



Environmental Audit Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

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Rt Hon. Gillian Keegan MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

Sent by email only

22nd November 2023

Dear Secretary of State —

The Environmental Audit Committee has been examining the future sustainability of the Department for Education (the Department), based on the findings of the recent National Audit Office report *Department for Education: sustainability overview*. On 18th October 2023 we held an evidence session at which we heard from Minister for the School System and Student Finance and Dr Jonathan Dewsbury. Following that session I am writing to you with the Committee's observations and recommendations on the Department's sustainability policies.

We welcome the advances that the Department for Education has made in developing and embedding its governance, including the confirmation of a Chief Sustainability Officer appointed at director level. If maintained, this progress should allow for greater cross-government engagement on sustainability issues.

We acknowledge the positive steps that the Department has made in building its case for future funding in Spending Review 25, by assembling a greater evidence base through the use of models, emissions reporting standards and pilots. We are, however, concerned to note the scale of the challenge the Department has ahead of it. The Minister remarked that "the challenge is to get on the trajectory for delivery", indicating that the Department was not yet on that trajectory. While the Minister stressed the importance of moving at pace, it is not clear to us that the progress currently being made is at a pace which will allow the Department to achieve the targets in its strategy.

While we understand that the Department has the greatest control over centrally built new schools, such as in the School Rebuilding Programme (SRP), we observe that this will only have an effect on a small proportion of the education estate. We also note the Public Accounts Committee's recent observation that this programme is behind schedule and suffers from escalating costs. At the current rate of school retrofits, only 20% of the existing estate is likely to have been retrofitted to meet sustainability and climate change

requirements by 2050. To retrofit all schools to the extent required for the education estate to reach net zero by itself would result in a significant charge on the public purse: the Government Actuary's Department has estimated that 650 school retrofits annually would have an annual cost of £2 billion.

Following the evidence session, Baroness Barran kindly provided additional information to the Committee in writing. This highlighted the Department's use of an Innovate, test, and invest approach to understand better what retrofits to the wider estate would deliver the greatest value for money. We agree that this is a reasonable approach. Nevertheless, the NAO's recent *Condition of school buildings* report identified significant funding shortfalls in recent years. In 2020, the Department recommended that £5.3 billion per year would be required to maintain schools and mitigate the most serious risks of building failure. Between 2016–17 and 2022–23 it has spent an average of £2.3 billion annually. We therefore support the recommendation of the Public Accounts Committee, in its most recent report on *The condition of school buildings*, that your Department should provide assurance that it has a good understanding not only of the current and future challenges to the SRP but also of the likely effect of such challenges on the programme's timetable and cost. This assurance ought to be extended to the programmes for sustainability retrofitting of the rest of the school estate.

We are concerned that the potential impact of climate change on schools, particularly in respect of risks from flooding, overheating and water scarcity, is not adequately understood across those who have stewardship of the education estate in England. We applaud the progress made by the Department in its creation of a risk framework for publication in January 2024 and its aspiration to have undertaken an assessment of the risks to the schools estate by January 2025: adequately supported and properly delivered, we consider that this has the potential to increase substantially the level of understanding across the sector of the potential effects on schools of significant changes in climate. We noted with approval the Department's intention to implement Climate Action Plans in partnership with schools to address the risks they face: but we understand that implementation relies on the availability of sufficient funding. Without adequate funding for this work, it is clear to us that the education estate will remain at significant risk of flooding, overheating and water scarcity. To ensure that the schools estate is future-proofed at least to meet current requirements to support student safety and attainment, measures addressing these risks must receive adequate funding.

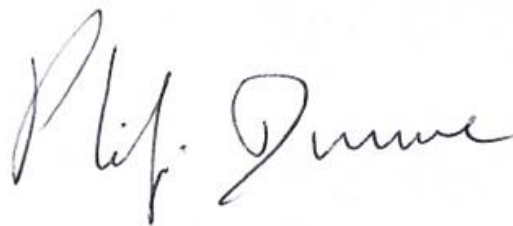
We therefore recommend that the Department establish, as a matter of urgency, detailed plans for the mitigation of likely risks to the schools estate from changing climatic conditions. Those plans should specify how the occurrence of extreme climatic events will be addressed, and in particular how students will be able to make up any learning forfeited as a result of lost teaching time. The Department must of course ascertain which modifications to the schools estate are most likely to provide long term positive impacts as well as value for money for the taxpayer.

Given previous systemic shortfalls in funding sustainability improvements, the current concerns over remedying the condition of school buildings, mitigating against flood risk and providing for student safety, and continuing pressure on the Department's budgets, the Committee is concerned that the funding to implement the necessary sustainability and net zero retrofits on the existing estate is unlikely to be available at anything like the scale required. Members are encouraged to note that the managing authorities with responsibility for some aspects of the estate are themselves taking the initiative to deliver sustainability improvements across the properties they manage: for instance, the Net Zero Carbon Programme driven by the Church of England Education Office in partnership with the Department and diocesan Boards of Education. If sustainability improvements are to be delivered to the fullest extent possible, the Department must fully support these capital initiatives.

We recommend that the Department establish and publish a realistic and fully-costed plan for the achievement of its sustainability strategy targets as a matter of urgency, building where necessary on partnerships with other bodies which provide capital funding to the schools estate. The plan must set out how issues such as student safety, the remediation of buildings containing RAAC and the mitigation of flood risk can be addressed alongside sustainability improvements.

In the interests of transparency the Committee has agreed that this letter should be published: I expect the Committee will also wish to publish your response. The letter is being copied to the Chairs of the Education Committee and the Committee of Public Accounts.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Philip Dunne', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP
Chairman of the Environmental Audit Committee