I can only repeat what I said earlier. We are absolutely clear—we have heard directly from many of you and directly from the heads that we have spoken to and visited—that they have made superhuman efforts to keep their children in face-to-face education, sometimes in really complicated situations. This is not a competition, but I would like to put this on the record in relation to heads whose schools we surveyed earlier in the year and said, "You have critical RAAC and some other RAAC and we have to take the critical out of use." They were heading back at the end of the summer holidays thinking their school was going to be okay and they got the message that, having been through everything they had been through, they now had to close the rest of the school. For those heads in particular, I would like to put on record our appreciation. I spoke to one of them and said, "I don't know how you get through it."

- Q69 **Mr Francois:** Thank you; I am sure that will be gratefully received. When we as MPs found out that the schools were closed, we did not have all the mobile numbers. I was ringing headmaster A or headteacher A to try to get a mobile number for headteacher B. There was a primary school in my patch that found out on the Thursday that it was not going to open on the following Monday—I only found that out myself when I bumped into the headteacher in the gym on Saturday morning. Communications-wise, that is not ideal, is it?

Baroness Barran: No.

Mr Francois: In the House of Lords, on 4 September, you said: "Our children have been out of the classroom enough with Covid, and this House knows the seriousness of issues with attendance". I had a year 11



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pupil and her mother come to my constituency surgery on the Saturday. I will not name them, but they said that I can repeat the gist of their comments. They attend The Bromfords School in Wickford in my constituency. The daughter—we will call her Miss A—was very articulate. She made the point that in year 7, her education was interrupted by covid, which dovetails exactly with what you told the House of Lords. Last year, her education was interrupted by the teachers' strikes, which were not the Department's fault. This year, her education is interrupted by RAAC. She just wanted me to convey to you the kind of stress and pressure that that puts on a young person and their parents, who obviously want them to succeed, because of the endless interruptions to their ability to learn—hence the absolute sense of urgency that I, Anna Firth and other members of the Committee are trying to promote. We need a wartime approach rather than a peacetime approach.

I faithfully promised this young lady that I would convey all that to you. Have you any response to those comments?

Baroness Barran: She obviously painted a very vivid picture. Sadly, she is not the only pupil who was in year 7 and has been through this pattern of disruption. The only thing I can say to her is that we are working as quickly as we can to ensure that she gets back in a safe, warm, clean classroom with her classmates and teacher so that she can carry on successfully, I am sure, with her education. We are also working to ensure that—I think I am right in saying this—we have spoken to or are about to speak to Ofqual regarding how very significant disruption for some students might be taken into account.

Q70 **Mr Francois:** That is the other thing. Her mother was particularly keen to make this point. I will give you one example. Physics is one of the things that she studies. Previously, sometimes those doing that were given a list of equations that they could have in the exam to take account of the fact that their education had been disrupted. She was very keen to know that when she comes to take her exams this year, those who have had to suffer from RAAC might have that allowed. That is just one practical thing that you could maybe pass back to Ofqual. I cite it to make a wider point.

I realise it is difficult for Ofqual to find out to what extent each school was affected by RAAC and for how long. However, having spoken to this young lady and her mother, I think that while maintaining the integrity of the examination process, we need to try to take a fairly generous interpretation of this. For someone who has had their education disrupted that many times, we should have some way of being able to look at this in the round. Is that something that Ministers could follow up on?

Baroness Barran: I can see that the Chair is anxious about time, so I will make my answer extremely brief. Some schools get disrupted every year; Ofqual is used to thinking about that. As you said, some have been significantly disrupted and others much less so. I will definitely take that away and discuss it.

Anna Firth: Very quickly, we talked about the impact on children. I want to raise the impact on staff and give you the opportunity to praise the



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staff up and down the country who are doing a phenomenal job. At Kingsdown, they are all set up in a corridor. They are all carrying on. The staff classroom now effectively looks like a shipping container block. It is outside the school and obviously has very thin walls. It is very basic. The staff toilet block looks like a shipping container—a demountable—and is further along in the grounds, yet when I went to see them, they were all upbeat about providing an education to the children. They are doing a fantastic job, and I am sure you would like to take this opportunity to praise them.

Baroness Barran: Absolutely, and I think there is massive pressure on them. Coming back to your fair questioning about timings of reopenings and the delivery of demountables, the other thing I pick up when I talk to staff is that knowing the date, and not missing that date, is absolutely critical for them feeling like there is an end in sight and they can get through this. Many of them, like Mr Francois's example of the pupil, feel like this is a return to covid, which is pretty soul-destroying. But they are remarkable in their can-do attitude.

Q71 **Anna Firth:** Those are the exact words: they feel at the moment that there is no end in sight, and we need to give them that end in sight.

Baroness Barran: We are really focused on that, but the worst thing we could do would be to promise a date and then miss it. For the vast majority of schools, children are already—83% or 84% of them, or whatever it is—in full face-to-face education. We have one school fully remote, and then we have a bunch in the middle. The complicated ones are complicated, and I would not want to pretend they are not. We just need to move as fast as we can, but some will be slower because they are more complicated.

Chair: I am going to bring in Andrew, and then we will come to Miriam, but we have a series of questions to run through.

Q72 **Andrew Lewer:** I want to broaden things out again. What steps have been taken to communicate the UK Government's understanding of risks relating to RAAC in England to the devolved Administrations?

Baroness Barran: I spoke to the Scottish Government myself, and I think colleagues spoke to the Welsh and Northern Irish Administrations. We have weekly official-level meetings. We have set up a cross-UK group on this. The point is that we want to share knowledge and information about this. They met on Wednesday the 13th. All four nations were represented. Obviously, the individual Administrations are responsible for how they address and resolve RAAC, but we are all sharing best practice. I do not know if the permanent secretary wants to add a bit more. If there is time, Chair, we can give a bit more detail or follow up on that in writing.

Chair: I am very happy for you to follow up in writing on that point.

Q73 **Andrew Lewer:** There is one specific point about the Health and Safety Executive. They are reviewing the latest technical information from DFE and have said that more information is due from the Department. When



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will you be able to update HSE with that information? What are you going to be able to tell them at that stage? Obviously, HSE's responsibilities extend beyond schools, just as this RAAC issue is not just about schools. How does HSE's responsibility fit with DFE's unilateral decision, for all sorts of reasons that you have already gone into, to make this announcement? What impact does that have on HSE's work and, therefore, on other parts of the built estate in both the public and private sectors?

Baroness Barran: I am not aware of what outstanding information the permanent secretary might give, but we can follow up. I was in a meeting with HSE the other day and it was not raised, so I would need to clarify exactly what that is.

I think the broader point is that the capability of the responsible body is very different in different parts of the public sector and in individual responsible bodies, whether they are a small number of local authorities or a small number of single-academy trusts. We have not felt as confident in that capacity and capability, which is why we have taken the action we have taken.

- Q74 **Andrew Lewer:** But you can see the issue: if the DFE says that any schools with RAAC must close because they are unsafe, then obviously every other Government Department would feel inclined to do the same.

Baroness Barran: There is cross-Whitehall work going on in relation to that, which is being led by the Cabinet Office. The Secretary of State and I have both attended meetings addressing exactly those issues. But it is very clear that the nature and capacity of responsible bodies in the education estate is different from other parts of the public sector.

- Q75 **Andrew Lewer:** Coming back to devolution issues, given that school buildings with RAAC were built prior to devolution at the very end of the 20th century, are the UK Government inclined to provide any support to devolved Administrations to manage the issue?

Baroness Barran: Can you pick that up, permanent secretary, in terms of the funding issues for the devolved Administrations?

Susan Acland-Hood: Obviously, education in Scotland has been devolved for a lot longer than that; it has been a wholly separate system for a much longer period.

- Q76 **Chair:** Since the 90s, by which time, obviously, RAAC had stopped being used in buildings.

Susan Acland-Hood: No, in Scotland education has been a separate system for significantly longer than that.

- Q77 **Chair:** But the devolved Government did not exist till the 90s, so it was a different system, but under a Scottish Secretary appointed by Westminster.

Andrew Lewer: The system of education is irrelevant. That is the main point.



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Susan Acland-Hood: Sorry; you are right. All I was saying is that the education system in Scotland has been more separate for significantly longer than the existence of the devolved Government. In history the responsible bodies for the estate have been local authorities, and they effectively transferred into the devolved Government wholesale. I think that responsibility effectively went with devolution and took its history with it, if that makes sense.

- Q78 **Andrew Lewer:** So there isn't a responsibility for the UK Government. Slightly predictably, perhaps, the Welsh and Scottish and their Governments have said, "We want loads more money," but the argument from the centre, is it not, is, "You've had the devolution, and devolution goes with not just money but the responsibility as well"?

Susan Acland-Hood: I think that is correct. We would follow the normal rules on Barnett and other formulas for additional money that we were putting in, but at the point at which transfers were made, as I say, you had that local authority overarching responsibility, and that went wholesale, as it were.

- Q79 **Andrew Lewer:** Thank you. Diana, your colleague Nick Gibb said that the DFE's response to the RAAC issue is "world-leading". What is the evidence for that claim, or is that just the sort of thing that everybody in this country seems to say these days? Is there evidence to support that? Are other countries affected by deteriorating RAAC in public buildings, that you know about? What has been their approach, in order that Nick Gibb could make that assertion?

Baroness Barran: All of us know Minister Gibb and he is not one to say those things without decent grounds for saying so. I think what he meant by that is that we know of no other Administration that have proactively gone to try to find where RAAC is in every school in their school estate. We are, therefore, for better or worse, ahead of the curve in terms of knowing where it is.

In terms of incidents internationally, the Cabinet Office has done a little bit of work in that area, and we have spoken to the university in Eindhoven. I think I am right in saying that there have been some incidents with another type of concrete in Spain. One of the problems with international comparisons—I have asked if we can get an answer to this—is that we do not know whether the recipe for RAAC, or its technical specifications, were identical in the UK and other countries. I am not normally happy when a factory goes bust, but I have to say I am slightly pleased that the RAAC factory went bust when it did. We don't know yet whether there was a difference in the specification here, but that is being explored.

- Q80 **Andrew Lewer:** In that case, would we be world-leading on our RAAC because we are the only country that produces that sort of RAAC anyway?

Baroness Barran: No, sorry, that's not at all what I meant. What I meant—and, more importantly, what Nick Gibb meant—is that we are world-leading in establishing where it is and what risk it poses. Whether it



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was made well or badly 50 years ago or more, none of us can judge—I don't pass comment on that. It was just that when we spoke to Eindhoven University, one question it posited was whether there was something different in the technical specification. We don't have an answer to that; it is just a question.

- Q81 **Andrew Lewer:** Is it also possible that if other countries used this material with an intended 20 to 30-year life, they actually replaced everything that they had in place within 20 to 30 years?

Baroness Barran: It is entirely possible, but I don't know the answer to that.

- Q82 **Miriam Cates:** I will try to be as brief as possible and collapse the questions into one. Looking at school capital funding over the long term, some people have pointed out that since 2010, it has been significantly reduced compared with the period before. Do you think that if school capital funding had continued at pre-2010 rates up until now, the crisis would have been averted or reduced, or would the lack of spending on RAAC buildings have continued because the assessment of risk was unchanged, and therefore the funding would have been allocated elsewhere? Would it have made any difference if we had spent more on school buildings?

Baroness Barran: I think that there is a risk of 20:20 hindsight. The first incident that we became aware of was in 2018. As I mentioned earlier, there were schools that were rebuilt previously that we have now found still have RAAC in them, so there are rebuilds where the RAAC wasn't addressed. I don't think that there is a simple yes-or-no answer. Also, to be fair, there was obviously a spike in capital expenditure in 2009-10 and 2010-11, after much lower years previously. So, actually, if you look at the 10-year averages, the overall capital expenditure doesn't look like such a radical decrease as you suggested.

The other thing to keep in mind is that since 2010, there have been basically three big strands of capital expenditure. One is school rebuilding, the second is condition and repair and so forth, and the third is what we call basic need, which I am sure you know about, but for the record it means building places to meet a growing population. That was obviously in sharp contrast to the previous Administration. We have been spending roughly £2 billion a year on basic need, whereas for the previous Government, the basic need wasn't there. They were spending more like half a billion pounds a year at the end of their period in government. Our expenditure on condition funding has increased quite substantially, particularly recently. In the last spending review, it went up by 28%, from £1.4 billion to £1.8 billion a year. There are many things we can be grateful to Minister Gibb for, but introducing the condition surveys and ensuring that we knew we could spend the money we had more intelligently was very important.

- Q83 **Miriam Cates:** So what you are saying is that there is a political argument about whether there should be more money spent on school



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buildings, and even a political choice within Government about how to prioritise money between Departments. However, even had you had double the money, say, it wouldn't necessarily have changed the types of schools being rebuilt because the knowledge wasn't there about the RAAC.

Baroness Barran: I think that is fair. You will be aware that in 2018, we had information from our condition data survey. From the second one, so from 2021, that survey is now specifically looking for RAAC. It is a visual survey, so in relation to the permanent secretary's points about how long the bearings are, it doesn't get into that. But it does give a visual survey, which is very useful in the vast majority of cases.

- Q84 **Miriam Cates:** Some of the remedial work will be taken out of existing budgets, but some of the schools will be moved into the school rebuilding programme. What impact will that have on schools that are already in the rebuilding programme, such as Windmill Hill in my constituency, but don't have RAAC? They are there for other, but also much-needed reasons. Will they be bumped down the list, essentially?

Baroness Barran: No, they will not be bumped down the list. I can't quantify the number, but with a very small number of exceptions, the vast majority of schools with RAAC will have multi-year remediation solutions. There may be one or two that are more urgent and you simply can't do that, but the vast majority will have multi-year remediation and therefore there is no reason to bump.

- Q85 **Miriam Cates:** So the aim for the number to be built each year is going to remain the same.

Baroness Barran: Correct.

Miriam Cates: But there may be some slight jiggling.

Baroness Barran: As you will know, there is always a bit of rejigging because stuff happens in terms of planning permission or the contractors—

Miriam Cates: And post covid it was difficult to find contractors and things like that.

Baroness Barran: Correct.

- Q86 **Miriam Cates:** Fifty schools per year is what the Government intend to rebuild. I know that every single school on that list is very pleased to be there, but at the rate of 50 per year, the Government are expecting each school to have a life of 500 years. I am sure Henry VIII built schools very well, but none is still in existence—well, there are probably one or two. It is not realistic. I go back to idea that this is a political choice. What effort is your Department making to persuade the Treasury that school building should be much higher up its priority list?

Baroness Barran: The permanent secretary can talk about some of the history before I was appointed to the Department, but the Department makes a very strong and compelling case. I think that where your



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question is going is that RAAC is not the only issue in the school estate. There are some schools with RAAC that are in the school rebuilding programme, in the 400 or so we have announced already, but there are others with serious condition issues—

Miriam Cates: Around 2,000, I think the ESFA thinks.

Baroness Barran: —that need to be rebuilt. What we need to do before the next spending review is to really bring together the data that we have on condition. Colleagues will all have seen the NAO reports and our own estimates on the bill for all the electrical work that needs to happen in schools and the mechanical work that needs to happen. We need to bring those things together, because the last thing we want to do is replace a roof and then find that, actually, we have to tear the school down because there is some other issue. We have a big bit of work to do to pull that together to make the most coherent case.

Q87 **Kim Johnson:** Baroness, are you saying that a real-terms cut in capital funding has not impacted the condition of school buildings?

Baroness Barran: No, I am absolutely not saying that. All I was saying was that the figures that get talked about—the 50% cut—take a particular peak in capital expenditure at the end of the last Administration and compare it with a particular year. We all know that capital gets delivered in a lumpy way. I am not denying that there is not a decline and I am not denying that that has not had some impact. All I am saying is that if you look at the averages, I think it gives a fairer impression of the scale.

Q88 **Chair:** Permanent secretary, in terms of need and spending, the Department has underspent its capital budget frequently in recent years—I think every year since 2020. How confident are you that underspends can be used effectively in this space?

Susan Acland-Hood: Part of the agreement we have with the Treasury is that we can use capital underspends for the remediation work and, indeed, for longer-term repair work where we need to. We have been working very hard to try to make sure we are underspending by as little as possible and making the fastest possible progress. Some of that is related to the covid-related construction delays that were mentioned earlier, but we take that really seriously. We want to be using every pound of capital we have to do this work.

Q89 **Chair:** You mentioned an agreement reached with the Treasury. My understanding is that it has also been said that the capital needs of buildings will be at the top of the list for the next spending statement, which is understandable in the circumstances. Should we not be concerned that last time round, top of the list for the spending review was SEND and the delivery of much-needed SEND places, which are an essential part of the “right place, right time” support? How are we going to ensure that there is sufficient capital to continue with that programme alongside this?



Susan Acland-Hood: We are really proud of the settlement we got for SEND in the last spending review. We know how important it is and we are delivering as rapidly as possible on the execution of those places. What we have agreed with the Treasury—again, to enable us to make the commitment that we will address every school that has RAAC and it will either be repaired or rebuilt—is that we will make that our first call on the next SR.

However, that does not stop us making the case for other much-needed funding, including SEND funding. I know, from the conversations that I have had with them, that they will be really sympathetic to SEND-funding capital asks; they were in the last SR and they understand both the need and the value-for-money case of ensuring that those places are available. Therefore, making school condition the first priority does not stop us having conversations about other needs and other priorities.

I think that I said this in the last hearing—this links to the Minister's point about basic need—but we should also just note that we have had to spend a significant proportion of the Department's capital budget in recent times managing that quite big increase in pupil numbers. We are just about to top out and start moving down; pupil numbers are already declining in primary, and that bulge is moving quite rapidly through the secondary system. Therefore, what I would expect you to see squeezed in the next SR is not SEND places but the amount spent on basic need. That will be perfectly reasonable, because the amount of basic need will be going down.

Chair: That is useful. Anna?

Q90 **Anna Firth:** This question arises directly out of your comments. My understanding is that the school rebuilding programme is a 10-year programme. So, at some point, although you may not have it today, we will need the estimated timescale for the repair works to be completed for these schools—not the remediation, but the repair works. I would like you to confirm that it is not the plan that some schools will be waiting 10 years for RAAC to be removed. We will need that repair plan, and, as I have said earlier, the game plan—the wartime plan, if you like—for the schools to operate in that repair period.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, and I want to say something briefly about the mechanism for getting there, because I completely understand that. In every school that has been identified as having RAAC, we will work with them immediately on the mitigations that they need now. But, at the same time, the project directors and others working with them on the immediate mitigation will be assessing what is needed in the longer term.

We will do that proactively. One of the things that I think schools really want to hear is that we are not going to ask them to go through some kind of bidding process for this; we are going to go and actively work with them and do an assessment of what is needed—whether a repair is the most appropriate response or whether, in some cases, whole blocks or other parts of a school need rebuilding.



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Then, as the Minister said, we need to look at that whole picture together and then work that through with the existing school rebuilding programme plans, not because we are going to delay anybody who currently has a date in the programme but because we have 100 spare slots. One of the things that we have spoken to the Treasury about is that it is possible that we will have more than 100 schools with a rebuilding need, and that agreement that they will make this a priority for the next SR will allow us to increase the total number if we need to. Therefore, if we have more schools that need rebuilding than we have slots, we will increase the size.

Then we will also look at the phasing and the timing, which is both about need and the practicalities of what we can do, and when, which we do as part of the school rebuilding planning anyway. Ms Cates asked about 50 schools a year; if we can, we will look at whether we can deliver more than 50 schools in some years to ensure that we are not extending the programme by just adding to the 10 years. But, again, that will be done on the basis of active assessments of what is needed in each school, when we can do it and how we can ensure that we are getting the works on site.

- Q91 **Anna Firth:** I understand that, but you still have not answered my specific question: if a school has so much RAAC in it that it will effectively need to be part of the school rebuilding programme—I suspect that Kingsdown may well fall into that category—how are they going to operate during the time in which the school rebuilding is taking place, given the very special needs of those children?

Susan Acland-Hood: Sorry—you mean while the school is actually being rebuilt?

Anna Firth: Yes.

Susan Acland-Hood: I apologise. Our contractors in the school rebuilding programme will work carefully with every school to ensure that there is a really well-worked-through plan for how they operate while the rebuilding is taking place. What we typically do is, wherever we can, we will build. It varies a lot according to the circumstances of the schools and SRP. In some, children can stay in the old school while the new school is built alongside. We usually try to ensure that both can stand up at the same time.

We have some really good examples of that. West Coventry Academy was handed over in August and opened this year, which is pretty much dead on two years after the work started. That is pretty good for an entire secondary school. The plan was created so that the new school could go up alongside the old school and children could be educated in the old.

If the old school cannot be used in that way, which will be the case for some of these RAAC schools, we will make a similar staged plan that allows for really good quality temporary accommodation. If you look at the images that we circulated, temps come in varying quality. That links to the point I made about Hockley.

Anna Firth: Sorry to butt in, but what I am really saying is that you are



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going to have to work really closely with these schools because you are going to have to rebuild bits and then move children into the rebuilt bit because you cannot have acrows through a school like this for a two-year period.

Chair: And have a very clear deadline of when it is all going to be done as well. That is the other point.

Susan Acland-Hood: We are very clear about that. We do work really closely with schools through the school rebuilding programme on those staged plans for moving people out and back in again. For a school like Kingsdown, I would expect that to be even more important. The facilities we will source will be specialised and we will talk very closely with the school about how we manage that.

Q92 **Chair:** We have overrun our time; I hope you do not mind staying for a few more minutes to answer the last few questions. I think there are some important points to touch on. Can I just ask a question on the lessons learned from all this? How do we make sure that there are not life-limited building materials being used in schools? Baroness Barran, are you confident that, in terms of the guidance and information that the Department now uses for building new schools or repairing existing ones, we have the right approach in place to make sure that life-limited building materials are not being used?

Baroness Barran: I think it is as good as it can be on the knowledge that we have. I think what we have all learned is, and I have been talking quite closely to our chief scientific adviser in the Department, just how little detailed research there is on a number of these issues. It is as good as it can be. He is working closely with his colleagues across Government and thinking about all the issues that you have raised. You will be aware from the NAO report that we are doing a research programme later this year into other so-called system builds—not because we know there is a problem, but just to exclude.

You will remember that Laingspan and Intergrid were the first two system builds we worried about. Those went early into the school rebuilding programme or maybe its predecessor—forgive me. We are really working very proactively on all those issues because it is clearly critical.

Q93 **Chair:** You have given a definitive answer; I would not say that it necessarily shows that you are entirely confident that we can be certain that these issues are not going to arise in the future.

Baroness Barran: What I am confident about is that our technical team in the Department are extremely proactive. They have been actively going out looking for cases and learning from them. They are really closely involved with all the industry bodies and have active roles within them, so I think that we are in a good place in terms of our competence and expertise, but what I cannot reassure the Committee about is that someone somewhere will not find out something new. It is a kind of unknown unknown.



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Chair: It is worth noting the points made by the Chairman of the Public Administration Committee on this issue about the need to potentially look at this across government and the potential that the HSE might not necessarily be the right body to hold that responsibility when it comes to construction in particular.

- Q94 **Mr Francois:** I will try to be brief. Baroness, we all share your and the PS's frustration about the small number of responsible bodies that have not yet responded to the questionnaire. Hopefully, before long, not least under moral pressure, you will get your complete response. You're surveying at about 100 a week. You take on extra surveyors to do it, so hopefully before too long you should have a fairly comprehensive picture of what you are up against.

The number of schools has gone up from 143 to 174. I am not going to put a total number on it, but maybe it will go a bit above 200—who knows?—but then at least you know how many schools you have to remediate, how many you have to rebuild and then presumably, Ms Acland-Hood, once you have got a reliable number on that, that will then better inform you going to the Treasury if you need more than those 100 extra slots in the school rebuilding programme. Is that a fair summary of where you are?

Baroness Barran: Yes.

Mr Francois: Thank you.

Baroness Barran: In an ideal world, we would also bring in the other data that we hold through the condition data collection and other surveys, to ensure that we are not just looking through a narrow lens at the RAAC issue, but looking at the building as well.

- Q95 **Mr Francois:** That proves we have been listening to you. That takes me to my last two. Asbestos: it is important not to be alarmist about that. I have learned a lot about it and had some on-the-job training because of what happened at King Edmund in my constituency.

Baroness Barran: You and I both.

- Q96 **Mr Francois:** A layman's understanding is that asbestos is generally safe if it is left undisturbed in a wall. It is if you break that up in some way and it crumbles, and the fibres are exposed to the air, that it may become dangerous. Provided you do not do that, it is relatively safe. That is correct, yes?

Baroness Barran: That is correct.

- Q97 **Mr Francois:** It is important to get that on the record. There will also be some schools that are affected by RAAC but not by asbestos, and some affected by asbestos and not RAAC. Some might unfortunately be affected by a double-whammy. What are you doing to cope with schools in that last category?

Baroness Barran: They are a bit more complicated. The first complication is that the asbestos is normally underneath the RAAC. One has to get a



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particular technical approach to make a hole safely in the asbestos, to be able to put in a camera to look at the RAAC. That is literally the first physical barrier.

Then, as you know from the school in your constituency, if the RAAC needs replacing, the asbestos might need to be removed at the same time. We are experienced in dealing with those things. Each case will need its own approach, but we have experts in the Department who will address those issues, as and when we find them. I do not know if there is more to add on that.

- Q98 **Mr Francois:** In short: you promised me that lessons would be learned from what happened at King Edmund. So as not to delay the Committee, those lessons have been taken on board.

Baroness Barran: Absolutely.

- Q99 **Mr Francois:** Lastly, on top of all your other challenges, in many schools you have electrical services, mechanical services, heating and ventilation, old boilers that need replacing. I think you have been mainly addressing those by the condition improvement fund, the CIF fund. Given all those other challenges, how are you going to ensure that the Department is able to deal adequately with those things, as well? It is one thing to have an issue with RAAC or asbestos, but it is another thing if children are shivering in a classroom, and it is too cold to learn.

Baroness Barran: You mentioned the CIF, which is for smaller trusts. The school capital allocation—the SCA funding stream—is for the larger trusts, local authorities and the dioceses. As the Committee knows, the advantage of the SCA funding is that it gives that responsible body visibility on its funding stream going forward. It allows it to plan those repairs in the most coherent way possible.

I will try to answer: we are absolutely aware of it. When we make those decisions about repair or rebuild, part of the rebuild question will be how much else needs replacement in the school, and if it is above a certain size. Our criteria historically have been if more than 300 square metres need to be rebuilt or the severity is sufficient to tip it in to the rebuild rather than the repair.

- Q100 **Mr Francois:** Perhaps before I finish and hand back to the Chair, we could end on a consensual note. Thank you for answering all our rather probing questions. That is our job. Perhaps we can give you an opportunity to thank again all the staff, pupils, parents and particularly heads, who have had to struggle hard with this. We should also acknowledge that a lot of officials in the Department have been working extremely long hours on this, too. You have heard from a number of us, including the Chair of the Committee, that that is our view. I take it that you would echo that.

Baroness Barran: Completely—110%.

Chair: I am very grateful for your time. There are a number of things we will be writing to follow up on. You have given us some valuable new



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information about the process. There has been an incredible response from the sector, and from so many people in our schools, for which we are all profoundly grateful on this front. I will call the meeting to a close on that point.