

Second Report of Session 2023-24

Department for Education

The condition of school buildings

Introduction from the Committee

There are 21,600 state schools in England, educating 8.4 million pupils. Between them, these schools have around 64,000 buildings, which can vary in age and design even on the same site. The ‘responsible body’ in control of the school—usually the relevant local authority, academy trust or voluntary-aided body—must manage the condition of its buildings and ensure they are safe. DfE has overall responsibility for the school system in England, setting the policy and statutory framework and bearing ultimate accountability for achieving value for money from the funding provided to schools, including for school buildings.

DfE distributes funding to responsible bodies, collects data on the condition of school buildings, conducts surveys on specific issues, and itself delivers some estate-related programmes. It has a clearly articulated principle to rebuild schools in the worst condition while allocating enough funding to allow responsible bodies to maintain the rest of the school estate. DfE considers that exclusively spending money on the poorest condition buildings would not deliver best long-term value for money

Based on a report by the National Audit Office, the Committee first took evidence from the Department for Education (DfE) about the condition of school buildings in England on 13 July 2023. On 31 August 2023, DfE significantly changed its safety guidance for schools that were confirmed to have reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) – a lightweight form of concrete susceptible to structural failure that could lead to a school building suddenly collapsing. In response, the Committee took evidence from DfE again on 11 September 2023. The Committee published its report on 19 November 2023. This is the government’s response to the Committee’s report.

Relevant reports

- NAO report: [Condition of school buildings](#) – Session 2022-23 (HC 1516)
- PAC report: [The condition of school buildings](#) – Session 2023-24 (HC 78)

1: PAC conclusion: DfE still has incomplete knowledge on the number and condition of schools with RAAC, with questions about the reliability of some of its information.

1a: PAC recommendation: DfE needs to urgently assess the risks of inaccuracies within RAAC questionnaire returns and specialist surveys, so that it considers these risks in its overall approach, decision-making and guidance.

1.1 The government agrees with the Committee’s recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

1.2 In 2022 the Department for Education (the department) issued a questionnaire and guidance asking responsible bodies for schools and colleges to identify whether they suspected they had reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC), in line with their responsibilities to manage their estates and keep pupils and staff safe.

1.3 All responsible bodies for schools and colleges with blocks built in the target era have submitted responses to the questionnaire. The Department for Education's RAAC identification programme is complete, and the questionnaire has closed.

1.4 A final list of schools and colleges with confirmed cases of RAAC in England was [published on 8 February 2024](#). Any school or college that advised us they suspect they might have RAAC has had a survey to confirm if RAAC is present. Other than the 234 education settings, the surveys found no evidence of RAAC. A small number of schools and colleges are carrying out additional checks for further assurance in some spaces. The department is working with responsible bodies to support them to complete these additional checks as quickly as possible. As these final checks are completed, the department expects the number of further cases to be very low. This has been the case over the last two months, where only three cases have been identified.

1.5 The department has conducted significant further checks with responsible bodies where there was uncertainty over their initial response about RAAC. On the overall condition of the estate in England, the Condition Data Collection (CDC) has provided consistent data on schools, including those with RAAC. CDC2 is now in train and is providing updated data on the estate.

1b: PAC recommendation: DfE should expedite its programme of specialist surveys where RAAC is suspected, and in due course publish the full set of results so that the extent of the RAAC problem is known.

1.6 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

1.7 The Department for Education has moved at pace to support identification of RAAC in the school and college estate, including ramping up its programme of professional surveys to verify its presence, when responsible bodies have informed the department that it may be present.

1.8 All responsible bodies for schools and colleges with blocks built in the target era have submitted responses to the questionnaire. The Department for Education's RAAC identification programme is complete, and the questionnaire has closed. A final list of schools and colleges with confirmed cases of RAAC in England was [published on 8 February 2024](#). Any school or college that advised us they suspect they might have RAAC has had a survey to confirm if RAAC is present. Other than the 234 education settings, the surveys found no evidence of RAAC. A small number of schools and colleges are carrying out additional checks for further assurance in some spaces. The department is working with responsible bodies to support them to complete these additional checks as quickly as possible. As these final checks are completed, the department expects the number of further cases to be very low. This has been the case over the last two months, where only three cases have been identified.

2: PAC conclusion: DfE's risk appetite regarding the school estate, and how this aligns with its recent approach on RAAC, appears unclear.

2a: PAC recommendation: DfE should clarify its risk appetite with regard to safety issues across the school estate and ensure that this feeds through into consistent decision-making, with a nominated senior official in charge.

2.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

2.2 All pupils must learn in safe buildings. The responsibility for keeping school buildings safe and compliant with relevant regulations lies with schools and their responsible bodies – local authorities, academy trusts, or voluntary aided school bodies. The department supports them by providing access to annual capital funding, rebuilding programmes and extensive guidance and support, including on specific risks. It has always been the case that where the department is alerted to a serious issue with a building that poses a risk to safety immediate action is taken with responsible bodies. Where serious issues cannot be managed independently by responsible bodies, the department provides additional support on a case-by-case basis.

2.3 The safety of pupils and staff is the department's absolute priority, which is why it took immediate further action on RAAC when new evidence emerged over the summer of 2023. The department acted with the utmost caution in addressing the risk for the education estate, although the technical advice does not recommend removal in all cases where it is present. The department has established a comprehensive plan to mitigate and permanently resolve it.

2.4 The principal risks being managed by the department and owned at Director General level, are managed on a day-to-day basis in the relevant director's area to help ensure a consistent approach.

2.5 The department keeps under review how it can best support responsible bodies to meet their duties to manage the estate safely and effectively.

2b: PAC recommendation: In line with the approach already taken by DHSC, DfE should make clear when and how it plans to have eradicated RAAC from the school estate.

2.6 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

2.7 There are over 22,000 schools and colleges in England and the vast majority are unaffected by RAAC.

2.8 All responsible bodies for schools and colleges with blocks built in the target era have submitted responses to the questionnaire. The Department for Education's RAAC identification programme is complete, and the questionnaire has closed. A final list of schools and colleges with confirmed cases of RAAC in England was [published on 8 February 2024](#). Any school or college that advised us they suspect they might have RAAC has had a survey to confirm if RAAC is present. Other than the 234 education settings, the surveys found no evidence of RAAC. A small number of schools and colleges are carrying out additional checks for further assurance in some spaces. The department is working with responsible bodies to support them to complete these additional checks as quickly as possible. As these final checks are completed, the department expects the number of further cases to be very low. This has been the case over the last two months, where only three cases have been identified.

2.9 No pupils in England are learning in buildings with confirmed RAAC, unless those buildings have had measures implemented to make them safe.

2.10 The government has committed to remove RAAC from the school and college estate for good. The department is funding the removal of RAAC present in school and colleges either through grants, or through the School Rebuilding Programme. The longer-term requirements of each school or college will vary depending on the extent of the issue and nature and design of the buildings. Permanently removing RAAC may involve refurbishment of existing buildings or rebuilding affected buildings.

2.11 On 8 February 2024 the department confirmed to schools and colleges how it will fund them to remove RAAC permanently. 119 schools are being included within the School Rebuilding Programme where works to remove RAAC are more extensive or complex. 110 schools and colleges will receive grant funding where works will typically be smaller in scale. Five schools and colleges have alternative arrangements in place, for example, the building will not be part of the school or college estate over the longer term.

3: PAC conclusion: Schools are uncertain about the support they can access to mitigate RAAC-related issues, and how they will be reimbursed financially.

3: PAC recommendation: DfE needs to re-examine its process for funding temporary mitigation measures, ensuring it achieves the right balance between accessibility and value for money, communicating this clearly and consistently to schools.

3.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

3.2 The department is funding emergency capital works needed to mitigate the presence of RAAC in schools and colleges in England. This could include installing structural strengthening or temporary buildings. All reasonable requests for additional help with revenue costs, like transport to locations or temporarily renting a local hall, are being approved.

3.3 Every school or college with confirmed RAAC has been assigned dedicated support from a team of caseworkers. They have worked with them to put in place a bespoke plan that supports face-to-face education for all pupils as soon as possible based on their circumstances and provide support to access funding.

3.4 The department is working closely with responsible bodies to process requests as quickly as possible and ensure processes are not burdensome, while providing proportionate levels of assurance. The department has kept its processes and guidance under review. The department can also arrange urgent payments where necessary, if for example, a responsible body has cash-flow challenges.

3.5 The government has committed to remove RAAC from the school and college estate for good. Schools and colleges have been offered capital grants to fund refurbishment work to permanently remove RAAC, or rebuilding projects where these are needed, including through the School Rebuilding Programme.

4: PAC conclusion: There remains a lack of transparency for schools, parents and communities on where RAAC exists and how long it will take to be fixed.

4: PAC recommendation: DfE must write to the Committee, alongside its Treasury Minute response, with its latest assessment of the scale of the RAAC problem, its overall plan to deal with it, and the likely associated costs.

4.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

4.2 The department will write to the Committee alongside publication of the Treasury Minute.

5: PAC conclusion: DfE has incomplete knowledge of the prevalence of asbestos across the school estate.

5: PAC recommendation: As soon as possible, DfE should provide us with evidence that it has a full picture of asbestos across the school estate, having received survey returns from all schools and ensuring that every relevant school has an adequate asbestos management plan in place.

5.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: December 2026

5.2 The department takes the safety of children and those who work with them incredibly seriously – which is why it expects all local authorities, governing bodies and academy trusts to have robust plans in place to manage asbestos in school buildings effectively, in line with their legal duties.

5.3 Asbestos management in schools and other buildings is regulated by the [Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\)](#). The Health and Safety Executive advises that, as long as asbestos-containing materials are in good condition, well protected, and unlikely to be damaged or disturbed, it is usually safer to manage them in place.

5.4 The department has published guidance on effective management of asbestos in schools. The department previously run an [Asbestos Management Assurance Process \(AMAP\)](#) - a survey launched in March 2018 to understand the steps schools and those responsible for their estate were taking to manage asbestos. The AMAP survey has now been incorporated into the [Condition Data Collection 2 \(CDC2\) programme](#), which will collect data on every state funded school in England. CDC2 is in train and as of the end of January 2024, 631 (42.3%) of non-responders to AMAP had been visited, reducing the number of non-responders from 1,491 (6.7%) to 860 (3.9%). The full dataset will be available by 2026.

5.5 The department has, and continues to, share any concerning data on schools with HSE which is responsible for setting the policy and regulations for schools on asbestos management and compliance – and which undertakes its own investigations of schools, and issues warnings notices or stronger sanctions, where necessary.

5.6 The department also, in collaboration with HSE and Regional teams, continues to follow up with AMAP non-responders and any concerning practice through CDC2. CDC2 is expected to be completed in 2026 when a final set of asbestos data and conclusions will be available.

6: PAC conclusion: Unacceptable numbers of pupils are learning in poorly maintained or potentially unsafe.

6: PAC recommendation: Within the next year, DfE should develop a package of support and good practice to help those responsible for mitigating the negative impact on pupils and teachers of schools that are in poor condition but cannot yet be fixed.

6.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

6.2 It is the responsibility of responsible bodies to keep their buildings safe and carefully prioritise investment over time. It is already the case that where responsible bodies have

serious issues with their buildings that cannot be managed independently, the department provides additional support on a case-by-case basis through the department's capital teams.

6.3 The government has allocated over £15 billion since 2015 to improve the condition of the school estate, including £1.8 billion committed in financial year 2023-24. Funding allocations are informed by consistent data on the condition of the school estate, so that responsible bodies with schools in relatively poorer condition attract greater funding. In addition, the School Rebuilding Programme is transforming poor condition buildings at over 500 schools, including schools with RAAC that need rebuilding projects.

6.4 Around 31% of the estate by floor area has been built since 2000. The condition data survey also shows that over 95% of the individual condition grades awarded to building elements were As and Bs - meaning in a good or satisfactory condition.

6.5 The figure of 700,000 pupils in buildings that may require replacement stated by the National Audit Office (NAO) is often misinterpreted as it is based on the total number of pupils in schools nominated to the School Rebuilding Programme (SRP) in 2022 by responsible bodies (1097) and the first 100 previously selected by the department. Nominations to SRP give an indication of refurbishment need, but as responsible bodies self-nominated, this is, of course, subjective. The figure is also for all pupils in these schools, whereas buildings in poor condition are often only a part of each estate.

6.6 The department robustly assessed the nominations and selected schools with the greatest need. All nominations for schools with evidence of exceptional need, such as structural issues, verified by the department against the programme criteria, were included.

6.7 The department already provides extensive guidance and support to the sector on effective and safe management of school buildings, through the well-regarded [Good estate management for schools](#) manual, which sets out best practice, including strategic estate management, managing resources, prioritising maintenance and health and safety compliance, the [Estate management competency framework](#) which sets out the skills and knowledge needed to manage school estates at all levels, from operational staff through to leadership; and the [Capital advisers programme](#) (CAP) offers multi-academy trusts bespoke recommendations from experienced technical advisers.

6.8 The department, however, keeps its guidance and support under review so that it meets the needs of the sector.

7: PAC conclusion: DfE has focused on reactive measures addressing immediate building concerns that often fail to take account of longer-term value for money considerations.

7a: PAC recommendation: Within the next year, DfE should set out its strategy for encouraging responsible bodies to carry out timely and effective repairs to better protect longer-term value for money.

7.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: February 2025

7.2 The department expects responsible bodies to maintain their estates in a safe condition, compliant with relevant regulations, and to plan management of their assets to deliver value for money. The department already provides extensive guidance on effective and strategic estate management through its [Good estate management for schools](#) manual, which is regularly updated – and emphasises the need for strategic planning and prioritisation of investment over time to deliver value for money, as well as ensuring effective maintenance and checks, to minimise deterioration and issues with buildings.

7.3 In June 2023, the department published the [Estate management competency framework](#). This sets out the skills and knowledge needed to manage school estates at all levels, from operational staff through to leadership. The Capital Advisers Programme (CAP) offers bespoke recommendations from experienced technical advisers and aims to help responsible bodies achieve safe, well-maintained buildings through effective practice and efficient use of funding. The department is expanding the number of trusts included in 2023-24 with potential scope to expand further in 2024-25.

7.4 The department's funding methodology aims to aggregate available funding into larger pots which can then be prioritised across groups of schools in the most efficient way, according to need. This may include concentrating funding on larger projects when required. The department's rebuilding programmes also replace buildings in the worst condition, freeing up responsible bodies to use their capital funding to address wider priorities.

7.5 While existing guidance and programmes support strategic management of the estate, the department keeps its approach under review. The department recognises there is some variability in the approach taken by different responsible bodies. It is considering how it may further clarify their roles and support responsible bodies to manage their estates effectively for the long-term.

7b: PAC recommendation: DfE should also reconsider its value for money analysis on fitting fire safety measures.

7.6 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: September 2024

7.7 The department continues to engage with the Government Actuary Department to review Home Office Data on fires in education buildings and the impact of fitting sprinklers as standard on new school buildings.

7.8 A response will be included in any new version of the department's guidance on Fire Safety (BB100), which is expected to be published later in 2024.

8: PAC conclusion: The School Rebuilding Programme is behind its initial schedule for getting contracts in place and schools built.

8: PAC recommendation: DfE should provide us with assurance that it has a good understanding of how current and likely future challenges will affect the timetable and costs for the School Rebuilding Programme, including by carrying out appropriate scenario-planning should likely and significant risks materialise.

8.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: December 2024

8.2 There are now over 500 schools in the School Rebuilding Programme, including schools with RAAC that need rebuilding projects. The department made rapid progress in setting up the programme and had selected 400 schools by December 2022, ahead of schedule.

8.3 While the National Audit Office (NAO) highlighted that the department had not met initial programme forecasts for the number of contracts awarded, these forecasts were made ahead of the impact on the construction market of significant global events outside of the department's control that could not have been reasonably predicted, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

8.4 The NAO made clear in its 2023 report on the condition of school buildings that the department has already taken steps to address delays related to these issues, including changing project funding policy to reflect market conditions. There are indications the department is now seeing a more stable position, with overall progress on track to deliver the programme as planned. Where construction contracts have been awarded to date, the department has been delivering projects, faster on average, than expected durations.

8.5 The programme is part of the government's major projects portfolio. The programme manages risks robustly, continually monitoring the horizon for internal and external factors that could impact on delivery, so it is able to respond quickly to such challenges. There are established processes for formally reviewing progress and overall risks to delivery of the programme through regular Infrastructure and Project Authority (IPA) gateway reviews. The IPA has previously rated progress as very good and commented that the programme was well managed. The next gateway review is expected to take place later in 2024.

9: PAC conclusion: *There is considerable variation across the school estate, including regional disparity in the condition of school buildings and differences in school types and governance models, which will influence the type of support DfE needs to provide.*

9: PAC recommendation: *DfE should review its guidance, support and financial allocations designed to help reduce variation in the condition of school buildings and the capability of those managing the estate, and make improvements where necessary.*

9.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: March 2025

9.2 This government introduced the Condition Data Collection (CDC), the first ever comprehensive survey of the school estate and one of the largest data collection programmes of its kind in Europe. CDC2 is now in train to provide updated data on the estate.

9.3 The department's capital funding programmes are already targeted on need. For example, School Condition Allocations provided to large responsible bodies annually, take account of the relative condition of their schools, based on consistent data from its survey programme. The department's bid-based programmes robustly assess applications based on the published criteria. Unlike previous programmes, like Building Schools for the Future, the School Rebuilding Programme prioritises projects based on evidence of need rather than other factors. The department's funding methodology also takes account of the different types and size of responsible body in the sector, so that funding can be aggregated into larger pots which can be more efficiently prioritised across groups of schools, with funding then concentrated on larger projects where required.

9.4 The department provides extensive guidance on effective estate management, as well as advice on specific issues such as managing asbestos safely. In June 2023, the department published the Estate Management Competency Framework. This sets out the skills and knowledge needed to manage school estates at all levels, from operational staff through to leadership. The Capital Advisers Programme (CAP) offers bespoke recommendations from experienced technical advisers and aims to help responsible bodies achieve safe, well-maintained buildings through effective practice and efficient use of funding. The department published an evaluation report on the first stage of the Capital Advisers Programme and are expanding the number of trusts included in 2023-24. This is being kept under close review, with potential scope to expand further in 2024-25.

9.5 The department keeps its approach to capital funding, guidance and support for improving the condition of the school estate under review. Representative data from the on-going Condition Data Collection 2 should be available in 2024 to further inform capital funding policy and any changes to the allocation methodology for the 2025-26 financial year.

9.6 Capital funding beyond 2024-25 is subject to the next Spending Review.

10: PAC conclusion: It is unclear whether decisions concerned with addressing the condition of the estate are coordinated with those relating to the need for school places.

10: PAC recommendation: DfE should consider how local authorities can best be supported, and put in place the necessary measures, to ensure that the need for high quality places across the estate is considered when decisions are taken on reducing school places locally.

10.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

10.2 The statutory duty to ensure sufficient school places sits with local authorities. Local authorities already consider overall place requirements and forecast demand in their areas, including when making decisions about reducing school places. There is currently a period of declining birth rates, but local authorities are well placed to handle this, having managed periods of decline, bulges and shifts in local patterns before. They do however require the support and constructive engagement of other responsible bodies in the area to work collaboratively on place planning matters.

10.3 It is prudent to retain some spare capacity in the system, to manage shifting demand and unexpected changes, provide for parental choice and support effective management of the admissions system. The department expects local areas to avoid excessive levels of surplus capacity. Local authorities and other responsible bodies should work together to manage the estate efficiently by reducing or finding alternative uses for high levels of surplus, to avoid potential detriment to the educational offer or financial position of schools in the area.

10.4 The department would expect local authorities, trusts and other local partners to consider a spectrum of options for the reutilisation of space, including for example co-locating nursery or special educational needs and disability (SEND) provision, as well as options for reconfiguration, including via remodelling, amalgamations/mergers, and closures where this is the best course of action. Local factors should be carefully weighed up, along with considerations of the quality, diversity and accessibility of local provision and the forecast demand for places, to determine the most appropriate approach in a given area. The department's Pupil Place Planning Advisers engage with local authorities on a regular basis to review their plans for places in their area; and when local authorities are experiencing difficulties, they offer support and advice.

10.5 The department ensures that the School Rebuilding Programme (SRP), which prioritises poor condition buildings, considers opportunities for reducing the overall capacity of rebuilt schools when current and forecast need in the school and planning area has reduced, scrutinising and challenging sufficiency data where necessary.

10.6 In addition to capital funding to support local authorities to meet their sufficiency duty, the department provides them with revenue funding for growth and falling rolls, through their Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). This funding can be used by local authorities to support schools with managing a significant growth in pupil numbers before the lagged funding system has caught up or a short-term decrease in pupil numbers, where those places are forecast to

be required in future years. The Department has allocated £242 million in Growth and Falling Rolls funding to local authorities in 2024-25 through the DSG, and for the first time this funding is being allocated based on falling rolls as well as growth. The department is also giving local authorities greater flexibilities to use this funding to meet the revenue costs of reducing surplus places.