

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete \(RAAC\) and management of school estates](#), HC 1399

Tuesday 28 October 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 28 October 2025.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Darren Paffey; Mark Sowards; Caroline Voaden.

Questions 1 - 51

Witnesses

[I](#): Patrick Hayes, Technical Director, Institution of Structural Engineers; Professor Chris Goodier, Professor of Construction Engineering and Materials, Loughborough University; Rob Thomas, Co-Chair, the Educational Building and Development Officers Group of local authorities; Bryony Green, Chief Operating Officer, Aldridge Education; Andy Walls, Educational Adviser, NAHT - The School Leaders Union.

[II](#): Josh MacAlister OBE MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Children and Families); Dr Jonathan Dewsbury, Director for Education Estates and Net Zero, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Patrick Hayes, Professor Chris Goodier, Rob Thomas, Bryony Green and Andy Walls.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the Education Committee. This is our one-off evidence session on reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, otherwise known as RAAC, and the management of school estates. Can I welcome our witnesses this morning, and can I ask you briefly to introduce yourselves, please?

Patrick Hayes: I am technical director of the Institution of Structural Engineers, responsible for safety, digital engineering, and sustainability. I am also a fellow of the institution as a practising structural engineer.

Bryony Green: I am chief operating officer for Aldridge Education, and I oversee our estates in that remit. I am also part of the Trust Network, which supports estates managers and estates' needs across the sector.

Rob Thomas: I am co-chair of the Educational Building and Development Officers Group, known as EBD OG. It is the organisation for local authorities to engage with the DFE on all issues to do with the school estate.

Professor Goodier: I am professor of construction engineering and materials at Loughborough University, and I have done a lot of research into RAAC as a material and a structure.

Andy Walls: I am from the NAHT, the school leaders' union. We represent 39,000 school leaders. I work on a range of policy issues at the NAHT, including health and safety issues, which cover RAAC, asbestos and that kind of thing.

Q2 Chair: My first question is to Patrick Hayes and Chris Goodier. Our evidence session today on school estates takes place just over two years on from the beginning of the RAAC crisis in 2023. Can you give us an overview of the risks associated with RAAC?

Patrick Hayes: The risks associated with RAAC fall into two categories really. The first category was known about since the late '70s, early '80s, and there was substantial work carried out by the BRE, which resulted in a report in 2002. Those risks relate to the longevity of RAAC. It is a very porous material, and it has reinforcement in it that is generally coated. There were reports that RAAC was cracking after it had been installed for a certain amount of time, and that the reinforcement was corroding and deflecting. Those defects relate to the manufacture and the basic materials of RAAC. They gave rise to the claim that RAAC had a limited lifespan. We believe that was associated with the verbal report from the BRE, and the reinforcement that stops it corroding when it has been prepared or manufactured tends to break down over that period.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The second issue is to do with the end bearing, and that is really what caused the issues in 2022 and 2023. That resulted from a collapse of a RAAC panel in a school in Kent in 2019. That was a sudden collapse that happened overnight. That was investigated, and IStructE set up a RAAC study group to look into that and it published guidance in 2023.

There was a further failure in another school in Bolton that was not widely reported, but that was the same issue. The issue there was to do with the reinforcement that the RAAC relies on not actually reaching the end bearing and the end bearings being very low. That is a major concern to us, or more of a concern. With the historical defects that were known about—the deflection and the cracking the BRE reported in 2002—there should be a sign before failure. The problem with the end bearing failures that were seen from 2019 onwards was that it was sudden, and you cannot really pick up any visual signs before that happens. Those were the two families of defects that concerned us.

Professor Goodier: Two years ago, when this came into the public awareness, there was very little knowledge about RAAC as a structural material, compared with traditional concrete, where there are thousands, if not tens of thousands, of research papers and guidance on how to design it, build it, and maintain and look after it. When RAAC came into the national consciousness, everyone went looking around, saying, “Where’s the guidance? Where’s the handbook?” And it did not exist.

Patrick mentioned some work by the BRE that started some of that, but it was very little compared with normal concrete. The NHS funded research with Loughborough and some partners two or three years ago. That has finished, but we are continuing the research. There is a lot to do and a lot to find out because it is very different from normal concrete, and it performs in a different way, especially over time. Some research cannot be done very quickly. When you are surveying or monitoring buildings over years—tens of years—you cannot rush that into weeks and months.

A lot has happened in two years. It is very much in the public consciousness. Most asset owners have gone looking for RAAC. Many of them found it. We say it has been found in almost every type of building, but a small amount. Every public sector has some RAAC somewhere, and a lot of the private sector has it. But still, a lot of asset owners are finding it for the first time now. We engage with people every month where they say, “I have RAAC. Am I meant to do something about it?” Some is public infrastructure. Some are big factories—mainly big factories where they have just not looked up. “A bit’s fallen off; should I be worried?” is what they say. We say, “Well, there’s some guidance from IStructE. You need to get it surveyed. You need to make it safe. You have some responsibilities here.”

There is still a lot to be done in the industry, but I would say we know a lot more about it now. The panic is over. You can remediate it and you can live with it. In a lot of the hospitals we work with, the whole roof is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

still RAAC. There are 10,000 different RAAC panels in the whole of the roof of the hospital, and it still has patients in it, it is still operating, and it has been made safe. RAAC is not inherently bad. You can live with it, and it is one of many building materials, especially old building approaches, which are now looking a bit worn out and a bit weary. Really, the bigger issue is maintenance, surveying and remediation of old stock in general, one part of which is RAAC.

Q3 Chair: In some ways, particularly in terms of the public consciousness, as you say, the school sector was the canary in the coalmine for RAAC. It was the first major knowledge that we had across the whole country of this problem in buildings where public services were being delivered, where vulnerable members of the public were potentially exposed to what could be a catastrophic risk in certain circumstances.

Probably this question is more for the other witnesses, but Professor Goodier and Patrick Hayes may wish to come in as well. How has the DFE helped to direct and support remediation work across the education sector since 2023? And as part of that, what role have schools and other responsible bodies played, and what can you tell us about the consistency of those roles across the sector as a whole?

Andy Walls: The RAAC crisis, as far as schools are concerned, broke in August 2023. Obviously, schools were coming back the following September. It was quite chaotic. Schools did not really know the extent of the problem, whether they had RAAC or not, because you cannot see it—it is often hidden behind panels. It is not something you can visually inspect for or even know about, you may not know that your school has it. There was a mad scramble to try to sort that out.

It took a while to get going and acknowledge what needed to be done, but eventually, the DFE sent out surveyors to schools to do a very rough and ready inspection to see whether RAAC was there. We had to keep pressing the Department to say how many schools this affected because we did not know, it did not know, and CDC1—the condition of schools survey—could not tell it. It was very much making it up on the hoof, as it were, which is difficult because parents do not want to send their children to schools that are in danger of falling down, and quite rightly.

There was a process that went on throughout that term, of surveyors eventually going out into schools, inspecting and finding RAAC. Where they did, obviously it depends on the individual circumstances of the school, but you had to close buildings, send kids home and send year groups home. You had to put up marquees in the playground so that kids could be educated somewhere while buildings were closed down, and they were just taken out of service. There was a lot of disruption.

At the end of it, by about March or April the following year—2024—the DFE had come up with a list that had either 234 or 237 schools. It found three that it thought had RAAC and it turned out not to have. There was then a process of, “Okay, what do we do about it?” For those first six



HOUSE OF COMMONS

months, it was a chaotic process for schools. Schools then clearly needed help—they needed funds, surveyors coming in and work done. That was a chaotic process, which landed on school leaders, and they had to deal with it as best they could.

That is where we got to in March. The follow-up to that is that, I think, 119 of those schools were added to the DFE school rebuilding programme, which means—I cannot do the maths—another 115 were not but had separate allocations made to them. But just identifying RAAC does not solve it. It does not repair the buildings, and it does not get the kids a safe roof over their heads.

That is a process. The previous Education Minister, Stephen Morgan, said that the Department had got through about 30 of the 234 schools a few months ago, and that it would take about three to five years. This is an ongoing process. As Chris rightly says, the immediate crisis has passed, but if you are one of those schools affected, the crisis is ongoing and serious.

Bryony Green: I can talk about the MAT sector specifically—MATs and SATs. We are still a relatively immature sector, so the level of knowledge across the sector, in terms of estates, professionals and leaders, is really quite variable, and the level of information available to us is quite variable. The CDC was mentioned, and that is a very high-level survey that does not actually provide significant information. Depending on the knowledge and experience of professionals in schools and trusts, the quality of surveys that they might hold and therefore the information they have about their buildings will vary significantly. That is a real challenge.

I remember that, as a responsible body, we were sent a survey that we had to fill in by school, and we were asked a whole range of questions to try to ascertain whether there was RAAC in the building. We had a similar survey after Grenfell that was done to identify types of cladding and whether remedial work was required. But that absence of information makes it very difficult to respond. It makes it very difficult to carry out good-quality maintenance that actually prevents these issues from happening where they are identifiable, recognising sometimes that there are things we do not know, but also in terms of being able to respond well. An emergency situation is very difficult, when you have to close a school suddenly. Being able to rely on a network and knowing where you can actually host your school, or where you can teach children, is very challenging.

Rob Thomas: The local authorities are the mature sector of responsible bodies for schools and have looked after schools for many years. Similarly to Bryony, when the crisis arose, there were a lot of communications in the DFE, a crisis team was established within the DFE, portals were established and information was completed. The responsible bodies in local authorities were very good at looking after their school



HOUSE OF COMMONS

estate and have very good condition data. The inter-relationship with the CDC is really important. The CDC is not condition information; it is high-level information that does not detail any structural, mechanical or services information. So local authorities do have those and need them to prioritise the funding they get.

The issue at the time the crisis arose was that there was a dearth of professional advisers—quantity surveyors and building professionals—to deal with that. There was not that marketplace, and it was not geared up as quickly as it could have been. Some smaller organisations—small academy trusts or smaller local authorities with very few schools—do not have an in-house assets team, so they had to commission their own surveys as well. That all took time and capacity.

As colleagues have said, there were the implications of when RAAC was established in triangulation with the DFE surveyors, the alternative accommodation, the repositioning, and the sharing of different curriculum spaces or taking blocks of the schools out of use. That has an impact on the community, public, pupils and staffing, and it became quite an anxious time for a lot of establishments.

Professor Goodier: Rob makes a good point. At that time, two years ago, RAAC was quite a surprise to the construction industry, the building industry and the surveying industry. The whole industry has been brought up on what we call traditional reinforced concrete. It is heavy and robust, you can leave it out in the rain, and you can bang it around. That is how we were all educated and brought up. This different type of material—not inherently bad, but it is very different, almost more akin to timber and wood in its properties and how you have to look after it—surprised the whole industry. There just was not the knowledge of how to survey it, how to repair it and how to look after it. Some wrong diagnoses were probably made because people had never seen it before.

At the time—barring the NHS, which has it in all its hospitals and has been managing RAAC—the DFE was the Government Department that engaged most with the research. It wanted to know about this and wanted to learn, and to talk to IStructE, talk to us and write its guidance with us. We spoke to probably most, or many of the other, Government Departments and they were behind and catching up even more. To give some feedback, there was there was very little cross-pollination of that knowledge between Government Departments. But barring the NHS, the DFE tried the most to engage with the latest knowledge, asking, “How do we get the plans? We need to write this.” We helped the DFE to write that and get it out, but the challenge is getting it out to so many schools.

Andy Walls: By the time that guidance came out, the immediate crisis had passed. By the time the DFE got a grip on what it was and could send out something saying, “Here’s a picture of what RAAC looks like. This is what you need to look for,” chunks had already fallen off ceilings, and people knew for themselves what it looked like. So yes, it is difficult.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Patrick Hayes: Certainly, the key lessons we have learned have parallels with the Building Safety Act 2022. Under the Building Safety Act, there is a requirement for HRP owners to assemble basic building information data, to carry out regular five-year surveys of their buildings related to risk and to carry out risk assessments. When the RAAC issues broke, one of the main problems was the lack of data that schools had about their buildings. It was very difficult to identify the buildings with RAAC, and having that information beforehand helps.

Work is now being done on that. There is a very good guide that the DFE produced, "Managing Older Buildings," which enables estate managers to identify the buildings that have all the typologies. We are aware that there is a study looking at the risks to do with system build. But the process that is rolled out for higher-risk buildings is first, doing that desk study to understand the types of defects that are associated with buildings; secondly, getting the information on the ground of the type of buildings and assets that people have; and thirdly, looking at the overall risks and then carrying out in-depth surveys every three to five years with a risk assessment. That gives you a robust process.

Q4 **Darren Paffey:** Thinking about the impact of all this, our predecessor Committee was told two years ago by Baroness Barran that, actually, remediation had been pretty quick across the board. That was her view. I just wanted to get your view on whether RAAC remediation has been timely and straightforward, as it is presented to be. I am happy for anyone who has a view on or experience of this to answer.

Andy Walls: As I said, the DFE's only assessment is that it will take three to five years. If Baroness Barran said two years ago that it was fixed, that is unlikely to be true. What I imagine she meant was that it has been identified, but the work needs to be done. The money needs to be found and given to schools to effect the repairs, and to local authorities and other responsible bodies. Schools need to be put in the school rebuilding programme, but being put in the school rebuilding programme does not, as they say, butter any parsnips. It just means you have a slot, but you then have to wait until it is your turn.

They are now being prioritised, and that is a good thing, but it still takes time, during which you have to put kids in temporary accommodation, and you may have to close parts or all your school. It is an ongoing process; it is a process, rather than an event.

One other thing is that when schools with RAAC were put into the school rebuilding programme, they did not change the size of the programme. That meant other schools that would have had a slot in that programme were then waiting, so you are robbing Peter to pay Paul. So yes, it is going to be an ongoing process, and there will be a lot of pain for the schools that are affected and the communities they serve.

Rob Thomas: I would say the same. Originally, the school rebuilding programme was 500, and now 100-ish projects of that original 500 are



RAAC-related. There are still a number of schools with temporary accommodation—whether those are marquees in the playground or temporary buildings—still waiting for their RAAC projects to be remediated. That obviously has an impact on the school management and the curriculum management for the schools. There is not enough pace in the delivery of this programme, and to give that wider public perception of assurance, we ought to remediate RAAC as soon as possible from the estate.

Q5 **Darren Paffey:** That is helpful, because it moves us on to my next question, which is: what is the impact on usable space? You have outlined it in the short term. Are there any longer-term impacts that we should be concerned about or looking into at this stage? For example, one of the other things Baroness Barran said is that, on average, the loss of learning to children in schools where RAAC remediation was happening was around six days. Does that ring true with you? Is that something that we just have to say is collateral damage, or should we be deeply concerned?

Rob Thomas: There is some immediate loss of learning. If RAAC was identified, there had to be an immediate removal of that block or the whole school, potentially. There are schools in the country that have had to be temporarily relocated to different facilities while their RAAC project is remediated, whether that means knocking down the school or knocking down blocks. Initially, there were some immediate days that were lost. I am not sure how you could calculate the loss when there is aggregated learning from parts of facilities—say, the science block or the PE hall, or whatever it might be. An adaptive curriculum would help to support that, but if you do not have your specialist facilities available for all your curriculum delivery time, it will have an embedded impact on pupils.

Bryony Green: There is a difference between an immediate loss of learning, in terms of days that you might not be in school at all, and the knock-on impact of trying to deliver an education in less-than-ideal circumstances. It might just be a change of scene for those staff who are having to set themselves up, or specialist equipment—as a trust with a large specialist curriculum, that is something that is close to our heart—or having access to the right facilities to be able to deliver the curriculum.

Every child gets only one chance in school. When we look at it overall, there are some things that are constrained in terms of the time to actually resolve them, but for that child, three to five years could be a significant chunk of their whole experience in that school. That could have a lifelong impact on them.

Andy Walls: Obviously, this varies from school to school, but in 2023, one secondary school in Stepney had to close down entirely and send 1,800 kids home. That is a fairly major disruption. That took several months, and they had to wait for temporary classrooms to be ordered and arrive. That obviously caused disruption. We are not out of the woods yet. Even this September, a primary school in Buckinghamshire



HOUSE OF COMMONS

found RAAC, it had to admit kids a couple of weeks late, and then they were educated in steel frame marquees in the playground.

Once RAAC is discovered, it will immediately cause disruption. Schools differ massively in how big they are, from small primaries to 2,000-pupil secondaries, so it depends on how much the school is affected, to what extent, and how big it is. But it causes huge disruption to those local communities when it happens.

Q6 **Darren Paffey:** Sticking with the longer-term impact, the Association of School and College Leaders predicted that many of the schools where RAAC remediation was happening would see a dip in admissions, because two years on, parents are looking and saying, "Do I really want to send my kid there?" Has that been your experience from looking at admissions?

Bryony Green: We do not have RAAC in any of our schools directly, although we have another building that is currently closed for a different condition-related issue. Certainly, recruitment is a challenge that we are really concerned about. That is against the national picture of falling rolls anyway, so to attract local families, we want to be schools that serve our local communities. That is an additional challenge, and recruiting and retaining staff who might be working in less-than-optimal environments is a concern.

Q7 **Darren Paffey:** There is a double challenge, too, because obviously, if you start losing children, you start losing revenue and the funding that comes with it. Have you seen this, again, not necessarily in those that you are dealing with, but across other parts of the sector?

Andy Walls: We have not particularly surveyed every school to ask, "What has the effect been on your admissions?", but what Bryony says is exactly right. I would add that if you discover RAAC and then you have to remove it, sometimes when you remove the RAAC, you unearth other problems on the school site. You may find asbestos that has been encapsulated. When you find that, you clearly have to close the school immediately because it is a toxic, hazardous substance that has to be removed by specialists. That has an effect. On the whole, parents do not want to send their children to a school that has asbestos in it. It is a huge problem when consequential problems are unearthed.

Q8 **Darren Paffey:** You listed, and several of you have spoken about, the disruption caused by temporary classrooms, marquees, lost days and so on. For the children who are in those particular schools, have we seen any evidence of an impact on their achievement? For example, on examination results, have examinations been disrupted or have we managed to—

Rob Thomas: We are overlaying the RAAC with the covid situation as well. In terms of analytical data that is linked to the condition of the school building, some of these children in secondary school would have been through the covid pandemic as well. We know the results have



changed; post-covid, results are starting to increase, back to where they were before covid. There will be a lot of factors to do with outcomes for children. The teachers who are delivering those good-quality lessons also need the estate to be able to support children's outcomes.

- Q9 **Darren Paffey:** I appreciate you have had several things going on at once, with covid and so on, but if we are saying that the vast majority of schools where there is RAAC are still to be remediated, is now a better moment to start looking at that? Will there be monitoring and tracking of schools where RAAC remediation is going to happen in future and of any impact on exam results? We are basically back to pre-covid, so we can measure it from now—is that right?

Rob Thomas: That might be a question for session two.

- Q10 **Caroline Voaden:** I have a question for you all. Do you believe that schools are safe and fit for purpose?

Patrick Hayes: What we are aware of from RAAC is that we need to take an active role in managing schools. We are not aware of any systemic risks in the nature of RAAC, but when you look at building issues, they tend to arise after a new technology is introduced. We need to pay attention to MMC after about 40 to 50 years. We have an ageing building stock and we need to take an active approach to maintenance. It is not really a binary question of whether things are safe or unsafe; it is that you are in a region where you have to actively manage the safety of the buildings.

Bryony Green: Colleagues in schools are working very hard to make sure that spaces are safe. Certainly, in the MAT sector, as we mature, there are professional estates leads. In our trust, having that five-year survey, understanding the risk and making decisions about how you allocate your limited capital funding to maintain it are high priorities. It is about making sure you have access to expertise in terms of health and safety, risk assessment and all that. For many trusts, it would be very secure, but certainly, in smaller MATs, it is harder for leaders—whether there are estates leaders or other leaders—to know everything that they need to know in order to maintain that.

Having access to support is important. I know the estate management standards that were released earlier this year help people to understand what they need to do, but you still have to engage actively with that. The competency framework is helpful in terms of knowing what skills you need, but you have to engage actively with it. The challenge is making sure that everyone knows that those things exist and are engaging with them.

Rob Thomas: Similarly to Bryony, I would say that “safe” is a very emotive word, but from the information that local authorities and responsible bodies collect, they do maintain their assets with the limited funding they get. We are coming to the point where the limited funding



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that we do have for school estate management—we have 22,000-plus schools, and we are looking at a rebuilding programme of 750 with the new announcements in the comprehensive spending review. Schools have 60-year or 75-year life cycles. How much of that money is now being spent to patch and repair and elongate the life?

There will be elemental failures in parts of the estate, whether that is the mechanical engineering, the roof or the external façades. That money is being diverted from improving the estate into maintaining, patching and repairing. At some point, buildings will become life-expired, and we have to accept that we need additional investment to replace 20,000-plus schools.

Professor Goodier: To build on that, let me state the scale of the problem for the DFE. There are more than 20,000 schools in every part of the country, and they were all built at different times by different people, using different materials. The schools have been used in a slightly different way, and the weather has been different in all those parts of the country. Even if they were the same when they were built, which they were not, 50 years later, they are now different. They are all ageing in a slightly different way.

We mentioned the CDC, and even if you walk around and view the school—as they try to do every year—you have only a small part of what that structure is. You have not seen the inside, which is the structure that is holding it up. You have seen the bits you can see, like the paint, which is the visual part. There is a massive challenge just to understand that. Therefore, getting data about the proper structural condition is really important, and you can then make decisions based on that. But it is a big challenge.

Andy Walls: We surveyed our members on this last April. School leaders work tirelessly to make sure their schools are safe, the staff work wonders and parents work wonders. When we surveyed our members, 83% said that the capital funding they received was insufficient; 37% said that they had to raise their own funds just to make sure that they could repair and maintain the buildings; and 97% said that they were prioritising the maintenance of school buildings over longer-term capital projects. So it is make do and mend, and sticking plasters.

The answer, as ever, as with most things in education, is that there needs to be more funding. Until there is, school leaders will make do with what they can, but it will not be perfect.

Q11 **Caroline Voaden:** I just have a follow-up question for Chris. In 2023, the National Audit Office identified RAAC, system-built blocks and asbestos as the three principal risks on the school estate. Would you agree?

Professor Goodier: Those are three from a longer list. System-build is a catch-all term for a lot of innovative building approaches that were



HOUSE OF COMMONS

developed in this country and many countries around the '50s and '60s. We built a lot of buildings very quickly, with less skilled labour. At the time, they all seemed fine, but 50 years later, the drawings have gone, what you see is what you get, and they are very different. What we did not know then, because there was a new approach to building, was how they would age over time. We now have a very large stock of different buildings, and we do not even know how they were built, never mind how they might last.

This is obviously about the DFE, but you can apply that to many other sectors as well. They are the high-level risks, but really above that, we do not fully understand what is in the building and how it was built, and we do not fully understand how it ages over time. Those are three of the main ones, and there is a longer list underneath.

Q12 Mrs Brackenridge: This question is best suited for Professor Goodier and Patrick. We welcome the announcement that we heard this morning about RAAC being removed from schools by the end of this Parliament. We are still awaiting the detail on that. To follow on from your point, Professor Goodier, about the structural realities and how immense that challenge is, the risks associated with RAAC were understood decades before action was taken, so what confidence should we have that structural and other risks in the estate are now being managed better?

Professor Goodier: Starting with RAAC, we have a much higher confidence now in the educational estate. We have found the RAAC, and we have a plan—or you have a plan—of how to remove that. I would like to mention that DFE has made the statement about removing it all. The NHS is not removing it all; it is living with that. Eventually, it will have to replace it, because the buildings are very old. You can live with RAAC, but that is RAAC, and we mentioned the three main risks there, of which there are more.

The bigger challenge is all the other problems with the buildings, such as asbestos. We understand that now as a material. If you do not touch it—if you leave it—that can be safe. System-builds we do not understand, but I know that DFE has funded some research to try to understand that better, which is ongoing now and the results come out next year. So it will have a better understanding. But even with that funding, which was more than £1 million, there are so many different types of system-built buildings, you cannot study them all or find out where they all are.

There are other problems with old, decaying buildings. We know a lot about the science, but it comes back to how we have not done a proper structural survey of each building to fully understand it. We have done a walkaround visual inspection. There is a lack of data. Things will happen with schools, because with climate change, which is happening, the buildings are being worked harder than they used to be. A school can sit there for 40, 50 or 60 years. If all you are doing is a visual inspection, there could be some inherent risk inside the structure that is holding up the roof that you have just not looked at. With a really severe storm and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

massive rainfall, which we do have, or a freak snowstorm, suddenly it is receiving a load externally that it has not done before, and an accident will happen.

Q13 Mrs Brackenridge: Okay. Would you support calls for a digital database regarding the DFE's knowledge of asbestos on the school estates, so that it can have an adequate programme?

Professor Goodier: Yes—more data is good, but with the digital bit, you have to get that data. What data is going into that digital repository? It is about collecting the data, and that means on site, in the structure, in the school. A national database to prioritise the high-risk schools is a good thing. With limited funding, where do you spend that money? You spend it on the high-risk ones, but regarding repair and remediation, you should also spend money on the medium or lower-risk ones, so that next year or in five years, they are not high risk. It is both.

Patrick Hayes: If I could come in on that, there are real parallels with the Building Safety Act. In terms of where we are, the search for RAAC has enabled us to identify the structure in our schools better. If we look at those parallels, we see that there is a requirement under the Building Safety Act for high-risk buildings to assemble a digital database of their building assets. The first step is what is known as basic building information. That is fundamental: knowing what the schools are and what they are made of, because when a risk arises, it is very difficult to get the prevalence of that risk without having that information. That really needs to record not just asbestos, but the risks that are associated with certain building types.

The exercise that Professor Goodier spoke of, where the DFE has funded £1 million of research into system-build, is very similar to an approach that we took with high-risk buildings. We generated a compendium of 16 building types and the defects that are associated with them, so that you can then marry up the defects you expect to happen with the building data on site and the surveys. The people who are carrying out the surveys are armed with what they should be looking for. You can then look in detail at the potential risks. For example, if we look at what is reported to us—reporting is really important under the CROSS scheme, which is a voluntary reporting scheme—we have seen four or five issues in schools over the last few years.

As Chris said, they tend to relate to system-build, but lightweight system-build solutions that tend to deteriorate over time and get subjected to extremes of weather. There have been lightweight timber solutions. There have been proprietary, very lightweight steel and concrete solutions, which have suffered damage after extremes of weather. That pattern ties in with research that has been carried out in New Zealand, which states that some root causes of deterioration tend to be damp, biological degradation and movement. If we can pick up those things on the ground in a survey and marry that with the problems we expect to see because we have carried out a desk study, that gives us a



robust approach. Those steps are being made, when you look at the research that has been carried out.

Q14 Mark Swards: You have already answered the question I was going to ask you first, so I will try to develop on it. Chris, you mentioned in your previous answer that the DFE's Condition Data Collection 2 survey, which completes next year, is not sufficient to identify structural problems because it is not invasive, it does not look at structural things, and it does not identify hazardous materials like asbestos, as you have already addressed. It is pretty clear that, in your view, it does not collect sufficient information about the buildings. So what should the DFE do? What concrete asks would you give to the DFE, should you have the Minister in front of you in a few minutes' time? Anybody can answer that.

Bryony Green: When the CDC is carried out, it does not actually support responsible bodies to be able to maintain their estates. We have to check what we know about our buildings against it, and we have to respond if there are gaps, or if there are differences in our opinion on the building and what comes out. But the CDC is a tool to help allocate the finite funding, and the challenge is that it does not necessarily give enough information, for all the reasons that have been covered. As responsible bodies, we carry out our own surveys, so we are then spending more money on carrying out surveys.

It would be far more sensible for there to be a joined-up approach—a standard specification for surveys, and an approach that meant there was good-quality, robust and complete information that could be used to provide the information to support long-term planning. It could also be used by responsible bodies to prioritise their maintenance and their use of the funding. Obviously, we have different funding streams available. If you are a small MAT or a single-academy trust, you are likely to have CIF. You have to bid for that funding anyway, which is a different approach and causes separate challenges. Bringing the things together would be far more sensible.

Rob Thomas: I fully support that, from a local authority perspective. It is a conversation we have been having as part of the strategic framework we are developing with the Department, regarding estate management in the long term, as we move towards the infrastructure development plan and how we look at our estate in a longer-term fashion. We are into this cycle where there is cyclical funding and cyclical maintenance, and we are having to spend money to either back off the surveys from CDC ourselves or to bid in if they are smaller academies.

We have to look at more strategic development of funding for maintenance, and we should not be duplicating it. We need to work jointly with the Department and all responsible bodies, whether those are the diocesan bodies, academy, trust or local authorities, to agree what there needs to be. The summary of that information should then lead to more intrusive surveys, if there is anything that looks like asbestos. There should be jointly commissioned support for structural intrusive



information, because CDC is a more visual inspection—there is no loft space access, no below ground, no drainage information, no mechanical engineering information. It is literally a visualisation of a block and it can put a block into a category for allocation of funding, as Bryony has mentioned. That is not estate management.

Andy Walls: I would agree with all that. As you said at the start, the CDC is not sufficient, and it is not sufficient by design. You rightly point out that it is designed not to be invasive or structural, and it is designed not to even look at asbestos. The DFE cannot rely on that to pick up those things because it is designed not to look at them. Responsible officers need support, and people need to know what they are inheriting when a school changes hands—when it moves from being local authority to academy or back again, or when the new head takes over a school. They just need that information and they need to know. If it is not sufficient, they need support to find out that information, because if you do not know what is there, you cannot do anything about it. The CDC will not help you.

Q15 **Mark Swards:** If there are no further answers on that one, I just want to delve into this a little more deeply. Bryony, you were talking about the data that schools or responsible bodies already hold. How good is that data? Andy and Rob might want to follow up on that question, too.

Bryony Green: It is variable. It will depend on who commissioned it, what they understood about what was required and what format it came back in. There is not a standard specification for surveys. Some trusts will hold that information digitally. We certainly use it to forward-plan and hold that in a system that allows us to work out what we have completed, but in a lot of cases, it might still be in a downloaded file somewhere on someone's laptop. There are probably not as many big folders printed out these days as there used to be. It is very variable.

Rob Thomas: The local authorities, as I said, are quite well versed in school estate management. There will be variance across the country, but in the main, we have to prioritise our funding. We have to be assured that the condition is needs-led and needs-driven, so strategic assessment of the estate to prioritise the funding is really important. The scale of the funding we get is really important. An average local authority like the one I work in in Walsall receives approximately £3 million a year. That would equate to approximately £40,000 per school in capital maintenance funding. A senior school roof would cost £500,000 or £600,000. You can see how we have to really be sure when we are spending our capital maintenance—and it is around that patch-and-repair approach, rather than really investing into the estate for the long term.

Q16 **Mark Swards:** The NAO has said that it is not confident that all local authorities keep the same level of consistent data. Some do inspections really well and some do not do inspections at all. It might not necessarily even know where that need is now.



Rob Thomas: That is fair, up to a point. Local authorities have to be responsible, and section 151 officers have to be assured that money has been spent appropriately. Depending on the surveyors they use, and whether it is an in-house organisation or external, there will be variable quality. It comes back to the point that Bryony made—it is about consistency of specification, consistency of inspection, consistency of identification of risks, and prioritisation, so that those digital passports for a building estate could be passed across authority boundaries, and that should be the same.

Andy Walls: I agree with all that, and I would say there is also a regional angle to it. When the RAAC crisis hit, a quarter of the schools that were affected were in Essex, because the east London to Essex corridor was massively rebuilt in the post-war period, so that is their regional history. With modular buildings, the CLASP buildings that went up in the '50s were quite common in Hertfordshire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. So it depends on what the local authority bought into and what they decided was the right approach then. It is hugely variable, and there is really no commonality. The information needs to be a lot better so that the responsible officers and school leaders can do their jobs.

Professor Goodier: Can I just link up a few points? I agree with what has just been said. The CDC provides a process, a framework, a specification to do something, but what is missing is an understanding of what building type we are looking at. When we know that, we need to develop the guidance that Patrick was talking about: what do we look for when it is that type—brick and block, steel, timber, or whatever building type—so we can go to the next level? We then need a national register, probably digitally, so that we can make comparisons across 20,000 schools and help prioritise. That can link to more locally held data, so that we can get a proper national picture and also help locally to make those decisions.

Q17 **Mark Swards:** Understood. Just sticking with Andy, Rob and Bryony, moving on from data to the actual skills required, to what extent do schools and responsible bodies have the skills and capacity to manage their school estates effectively? What is the condition?

Andy Walls: That is difficult to answer because there are 24,000 schools, and it will vary from school to school. School leaders do the best they can with the school business leaders. They are trained and they do their job, but they need to be supported in doing that. What we find as the school leaders' union is that school leaders are being pressed upon to do things that they will willingly do because they care about their communities and their schools, but it is not really their purpose or their job to do that. They are not trained to do it. They need support in looking after the school estate.

We need greater help and greater funding. The DFE is providing help and guidance in looking at estates management frameworks. That is welcome and we are working with it in doing that. But there needs to be more of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

it, it needs to be funded and it needs to work, so that it takes the pressure off school leaders and school business leaders who are quite hard-pressed in all this.

Rob Thomas: I would say the Department has been supportive recently regarding the GEMS—good estate management for schools. That goes across the system. The larger academy trusts and local authorities will have an estates team, will be well versed, and will employ professionals or consult out for professional support. There will be those smaller single academies that may struggle in their professional awareness of estate management. Any documentation that is provided by the Department will be beneficial. There is a lot of information in that guidance, as you would imagine. Managing a school estate is not straightforward. You need to be aware and cognisant of a lot of legislation, whether it is water hygiene, asbestos management or condition information, as well as mechanical, electrical and engineering.

The guidance provided from the Department of Education is supportive. The issue is how that is transitioned into individual establishment level, and the skillset that traditional premises officers or estate managers need to understand in managing their estate going forward.

Bryony Green: There is a point about capacity. GEMS has lots of good information in it, but it is enormous and it is quite hard to navigate. The estates management standards start bringing that into an easier and more navigable system, in which you can understand where you are as a school or as a trust. But actually, the team that looks after that is tiny. It is much smaller than, say, the emergency response team or other teams across the DFE. Actually, it relies on trusts and responsible bodies finding it. I am part of the Trust Network. We are a national network for multi-academy trusts. We help colleagues at whatever level of maturity they are to access those and find those, but we are volunteers.

The Department must ensure that everyone knows what they need to know, because people do not necessarily choose to opt out of it; they do not know what they do not know. Their ability to access it is challenging. I am really conscious that in the “Academy trust handbook”, the wording has been strengthened quite considerably over the last couple of years around trusts and responsible bodies, responsibilities around estates and the potential consequences of not adhering to those. Making sure that there is proactive support that actually means we are not just dealing with the crisis when it happens, but we are actually trying to stave off many of those crises early, is really important.

Patrick Hayes: Can I come in from an industry perspective? I sit on one of the industry competence steering group committees. The impression—certainly, Dame Judith has said this—is that the level of competence is really variable across the industry. What is really important is to pick up the back of the industry—just to pick up those points. There are now competency frameworks coming out, particularly for facilities



management, but communication throughout the sector is absolutely vital.

One of the skills issues that we have found is that there are two sets of skills. There are the technical skills, but the risk management skills, particularly the knowledge of legislation and how you deal with risk, is really critical as well. Again, that is very difficult for individuals to deal with because that is set by best practice. It is important to have communication across the sector on what that best practice is.

- Q18 **Mark Swards:** Understood. I am conscious of time, so I am going to briefly ask you one final question. Are schools and responsible bodies actually held accountable for their estate management? That one is really for Andy. And then, for Bryony and Rob, how effective are the frameworks and standards provided by the DFE? I do not know if you want to start with the accountability point.

Andy Walls: Are schools held accountable? Of course they are held accountable.

- Q19 **Mark Swards:** Is it effective?

Andy Walls: Is the accountability effective? That is a hard one to answer. I don't know.

- Q20 **Mark Swards:** For their estates management, specifically.

Andy Walls: I am not sure if I can give you an answer on whether school leaders feel that works. Having a framework is great, and having a list of instructions on what you are meant to do is great, but when you have to go in at the weekend because the sewage pipes are backflowing or your windows are falling out, you do not really care about the framework or how you are accountable. You roll your sleeves up and get on with it. The feedback we get from our members is that they are doing the best they can in difficult circumstances. Yes, they are accountable for it because they take on all that. That adds to all the other pressures they have knocking at the door, including high-stakes accountability. Yes, they care, and they do the best they can.

Rob Thomas: The GEMS guidance that we have talked about is starting to translate into implications for trusts, local authorities and school estate managers. The gap in the knowledge is around how to deploy that awareness, training and support. We need to identify how the DFE, working together with local authorities, EBD OG and the Trust Network can really get under the skin of this, because there will be those expert areas, and there will be those areas that need support.

We need the development of the guidance into practical, real-life examples of how to do estate management planning, whether that is IT-led solutions, BIM systems or spatial awareness programmes. We can do it on Excel, but it is about how we move forward. We manage our risks at



a really high level, but it is that practical level of fixing the estate that needs more support.

Bryony Green: You would find it very hard to find a trust or a school that did not feel they were being held to account across a whole range of areas. So I would not necessarily advocate for more holding to account, although making sure we are doing the right things, that investment and time is spent on the right areas, and that we are mitigating risks—that risk approach—is really important. The estate management standards are a positive step. I know the team has worked really hard to seek feedback and to try to engage across the sector, including with other organisations such as EBD OG, to make sure that it actually provides more practical guidance.

The challenge is that the people who are engaging in that are probably the ones who are already quite cognisant of how to manage it. They are aware of it already, and they are probably doing a lot of the things. There will still be a harder-to-reach minority who may be just struggling for capacity in a smaller setting, who need to actually engage with it.

Mark Sowards: Those were incredibly helpful answers, thank you all.

Q21 **Caroline Voaden:** I have a couple of questions for Bryony, Andy and Rob. The first one might be a very short answer. Is school condition funding adequate to allow responsible bodies to meet their obligations to maintain the fabric of their estates?

Bryony Green: No. We are all in the same boat of responding to things that have gone wrong, and replacing things when they need replacing. No one would say that they are maintaining the building proactively in the way that we would like to.

Rob Thomas: I will refer to my earlier point regarding the scale of the funding and the average, and what that means to the estate. It is patching and mending. There is not that opportunity to really improve the estate for the future.

Andy Walls: I will add the wider point that the DFE said in 2021 that it needed £11.4 billion to bring the school estate up to satisfactory—that is not even good, but satisfactory. That was a few years ago, so it is about £14 billion now. It needs investment, because without that, it is going to fall down. It does not really matter what route the funding comes through, but there needs to be more funding, whether that is through the condition improvement fund, or whichever fund, or the school rebuilding programme.

Q22 **Caroline Voaden:** It is clear from what you have been saying that the condition improvement fund is too complex and is not awarding funds according to need across the country. We know that the north-east received the least funding in the most recent round, despite having the highest need. It is clearly not very effective. How do you think it could be



improved? The obvious answer is with a lot more money, but are there ways that the fund could work better that would meet need more effectively?

Andy Walls: The easy answer to that is that what schools cannot really cope with is having penny packets of things, with different strings and bows wrapped around them. Making it easier to understand what money you have—whether you are a school, a local authority or an academy trust—and having more freedom to spend that on what you know it needs spending on, will be helpful. But then, clearly, the quantity needs to be big enough to make that worth while.

Rob Thomas: There is a distinction in that the CIFS are available only to small academies—so not large academy trusts or local authorities. There is a perverse incentive in that the smaller, less-funded individual establishments have to spend a lot of money on professional advice to support the application. Actually, there is a disconnect where probably some schools that really genuinely need that funding do not have the expertise on the individual school level, or they have to spend the money. There is a balance between the risk and reward of spending money to support the application, and there is a disconnect for those smaller schools.

Bryony Green: There are two very different models of funding. Obviously, the advantage you have if you receive SCA is that you can plan, you have an idea about what you are going to receive and you can choose how to allocate it across your organisation, but it is never going to be enough to do the large jobs like a block replacement and significant projects. With CIF, you do not have that consistency and you do not know that you are going to get funding, but you might be able to access something that is larger. But you will not know.

Often, the timing of those announcements can be challenging as well. The school summer holiday is a critical period for doing big pieces of work. The timing is often such that you have had to pay to get some support in order to put a bid in that is likely to be successful, and then you have to mobilise very quickly, and you are paying a premium because you are trying to deliver the work in a critical holiday period.

Rob Thomas: Just to come back, it was not CIF, but it was a reduced SCA—the equivalent of CIF for local authorities and large trusts. We get an annual allocation, generally in February or March, for the coming financial year. We have to do strategic planning for large-scale roof replacement; we cannot just line that up that coming summer. For us, in the longer term, we would like an indicative single settlement-type approach for local government funding needs to apply to the capital arena. I appreciate that there is a methodological approach, depending on the number of schools in each body, but there should be a little more systemic long-term capital allocation that we can do strategic planning for.



Q23 Jess Asato: This is for Professor Goodier and Patrick. Last year, it was reported that contracts have been awarded for only 62 of the 500 schools in the school rebuilding programme. The ISBL has said that, at current rates, it would take 400 years to rebuild all schools. What are the reasons for the delays, and what does the DFE need to do to speed up delivery?

Professor Goodier: I do not have good knowledge of how the DFE is issuing those contracts, but I can speak about the capacity of the industry to deliver those, and we have alluded to it before regarding the RAAC problem. The construction industry is mainly SMEs—very small companies all over the country. They struggle to make themselves heard with a national voice, and they deliver on very small margins, with very small profit. At the same time, there are very low barriers to entry. Almost anyone can go and be a builder and do a bit of building.

Over recent years, accelerated by the pandemic, costs have accelerated; we have a skills crisis partly due to Brexit, and partly just because of the reputation of the industry. There are fewer people coming in, whether it is at the professional level or the labour level. Material prices have shot up, The Ukraine war is part of it, and there is Brexit again and other issues. Energy prices have rocketed—as we all know from our homes—for all sectors. Costs have shot up, so even if the money was there, the capacity of the industry to deliver all these schools, with the expertise and the labour, is difficult.

Patrick Hayes: It is worth putting this into context. As an industry, we replace about 1% of our built stock per year. As you say, just to get to that, we are talking about a fourfold increase. But in terms of some of the complexities of school building and some things that have been accelerated—school building is difficult anyway because you are dealing with an existing site. Even before you get to the site, you probably have a year of planning and a year of logistics. Once the funding is there, it is important that the projects are really well project-managed, particularly if you are dealing with an individual school. The more that you can project-manage, the better.

Once you get to site—I know that MMC was discussed, and that can accelerate things by 20% to 60%, but you have to procure with MMC in mind, and you have to do a lot of work up front with existing buildings. There is a bit of a conflict between a lowest cost, single-stage tender approach, and the fact that if you want to de-risk the building and get on site earlier, you need contractors on site earlier, and you need the supply chain on site much earlier on a project to use MMC.

Also, as Chris said, the industry at the moment works on quite low margins and is quite risk-averse. It is really important to pump-prime the industry. It needs to know that there is going to be a supply coming forward so that it can move people into it. It is also important that the standards are realistic and consistent, so that people can really get a supply chain that can meet demand in several places.



As a good client, there are steps that that can be taken in terms of a standard approach to specification, and a standard approach to school design. It does not have to be MMC but certainly DFMA. Having things as simple and as repeatable as possible, and as open to as many suppliers as possible, is important, but then so is pump-priming the industry. On an individual basis, we then need to make sure that there is loads of data on existing buildings, so there are not risks and you can procure early, so that when you get to site you can build things as quickly as possible.

Q24 Jess Asato: My next question is to Chris and Patrick. In the light of the demolition of schools built by Caledonian Modular in 2024, how confident should we be in the DFE's processes for assuring building contractors for the school rebuilding programme? We have heard about the safety risks relating to modular school builds, but it would be useful to get a bit more understanding.

Professor Goodier: We are often very quick to blame the building approach. In this case—Caledonian—the modular was the failure, but many traditional forms of construction businesses fail, and there are problems with the buildings. We have touched on many. There are many ways of building a building. MMC and modular get a lot of publicity for being quicker and better quality, so when they have problems with that approach it gets some publicity. People say, "Oh, you all said this would be quicker, better and better quality, and it's gone wrong." It gets a lot of press, whereas when it is bricks and mortar and the local builder goes bust—it happens every day of the week—it does not make the press because there is no news there.

We should not blame the approach. MMC and modular can deliver high-quality buildings quicker, if they are done properly—so if the clients know about the system, and the supply chain and the companies in that are good. There are benefits for the taking if it is done properly. But there is a higher risk because if you are doing bricks and mortar, every town and village in the country sells bricks and mortar, so if your contractor goes bust you can go to another contractor and buy different bricks. I just use bricks as an example of something that is everywhere.

When you go to a specific supplier doing a unique product, like Caledonian, there is a temptation to design a very unique, bespoke product that could be much higher quality and cheaper, but you put all your eggs in that basket. If that contractor or supplier goes bust, you cannot just pop around the corner and buy some more bricks. Patrick alluded to this: there is potential for more standardisation with customisation—so you can get the advantages of MMC factory-built, standardised approaches, but more than one supplier can supply that type. So if a company goes bust due to various business issues, there are other suppliers you can go to, to deliver that building.

Patrick Hayes: There are two sides to this. As Chris said, there is an overall delivery model, and some issues with Caledonian that were in the press were issues that could have affected any building. They were



quality issues. Our policy is that for all buildings, there should be independent checking and monitoring. Since the advent of the design and build contracts about 20 or 30 years ago, there has been less independent site monitoring. When you look at things like the Scottish schools problem and certainly some other issues, they are more to do with quality in design checking and construction checking. Fundamentally, we have to get that right first, and we cannot rely purely on building control.

If we look at how infrastructure is delivered, with infrastructure, there are requirements for either in-house or independent design checking and construction monitoring, and building does not meet those same standards of checking. Getting that right is the first thing. There are then issues particular to MMC, and we have looked at these risks.

First, a lot of MMC can be an unknown technology, so it is outside the scope of design standards. It means that the technology needs to be subject to technical peer review or technical assessment. When you look at the construction product regulations that are going through consultation, something like 30% to 40% of construction products will comply with the standard, but 60% of construction products are not subject to legislation because they lie outside it. MMC is very similar. We need to make sure that there is a technical assessment system for MMC systems before they actually come forward.

Secondly, some systems tend to be lightweight for transport reasons—so there are robustness reasons. Because some systems are developed with IP—intellectual property—there are concerns around industry knowledge and lack of guidance. Again, there is a requirement for general guidance. There is also a requirement for competence frameworks, particularly around installation, because when you look at the installation and design requirements for some systems, they are quite complex. They are outside the realm of the normal supply chain.

Also, when you look at the contracts, you can get splits in responsibility. You might have an overall design team, but the design of the MMC might be delegated down to a supplier. You get splits in responsibility, and it is not quite clear who is responsible for what. Those things have to be addressed.

With a lot of MMC systems, the complexity would actually justify an independent peer review of these projects as they run through. It is a two-stage thing. First, we have to look at the overall quality issues within the construction industry and maybe compare that with what happens in infrastructure. Secondly, we have to look at these five or six specific risk issues around MMC and ensure that we are addressing those. A lot of those issues have been identified in the drafting of PAS 8700, which MHCLG funded. That sets out a process for procuring and delivering MMC projects.

Chair: Thank you all for coming to give evidence this morning. It has



been very interesting and helpful. If there are any points of detail that you reflect on after the session and decide that you were not able to convey to us adequately today, feel free to write to us after the session. We would certainly welcome that. Thank you very much for your time.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Josh MacAlister and Dr Jonathan Dewsbury.

Q25 Chair: We will resume our evidence session of the Education Committee on RAAC concrete and school buildings. I welcome the Minister and his official to our session this morning—thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us. I will ask you to introduce yourselves in a moment. As Committee members will know, in a remarkable coincidence that I am sure has nothing to do with the Minister’s appearance at the Committee this morning, the Government issued a press release last night on the very topic that we are discussing this morning. Minister, you might want to take a moment to update the Committee on the content of that press release because it sets the context for our questioning today.

Josh MacAlister: I appreciate that—thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the Committee for your interest in this. I will just share some brief remarks: I am the Minister for Children and Families, with the responsibility of covering school buildings as well. Jonathan Dewsbury is the Director of Estates at the Department for Education. Do you want to say anything else, Jonathan?

Dr Dewsbury: No.

Josh MacAlister: To set the scene, the problems that we have inherited on the school estate are fairly well known and understood. Some 43% of the estate was built in the post-war to 1980 period. Many of those buildings are close to or at the end of their intended life by this point, which leaves the Government with a major challenge in terms of the backlog of maintenance and building work that needs to be done. The last Labour Government invested heavily in new school buildings, but as a country we have under-invested in our public estate. Capital investment dropped under the last Government, which has further added to the backlog problem that we face. Further to that, the NAO found that more money could and should be spent on proactive maintenance of the school building estate rather than on the more costly patchwork remediation that would be needed once roofs were literally crumbling in. If we can make that shift, it would represent much greater value for money for the taxpayer and mean many more children in classrooms this morning with fit and proper learning environments.

I have seen much of this at first hand as a secondary school teacher, both in a Building Schools for the Future programme school built in 2008—it had its own set of issues, but it was a beautiful building for the community—and in moving to a school that was built just after the second world war, where there were many issues to do with leaky roofs



and flappy windows and all the challenges that that presents for teachers and pupils.

Just last week, I visited two schools, one of which is due to be rebuilt and has had major disruption as a result of extensive RAAC in the building—Myton Secondary School—and another that is being wholly rebuilt. Very briefly, I will turn to two points that are illustrated by those two schools. First, with RAAC, we are working at pace to remove RAAC from all schools. RAAC has already been removed from 62 schools and colleges, and 55 of those completions have been since last year's general election. I am able to share that following the RAAC crisis that hit the headlines in 2023, all schools and colleges will either have RAAC removed or be in delivery as rebuilds by the end of this Parliament.

In terms of wider school estate matters, which I am sure will be of interest to the Committee members, we have changed the fiscal rules to prioritise capital investment as a country. We have taken a 10-year approach, with the 10-year investment in infrastructure strategy that the Government have, which will enable us to put the capital investment needed into the school and college estate. That means £20 billion for new buildings over the next decade, and it means that we are raising the maintenance budget from £2.4 billion this year to just shy of £3 billion by 2034. That £2.4 billion this year is in comparison with the £1.8 billion in the last year of the previous Government, so it is already an uplift. It is a new minimum, and we are setting out the long-term, index-linked inflation increase in that maintenance budget so that we can work through the backlog issues.

Finally, I am hoping to work with officials to publish a long-term estate strategy that sets out, over a number of years, the Government's plans to get on top of these maintenance backlog issues.

Q26 Chair: Can I drill down into the impact of the RAAC-related crisis on the wider capital expenditure for schools? First, can you tell us the projected total cost of RAAC removal and remediation across the school estate?

Josh MacAlister: Jon will also come in on this. The rebuilding programme has done quite a lot of the heavy lifting of the capital works that have been needed for the RAAC work. The ordering of projects in SRP has been arranged around prioritising those RAAC projects.

Dr Dewsbury: To date, we have spent £211 million on RAAC mitigation and remediation. We would not be able to share the long-term forecasts for that because they are subject to commercial negotiations with individual suppliers and contractors. You will appreciate that we are delivering 237 projects with the sector and are negotiating individual procurement contracts. But this Government, like the previous Government, have committed to doing whatever it takes to remove RAAC from the education estate.

Q27 Chair: I am keen to get a handle on the level of disruption within the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

profile of capital spends that the RAAC crisis has caused. Can you say what impact the RAAC crisis has had, whether that is funding being diverted because new schools have come into the school rebuilding programme that were not previously in that programme, or the reprioritisation of schools within the school rebuilding programme? To what extent have we seen the diversion of capital funding away from previous commitments to address this crisis?

Josh MacAlister: When we look at the condition data collection which sets out where the whole school and college estate is, there is a significant overlap between schools that have RAAC and schools that were at the end of their intended life anyway. At Myton school, where I was last week, RAAC is not the only issue; the school is also very old, has deteriorated and is beyond its intended life. When you look through the systemic structural issues such as RAAC in the estate backlog, there is a big overlap between schools that need to be in SRP anyway and those that need to be prioritised within that group for RAAC. Jon might want to come in, but I do not think there are any exceptions to that where there are RAAC schools that would not have otherwise been eligible for SRP or have been priority projects.

Dr Dewsbury: All schools that showed a structural exception through the application rounds of SRP were included in the school rebuilding programme. The issue that we were historically worried about was system builds, such as Laingspan and Intergrid. We identified 23 of those throughout the education estate, and all those are in the school rebuilding programme. We also identified schools or colleges at risk of a threat to life from flooding; there are 10 in the school rebuilding programme. As the Minister states, the combination of deterioration of condition with a brittle failure of RAAC meant that those were right to be prioritised over other schools or colleges that could make themselves part of the programme. As well as committing £20 billion towards school rebuilding and the long-term commitment to 2034, this Government have also announced another 250 projects to go into the school rebuilding programme, and we will work through a process to identify those that require building first.

Q28 **Chair:** We have just heard from our previous witnesses that the presentation of the RAAC crisis was disorderly for schools. It caused really big disruptions on individual school sites, whether that was in terms of pupils having to move off-site or temporary structures being accommodated with, consequently, a loss of facilities. We know that that has had an impact on admissions for a lot of schools, with parents choosing other schools, and that parents in lots of parts of the country increasingly have a choice because of falling school rolls and the availability of places at other schools. What information do you have in the Department on the impact of the RAAC crisis on the financial viability and financial resilience of schools, as a consequence of those admissions decisions?



Josh MacAlister: I will come to Jon again in a moment. First, I was obviously not a Minister in the previous Government, but I am here representing the Government, and I am very happy to share reflections looking back through the paperwork and the experience of the RAAC crisis. The first few weeks and months of that process for schools were incredibly bumpy. Schools were shut with no notice and were unable to use parts of their buildings, and then, some of the initial offerings of temporary accommodation were wholly inappropriate, which put enormous pressure on schools, parents and pupils. Where schools have managed to put in place—as many of them have—really good temporary accommodation alternatives while schools get rebuilt, they are able to provide really excellent education. The temporary accommodation at the school I was at last week is of very high quality. It will not be very high quality for years—it is not a permanent fix—but it is able to provide a really good temporary solution. It is a vibrant school with excellent education being provided where parents still want to send their children.

Q29 **Chair:** I visited a school just outside my constituency a couple of weeks ago, and we were celebrating a very happy occurrence of the completion of the final stage of a build. It has had seven years where large parts of its site have been occupied by a building site, contractors and so on. The staff and the pupils talked about the psychological impact on the whole school day and the school community of existing in constrained space. They spoke eloquently about the opening out of the new site, and they said, “It feels like we can breathe as a school community and everything is easier.” Analysis is important—it is really important that you capture and acknowledge the impact of that disruption on schools, some of which cause financial consequences because of parental decisions around applications, and that that is being filtered through into the decision making of the Government, going forward, about supporting those schools. So can I just push you a bit more on that?

Josh MacAlister: I accept your point, and I accept that it has an impact on schools, which is why it is so important that we can get both, on top of the rebuilding programme, to ensure that schools that need to be wholly rebuilt are rebuilt as soon as possible and that we maintain schools before they get to that critical point, because it is very disruptive. If you are on a site that is already constrained, and you need to take really important school playing fields out of action to put temporary accommodation on them, together with all the noise and dust, I understand that situation.

Dr Dewsbury: We recognise the point that the RAAC has been disruptive. We have had dedicated caseworkers and project managers working with every one of those schools to make sure that the disruption is minimised as much as possible. In terms of financial distress caused by RAAC, those caseworkers can work through it with systems and the Department to make sure that those schools feel supported.



I want to quickly come back to one of your previous questions about the prioritisation of condition need versus SRP. The Minister gave the good example of Myton, where it had a condition need and RAAC, which is why it made it into the SRP programme. The SRP expansion and the SRP programme are about prioritising schools based on a condition need. You will notice that we have funded many through grant assurance, which is in addition to SRP. The number of projects funded through the grant is 108, which is in addition to the school rebuilding programme.

Q30 Jess Asato: Almost half the 234 schools in which RAAC had been identified in February 2024—the figure is 98—were located in the east of England. Have you identified the reasons for this?

Dr Dewsbury: We have not definitively confirmed it, but the theory is that the east of England was predominantly hit by the blitz during the second world war so there was a need to rebuild schools quickly in that area. There was a particular architect who was involved with the innovation of RAAC and who worked in the local authority at that time delivering those RAAC buildings, which is why you have a high presence of RAAC in the east of England.

Q31 Jess Asato: What is the geographical distribution of the remediation work that has taken place? For example, have you focused more on the schools in the east of England because that is where a large majority of them are?

Dr Dewsbury: No. All schools that have RAAC will have it removed and will either be rebuilt through the school rebuilding programme or get grant funding through our grant systems.

Q32 Darren Paffey: From the context of RAAC, I want to think about the wider lessons around the condition and maintenance of the school estate. You publish an annual report from the DFE. The last one, in July '25, described the risk of building or element failure in the school estate as "Critical – Very Likely"—that was the category. Can you elaborate on that? What is it that you are expecting to fail?

Dr Dewsbury: First, we are not aware of any pupils learning in environments that are unsafe. Secondly, the way our system works is that we have 2,800 responsible bodies that are responsible for the day-to-day management of our sites. We think that those responsible bodies are the most effective on the sites in terms of assessing the safety and stability of those schools and colleges. The Minister has set out that this Government have made an unprecedented investment in maintenance and renewal of the education estate, committing up to £3 billion by 2034 and investing £20 billion in the school rebuilding programme. That scale of investment will take time to bed in, which is one of the reasons that the risk is still rated as high as it is. The second reason is that we are concluding some research on older buildings, and the output of that research will help us to further assess that risk. Do you want me to talk about the older building research?



Q33 **Darren Paffey:** Yes, if it is about the risks that you are identifying and if you might be expecting there to be issues.

Dr Dewsbury: The review for the NAO report talked about doing 200 structural surveys on system builds. One of the things we learned from RAAC was that it was not perhaps the most appropriate way of assessing the risk across the education estate, so we took the NAO recommendation at face value and reviewed our way of assessing risk across the education estate. We brought together experts from IStructE and universities across the country, actuary scientists and AI scientists to do a hackathon event to work out the best way for us to assess the risk across the education estate. The thing that came from that was to do a research model based on Professor Burland's triangle of physical investigation, desk study review of data, and modelling, which is what we have been conducting. We launched a £5 million research programme into that last year, which is due to conclude in spring 2026. The early findings of that research show that there are no systematic issues across the education estate from system builds, but it does show the deterioration of the education estate—which is shown from our published condition data collection as well—due to a lack of maintenance. That is why this Government are investing additional money into maintenance and renewal—through the £3 billion per year.

Josh MacAlister: The Government recognise that this is a major challenge. We have inherited a backlog that has worsened due to not staying on top of the crucial maintenance works. For example, with RAAC, the deterioration gets worse, resulting in leaks in roofs and so on, which means that there is a cascade effect of rundown buildings accelerating deterioration. Bringing investment into earlier proactive maintenance reduces some risks, but we recognise that the risks are there, in terms of the overall estate. There are no children in schools at the moment where we are worried about safety, but it is a risk for the Department and our capital projects, which means that we are putting in the money to try to manage it proactively.

The research Jon mentioned is essentially to identify whether there are other systemic issues with some of the builds that were done decades ago that we should get on top of now, and that we are not aware of. Again, this is from the NAO recommendation, and the early indications are that there are not, but we are doing the work to assure ourselves.

Q34 **Darren Paffey:** We hear your reassurance about no children being in unsafe buildings. On your point about revising the way that you assess risk, that is good, too, because obviously, the problems with RAAC were known about well before the school buildings crisis of 2023. At this point, with the revisions that you are doing, how confident are you that in future any other structural risks that might emerge in the school estate will be managed before they become crises, as we saw with RAAC?

Josh MacAlister: This question links to the learnings from the whole RAAC experience. One of the Government's learnings is around our ability



to communicate with responsible bodies, which was a major barrier for the last Government in resolving the RAAC crisis. The quality of communication and information going back and forth between the Department and responsible bodies has improved, and next year, the Government will launch a digital platform with live data that can be shared between responsible bodies in the Department for the management of the estate.

The second learning point is to have a much clearer understanding of the condition of the whole estate and prioritisation over the long term, both for maintenance and for rebuilds, so that schools have more certainty and confidence about when new builds may be coming and what maintenance work needs to be prioritised. They are the two big learnings from the RAAC crisis that this Government are taking forward.

Dr Dewsbury: It is also worth reflecting on how RAAC was unique, in that it was identified as an issue in October 2018, and the Department took steps to notify all schools through the local Government authority. We took repeated steps in the years between 2018 and the summer of 2023 to notify those responsible for our schools about RAAC. What changed over the summer of 2023 was the assessment of RAAC: a visual inspection was no longer sufficient to justify its safety. Our research and condition data collection are not showing anything similar to that space from other structural systems.

Q35 **Darren Paffey:** It is helpful to hear about how you are taking on the learnings and making sure that ongoing, day-to-day, business-as-usual maintenance will be different. Has anything already changed in how the DFE deals with emergencies as a result of the RAAC crisis?

Josh MacAlister: Very briefly, as a Minister—I do not have a reference point for this; this is my first and only experience of it—there is a fairly rapid and clear line of sight to schools where there are issues, and the Department has a grip and knows about them. In my experience over the last few weeks, when MPs have contacted me about emergency situations in schools, the Department is aware and has a much clearer line of sight in those cases. There is also safety net funding for emergency and urgent works, which I know is deployed as and when needed on top of the other capital spend.

Dr Dewsbury: Operationally, we have an emergency response team within the Department, so if a responsible body feels that they do not have the capacity to manage it locally, they can reach out to the Department and we can support them through that situation. In terms of the wider response to emergencies, the Department has a resilience directorate that looks at the risks across the Department as a whole. It will look at the learning from covid, RAAC and other things that happened across government. We do exercises to plan for those things. We have done an exercise to prepare for another response, should it happen. We are not expecting another one, but we want to be prepared.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

As the Minister said, one of the main learning points was how we communicate out quickly to the sector. The Minister spoke about our new digital portal, which is called “Manage your Education Estate”. We are testing it now with the responsible bodies—those that run our schools and colleges—before we launch it live in the new year. Through that system, we will be looking to make sure there that is a way to get data backwards and forwards between us and responsible bodies, and also that we have a way of having alerts to anything that we are worried about in the future, should that arise.

Q36 Caroline Voaden: Minister, how good do you think the information is that your Department holds on the condition of the school estate?

Josh MacAlister: We have the last round of the condition data collection, CDC1, which is now a few years old, and that is why the Department is currently doing CDC2, which should be complete next year—if I am correct—in April 2026. We have sight of that already and the categorisation that comes off the back of it. We will then be sharing the CDC2 data, so that will be updated. I am aware that some schools take the view that some CDC1 data did not quite capture the true extent or nature of some of the conditions of their schools. Visits are done, but it is not a full survey of the school structures. Given the number of schools we have, people should understand why we are not conducting a full survey of every school as part of the CDC process. As part of, for example, SRP and schools bidding, there is an opportunity for schools to share more detail about the condition and nature of the school. But it does give, at a national level, a picture of the 24,000 schools and what the overall condition is of the estate.

Q37 Caroline Voaden: We heard from the previous panel that the CDC inspections, as you say, give only a surface look at the school and do not really examine the full state of the building. The survey is not invasive or structural, and it does not report on hazardous materials. If you are not reporting on hazardous materials, such as asbestos, how is the DFE going to identify these sorts of risks?

Josh MacAlister: There is a separate process on asbestos, for schools auditing the state of asbestos. We have a very good grip on that data. Jon might want to share more in a moment, but it is not the only process for understanding the state of the estate. It is to help the Government prioritise where investment should go for maintenance and new builds. If we were to do full structural surveys in 24,000 schools, there would obviously be trade-offs in doing that, in terms of the amount of time it would take and the cost to the Government, which would probably take away from the investment that could go into schools. The aim is to do something that is proportionate and speedy enough to provide live data and intelligence, so that we can prioritise where investment should go on asbestos.

Dr Dewsbury: Just to follow up on CDC, we recognise that it is a visual inspection. Those visual inspections are carried out by professional



surveyors—mechanical engineers—and they give a really good, holistic assessment. They look at every single element. That scale of data is not shared anywhere else across government, so the DFE has a really strong grip on the data. Having talked to the same stakeholders you talked to, we recognise the limitations of CDC being a visual inspection, which is why, through our good estate management guidance, or the estate management standards published this year, we set out the need for schools and colleges that know the day-to-day of how their buildings run to carry out their own condition and structural surveys, if they are worried about particular things.

In terms of asbestos, as the Minister points out, the Department ran the asbestos management assurance process in 2021 with the HSE, which received responses from nearly 80% of schools. Through CDC2, we then followed up with those schools that did not respond in 2021 and reduced the percentage of those that did not respond from 20% to less than 2%. We have also worked with the HSE to do statutory inspections of schools for asbestos management. Where schools do not meet the HSE legislation, the HSE has issued the appropriate notices to those schools.

Q38 Jess Asato: You say that all children are safe in schools, but a report commissioned by the NEU said that future cases of mesothelioma among adults exposed to asbestos as children could run to hundreds of thousands. How big a risk do you consider asbestos in the school estate to be, and why is this issue not seen as just as much of a crisis as RAAC?

Josh MacAlister: The first thing to say is that we take it very seriously. We want to make sure that children, teachers and adults in schools are safe. Asbestos is extensive in the school estate, and the approach that the Government have taken is to follow the Health and Safety Executive's very clear guidance on the management of asbestos. That means that the Government's approach has been to ask the school estate, through responsible bodies, to audit where asbestos is, and to ask them, where it can be kept in situ and managed and maintained safely in line with the Health and Safety Executive's advice, to do so and make sure that it is done properly. Where that cannot happen, it is about then removing it safely, either through a new building or a change to the building. Some of the capital investment going in at the moment is directly to take asbestos out of bits of school buildings where it cannot be maintained or managed. Our approach is to follow the Health and Safety Executive's advice in lockstep on this.

Q39 Jess Asato: Do you have an estimate of how much of the funding is going into that asbestos management or removal, and how many schools are part of that amelioration programme?

Dr Dewsbury: As the Minister set out, the policy from the HSE is to manage asbestos in place. We have a couple of projects within the school rebuilding programme that are being built because asbestos cannot be managed in place. The role of asbestos needs to be assessed in the wider condition of the estate: is it in high-traffic areas for pupils, and so on? In



HOUSE OF COMMONS

terms of our condition and maintenance, we spoke about the £3 billion by 2034 and the £2.1 billion, but we do not have the specific numbers against asbestos in those projects. We can show that those in the school community—schools and colleges—are very good at compliance in this space. Among the 421 schools and colleges inspected in 2023 across England, Scotland and Wales, there were no schools in England that needed a pre-adjudication notice, and only 20 schools needed an enforcement notice, and that was because they did not have an asbestos management plan in place—it was not because anyone was at risk of asbestos being managed in the wrong way.

Q40 Darren Paffey: What information do you hold on the estate management capacity of all the responsible bodies that are looking after our schools?

Josh MacAlister: Before Jon jumps back in, another learning, post the RAAC crisis, is that the Government have sought to bolster the capability and capacity of responsible bodies to deliver effective estate management. One of the reflections from 2010 onwards—this applies to PFI as well, which we may come on to—is the running down of the capability and resource of public bodies, multi-academy trusts and local authorities to manage estates proactively. So the Government have put serious effort into making sure that it is built back up.

Dr Dewsbury: The majority of our responsible bodies are competent and manage their estates well. As a Minister said, we have set out the estate management standards to make really clear the expectations we have for what an estate manager should be doing in our schools, and we will also set out later the standard for those running our colleges. In terms of the data we hold on those, we are collecting that through the Condition Data Collection 2 programme, and the proxy for the question we use there is about whether they have an asset management plan in place. We will share that data back with schools and those that need it to make the right decisions in due course as we conclude the Condition Data Collection 2 surveys.

Q41 Darren Paffey: Speaking about the school estate management standards, one criticism that has been levied against that is that there are no mechanisms for monitoring schools' compliance or enforcing progression. Do you want to respond to that? How does the DFE hold responsible bodies accountable if it does not have a measure of whether they are effective managers of the school estate or not?

Dr Dewsbury: The Department holds those that run our schools and colleges to account through the governance of those bodies. The capability to run your estate should be measured against the same ability to run the finances of the organisation versus the educational output of the organisation. So we think that can be managed through the governing bodies and interventions through our regions group.



In particular to the specifics of the estate management standard, we are working with responsible bodies and the Confederation of School Trusts to understand what they think is the most appropriate way to support the sector in meeting those standards. The majority of the sector already meets those standards, but a significant minority does not, particularly as highlighted by RAAC. Through the "Manage your Education Estate" portal, we want to think about how sharing data can help us better assess where compliance is lacking across the estate. We are working through the best way of doing that with the people who run our schools and colleges to make sure that we design a system and digital platform that works for them.

Q42 **Darren Paffey:** Turning to funding, five years ago, the DFE made a case to the Treasury that the amount that was needed to maintain the school estate and mitigate the risk of serious failure would total around £5.3 billion a year. In the spending review, we have announced £2.1 billion for maintenance, which is less than half the amount that was estimated to be necessary in 2020. Is that going to be sufficient, Minister?

Josh MacAlister: First, it will not surprise anybody if I labour the point that the Government have some really tough choices across the board. In that context, at last year's Budget and the spending review, the Government prioritised capital spending and made bold changes to the fiscal rules that have allowed us to put money into capital projects over above what had been assumed by the previous Government before the general election. If we look at the £2.4 billion for maintenance this year for both schools and colleges, we see that that is not really a fair baseline, given that in '24, under the previous Government, it was £1.8 billion. So we have increased it. In the spending review, we have been able to confirm that it will be indexed with inflation as a baseline and give confidence to the sector that we will have that for the next 10 years, rising to about £3 billion.

Overall capital spending in today's prices will, in 2026-27, hit just over £8 billion, which is a considerable investment. The last time we came anywhere close to that level was in 2008-09. So when you look back over the last 14 to 15 years, there have been prolonged periods of under-investment in capital, which ultimately catches up with you, and it becomes more expensive to fix things. We are ramping up the capital spend, and I appreciate that people always want it to be higher, but we have prioritised schools alongside other crucial infrastructure for the country over and above other choices, precisely because education is a top priority for the Government.

Q43 **Darren Paffey:** We all accept that more money is always the golden standard, but we also want to ensure that the money that is there is being used as effectively as possible. One of the tools for getting our schools into a better condition is the condition improvement fund, which has been criticised as too complex and for not awarding those funds according to need. You may know, Minister, that in the last round, the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

region with the highest need—the north-east—also got the least amount of money from the condition improvement fund. How can you make it a more effective mechanism to get the right funds to the schools most in need?

Josh MacAlister: First, I am very open to hearing from schools and school leaders about the future of the fund and how it is designed to work overall for schools in England and to prioritise spending. CDC2 will help us to get a more up-to-date, accurate picture of the need across the estate to inform the condition allocation. We have heard from school leaders that the lack of long-term sight around that allocation makes it difficult to prioritise projects. If you do not know whether you will get the same level of funding next year or the year after, it is very hard to then sequence projects that may be interrelated. If you need to change a boiler or electrics, you will probably want to do that after you have sorted out issues with the roof. If one thing is more critical than another, and you do not have the confidence that the money will come year after year, it makes it very difficult. So on the latest line of sight to the true condition of the estate, we are getting a grip of that, and we will have CDC2 in place and complete by April next year. Secondly, on making sure that we give a long-term viewpoint, it is already clear from the spending review and the estate strategy we will publish that we will provide even more confidence for the future years.

Only around 20% goes through the condition improvement fund. The condition improvement fund has just opened again for this year on 21 October. Applications are being received until the 16 December. We have written to all those eligible for the condition improvement fund. It is worth remembering that the condition improvement fund is only available to single academy trusts or small MATs with less than five schools, or less than 3,000 pupils, and they can bid for up to two projects with a value of £4 million. It is independently technically assured, so it is looking for compliance on health and safety issues. The assessment of where the money goes is completely independent of Ministers and is based purely on the technical information provided by those schools and colleges.

Josh MacAlister: The need for a fund like the condition improvement fund is a symptom of not having resolved the issues about the group-level status of schools. If you have lots of small, individual, stand-alone academies or small groups, it is very hard for them to manage their estate where the sensitivity relating to what you might need does not make a standard allocation appropriate. Therefore, there needs to be a separate approach for those schools. It is less than ideal, but it is a symptom of inheriting a school system that is pretty messy in its overall composition.

Dr Dewsbury: The Minister spoke about delivering a strategy next year. We are basing that on the strategic framework set out by the Treasury's 10-year infrastructure strategy—around increasing proactive maintenance and how we support responsible bodies in proactively maintaining their



estate, how we renew through condition and maintenance and then only rebuild when we really have to rebuild, when there is an acute condition need. We will set that out in due course.

- Q44 **Chair:** Minister, you mentioned the question of schools that have interrelated projects that they may need to plan for over a period of years. We heard from a witness on the previous panel about schools that need to plan for bigger projects, where the capital allocation may not be sufficient within a single year to plan for the replacement of the roof of a large building or for some of those very big projects. Are you considering the possibility of multi-year settlements for capital maintenance grant funding to enable schools to get a better handle on those bigger projects?

Josh MacAlister: Jon will come in on this, but now that we have a multi-year spending review settlement, we want to give schools and responsible bodies the ability to plan ahead exactly as you described, Chair, so that they can sequence projects. I am not sure we have worked out fully yet whether that will mean we give them, as responsible bodies, a multi-year settlement or an indication of what money will come, but the intention of the spending review and the 10-year plan that we will publish, plus the 10-year infrastructure spending that has been confirmed, is to support schools in doing that.

Dr Dewsbury: One of the things we are working on through the Manage your Education Estate portal is how to help responsible bodies have that long-term view and plan their asset management and maintenance. By sharing the data, we can work through the projects they need to target throughout the next 10 years. So we are trying to make sure we do this in a collaborative way. I know the people you spoke to earlier are the types of people we have in the group that we are working with to solve that problem.

Josh MacAlister: If it is useful to the people who provided evidence to the Committee, direct them to me and the Department on that question. It would be interesting for me to explore with Jon and the team how exactly to sequence that and allocate money in a way that helps them.

Chair: I am sure we can join them up—thank you very much.

- Q45 **Caroline Voaden:** Looking at the school rebuilding programme, in October 2024, the BBC reported that only 62 contracts out of 500 projects under the school rebuilding programme had been awarded, and the ISBL has said that at current rates, it will take 400 years to rebuild all schools. Would you explain the reasons for delays in awarding contracts and how the DFE will mitigate this?

Josh MacAlister: I will let Jon come in in a moment. We have been really keen to ramp up the school rebuilding programme in terms of the overall number of schools, taking it from 500 to 750 over the course of the 10-year programme, and to get those completed by 2034. The original plan from the previous Government was to have 50 projects



HOUSE OF COMMONS

under way each year, there or thereabouts. I recognise the description that you have had of delays in starting. This year, we have had 100 start the programme, so we are ramping up, speeding up and pushing some schools through the process.

There is a wider point that it is more appropriate for me to make than Jon: there is a wider issue about our planning system in this country. I was at a school last week where they want to do the school rebuild. Without giving the house away on which school it was, there was a really odd, quirky situation where something got listed in the building—objectively, many people might take different views on whether it should have been listed—and that has added lots of delay and complexity into the process. The Government's wider approach to changing the planning system is precisely to be able to speed up these kinds of projects.

Even yesterday, I had Members of Parliament coming to speak to me about delays around statutory consultees responding to planning applications. All the stuff that, as Members of Parliament, we know is gumming up other parts of our planning system applies to this, and there are hundreds and hundreds of schools that need to be rebuilt. As a Government, we are keen to push through as much of that as possible, and specifically as a Department, we want to ramp up SRP delivery and prioritise the schools most in need.

The final thing to mention is that part of giving long-term confidence to schools is to give them an indication that they will join the SRP programme. It might mean that there is a period of design and consultation before anything is built, but we want them to be in the programme and know what is coming. Some schools will get the indication—the nod—that they will be in the programme, but there will not be diggers on site and bricks being laid for some years, which is probably part of the trade-off in giving advanced notice. However, it also needs to be accepted that for some schools not at the top of the list for being rebuilt—for example, those with RAAC—they have that vantage point but have to wait some time.

Dr Dewsbury: The NAO recognised that the global conditions when the school rebuilding programme started—the combination of Brexit, covid and the Ukraine war—impacted the construction market significantly, and the programme started more slowly than anticipated based on our forecast, but the programme has been ramped up massively. The Minister has mentioned that we are starting 100 projects this year. Of the 590 projects selected, 326 have already gone into delivery, 109 of those under this Government. We have already handed over 41 of the school building projects, which typically take between three and five years. All projects within the school rebuilding programme have been given an indicative timeline of the start of their delivery.

I want to just pick up the statistic that it would take 400 years to rebuild all schools. The Department has no intention of rebuilding all schools. If



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we think about the housing stock in this country, we would not intend to rebuild all of it, which is why the Treasury and our strategic framework in the DFE focus on how we practically maintain education buildings. We know that it is 88% more efficient to maintain buildings rather than to allow them to slip into being rebuilt, and where there are medium-sized projects, we can look at how to renew and improve their condition to stop them slipping into being rebuilt. We only need to rebuild them when there is an acute condition need.

Perhaps in slightly different terms, planning permission is a big barrier for school rebuilding project programmes. It is interesting to consider, when you are rebuilding a school on the same site in the same location, why that has to go through full planning permission rather than being permitted development.

Q46 Jess Asato: In our SEND inquiry, we heard evidence suggesting that many mainstream schools, including new-build ones, are not disability-access compliant. What is the DFE doing to ensure the SRP is truly building schools for inclusivity?

Josh MacAlister: This is an important point, and I am very happy to follow up with specific schools or constituents who have been in touch on that, and to look into it. Jon, I don't know if there is anything you want to mention about the SRP.

Dr Dewsbury: We set our specification for rebuilding in line with the building regulations and the building standards, and set that in process with RIBA in terms of inclusivity, making sure that our schools remain accessible and inclusive. So if there are individual cases where you think that is not being delivered, as the Minister said, we would like to hear about them, but we think our standards go beyond the building regulations in most cases. We are procuring the next construction framework to deliver the next set of school rebuilding projects. In that, we have something called specification 25—that is being tendered on the market at the moment. That specification really prioritises accessibility, inclusion, in terms of wayfinding, and the impact of acoustics and colours, which is all about how our standard comes together through our professional architects within the Department.

Q47 Chair: The conclusion from our SEND report is that inclusivity goes beyond the kinds of standards that might be ordinarily applicable. As you say, there are features that can be incorporated into the specification for a new building or refurb that do not necessarily cost very much more, but can make the difference to whether the environment is inclusive for children with a range of different additional needs—particularly sensory needs, as well as physical accessibility needs. When can we expect to see a fully inclusive specification for capital spend within the DFE that is consistent with the Government's aspiration to make mainstream schools inclusive for all pupils?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Dewsbury: The specification is already ready; it is specification 25. The markets and our large suppliers are working out how to build to that standard, which is centred around user outcomes. The health and wellbeing of occupants is prioritised by the use of standardised and flexible solutions, so if there are particular needs of pupils, the solutions could be flexed. It thinks about how environmental standards are integrated throughout the whole building—so how nature-first solutions work within the building design—ensures very strong, robust construction and it prioritises accessibility and inclusivity. That document is ready.

Josh MacAlister: If the Committee has any further ideas, I welcome hearing how to include aspects.

Q48 **Chair:** We would probably welcome sight of the document and would be very happy to feed in our views based on the extent of what we did in the SEND inquiry.

Josh MacAlister: We can write and share that with you.

Q49 **Chair:** That would be helpful. Thank you. I have a final couple of questions about quality assurance within the rebuild programme. What is the process in DFE for selecting approved builders for the school rebuilding programme?

Josh MacAlister: Jon will talk you through it, but it has learned lessons from other construction projects that have failed.

Dr Dewsbury: We first procure construction frameworks. All our suppliers need to go through pre-qualifying to register on those frameworks. We then have a rigorous process, aligned with the Cabinet Office standards and industry standards around procurement, to make sure that our suppliers meet not just the ability to deliver to quality, but the ability in terms of solvency, and so on. Once they are on our framework, we monitor the solvency of those suppliers to make sure that they have the ability to deliver our projects, and then our projects are tendered on an individual basis, where we review the ability of those suppliers to deliver those projects based on a standard ITT and procurement process.

Q50 **Chair:** We heard from our previous witnesses about the particular risks relating to modular-build contractors, where they are providing a product that is either pretty rare or unique and where the failure of such a contractor has much more complex and difficult consequences than a failure of a mainstream building contractor. How are you providing assurance on both the quality of modular builds and in relation to that particular set of risks that are greater?

Josh MacAlister: The first thing to say is that there is nothing inherently less quality about modern methods of construction and modular builds. This is actually a huge opportunity for the Government, and the Department for Education is ahead of other Government Departments in its use of modular building, in terms of speed, getting on-site, causing as



little disruption as possible, and providing value for money. The wider issue is about the examples where construction and design have come together and both have failed, and it is about making sure that the tender and selection process for partners is robust enough to ensure that they are solvent and can be held to account, and that the design and the build, as it is managed through the process, are of good enough quality.

Q51 Chair: I have been scrutinising this area for the best part of a decade, including when I was on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. Years and years ago, we did a big inquiry on modern methods of construction. There has always been the promise that this will become a mainstream construction technique, the market will be there, and then the quality assurance and the follow-up maintenance and all those things improve because the market is more mature. We simply have not seen that in the UK. We have not seen modern construction methods develop into anything other than small, bespoke solutions. So while there is no doubt, on the one hand, that they can be good solutions and good quality buildings, there is still the risk for a school that if you procure something that is very bespoke and specific and that contractor fails, you are left with a much more complicated set of problems further downstream. So why would you do that as a school, and where is the back-up?

Josh MacAlister: We are trying to move away from exactly what you describe, as almost spot-procuring a bespoke arrangement for a school. The SRP is designed to essentially partner with a smaller number of organisations that have a good track record, where we have confidence in the designs and where off-site prefabrication and other things that can be done to bring down cost and speed up delivery add to the overall quality and value for money. But I completely recognise, as you described, that we do not want to take too many risks with the SRP pounds through very novel approaches, given the context that we have described about the overall state of schools and colleges.

Dr Dewsbury: Can I just add some steps we have taken? As the Minister points out, MMC, as part of the construction playbook from 2022, has the ability to drive higher quality, better value for money and increased production. We just need to be careful when we talk about MMC because it is a really wide-ranging term, and your question is around volumetric construction rather than MMC, which in this country has been used for many years, and our partners in delivery have delivered parts of modern methods of construction significantly well to a high quality for decades.

We recognised, due to events in 2017 across the building sector—not in education—the need to change the way we quality assure. In 2017, we reintroduced the clerk of works to our construction projects to make sure that we are meeting the appropriate standards. We recognise the balance between design, manufacturer and construction, and getting that right. In 2021, we further increased the responsibility of the clerk of works to identify anything we might see in our supply chain. The examples we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have—perhaps these are what you are referring to—are examples of our quality management system working and catching those projects before they are opened to pupils. This year, in 2025, based on the learning from 2021, we are taking a further approach where, rather than having a single clerk of works, we are taking a multidisciplinary approach to how we assure quality through the whole design, manufacturing and construction process.

Chair: Thank you very much; that brings our questioning to an end. Thank you very much for your time this morning and for answering our questions. We will follow up with the Minister in due course.