

RAAC in Schools

2 October 2023

1. The NASUWT – the Teachers' Union – is committed to ensuring that parliamentarians remain informed of challenges in schools and colleges, in addition to the support we are providing to our members. The Union welcomes the Scottish Parliament Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's consideration of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete on 3 October 2023.
2. The NASUWT is the largest UK-wide teachers' union representing teachers and school leaders in all sectors of education.

CONTEXT

3. At the NASUWT Scotland Conference in May 2023 the following motion on School Buildings was passed:

Conference notes that the Department for Education raised the risk of some school buildings in England collapsing from 'critical' to 'critical - very likely'.

Conference believes it is likely that similar issues exist in Scotland, predominantly in those buildings built in the years 1945 to 1970 which used 'system-built' light-frame techniques.

Conference calls on the Scotland Executive Council to lobby local authorities and Scottish Government to ensure full surveys are commissioned of their system-built schools to ascertain the condition of the buildings.

Conference further calls on the Scotland Executive Council to provide support for Local Secretaries and Workplace Representatives so they can ensure:

(i) appropriate systems are put in place to ensure the condition of buildings is monitored and issues are addressed; and

(ii) appropriate procedures are in place for staff to report building issues to management

4. On the 26th of May NASUWT wrote to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee providing the following information:

'...last December, it emerged that UK Government officials had escalated the risk level of school buildings collapsing to 'very likely', after a rise in reported 'serious structural issues' and the failure of schools to get extra capital from the Treasury. The Department for Education's (DfE's) annual report states that school blocks collapsing is one of the six 'key risks' currently facing the DfE, according to its annual report, which also states: 'There is a risk of collapse of one or more blocks in some schools which are at or approaching the end of their designed life-expectancy and structural integrity is impaired.' It appears that the risk is predominantly in those buildings built in the years 1945 to 1970 which used 'system-built' light-frame techniques. These are commonly known as CLASP or SCOLA schools.

Although this report refers to England only, given that the same building techniques were used across the UK, it is very likely issues exist in schools in Scotland and indeed we have had confirmation of this from some local authorities already. In response to the report, some employers have commissioned full surveys of their system-built schools to ascertain

the condition of the buildings. For further background I attach a joint briefing that went to MPs in England in March. I can see that there was an FOI to the Scottish Government in relation to this issue:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-202300348865/>

Can you confirm whether this issue has been or is likely to be considered by the committee, particularly under the Building Safety inquiry?’

5. The Scotland Conference motions were also shared with Scottish Government officials in May 2023 and then a letter was sent directly to the Cabinet Secretary for Education in July:

I am writing today to highlight a serious concern about the safety of some school buildings and, specifically, those which have been constructed using Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC). You will no doubt be aware of the warning issued by NHS Scotland this week that more than 250 of its buildings contain RAAC and that it is potentially vulnerable to catastrophic failure without warning.

This follows events in England, where Westminster Government officials escalated the risk level of school buildings collapsing to ‘very likely’, after a rise in reported ‘serious structural issues’. Indeed, the Department for Education’s (DFE) annual report states that school blocks collapsing is one of the six ‘key risks’ it currently faces: ‘There is a risk of collapse of one or more blocks in some schools which are at or approaching the end of their designed life-expectancy and structural integrity is impaired.’

Although the DFE report refers to England only, given that the same building techniques were typically used across the UK, it is possible that similar issues exist in schools in Scotland, too, and the NHS Scotland report referencing RAAC would seem to reinforce this.

The DfE in England has now started surveying schools with confirmed or suspected RAAC, and this has resulted in the sudden and unexpected closure of a number of schools due to the presence of unsafe RAAC (there

have also been at least two collapses, thankfully without injury, attributed to RAAC failures).

In these circumstances, it would seem prudent to undertake a similar survey of school buildings in Scotland as a matter of some urgency.

6. A response was not received until September 2023 when an apology was given regarding the failure to respond timeously. While assurances were provided in that letter that *'The safety of children, young people, staff and others who use our educational establishments is my absolute top priority, and this is an issue that I am treating very seriously'*, and communication has since improved, NASUWT continues to have concerns regarding the relaxed approach adopted in Scotland compared to elsewhere in the UK.

CONCERNS

7. Undoubtedly, a different approach has been taken in England to the management of RAAC and a number of schools there have closed. The Cabinet Secretary's position on this matter has been that:

'The Department for Education has, thus far, been unable to share a full technical rationale for this decision, although we continue to pursue the necessary technical reports that would inform any shift from the advice published by the Institute for Structural Engineers... The key guidance on RAAC remains the updated guidance issued by the Institution of Structural Engineers in April 2023 (available here: [https://www.istructe.org/resources/guidance/reinforced-autoclaved-aerated-concrete-\(raac\)-inve/](https://www.istructe.org/resources/guidance/reinforced-autoclaved-aerated-concrete-(raac)-inve/)). Local authorities are expected to use this, and guidance from other authoritative bodies, to inform the active management of all their estate.'

8. It is worth noting this statement is at odds with the information NASUWT is being provided nationally. When representatives met with the Secretary of

State she was clear that all evidence available has been shared with the devolved nations.

9. The Scottish Government's maintained position has been that an appropriate programme of surveys has been conducted, necessary mitigations are in place where RAAC has been identified - in particular that *'pupils are not being taught in parts of buildings considered at risk due to RAAC'* - and that there has been no evidence yet provided to any of the devolved Governments by Westminster to justify a different approach being taken.

10. On the ground our local representatives have been engaging directly with councils to confirm whether RAAC is present in the school estate and were advised to ask:
 - (a) Has an appropriate survey of the school building estate taken place, the results been shared with trade unions and reported to the Scottish Government? (And are these desk-based reviews or on-site building surveys?)
 - (b) Are appropriate systems in place to ensure the condition of buildings is monitored on an ongoing basis and that relevant issues are addressed?
 - (c) What procedures are in place for staff to report building issues to management where there is a local concern?
 - (d) Whether any mitigation plan in place to ensure the safety of pupils and staff, has been shared with staff?

11. At the same time nationally, we met with the Scottish Government on 7 September who then committed to providing regular updates on RAAC in Schools. The initial list of schools identified has grown and may do so again therefore this may not be the final definitive list of schools where RAAC is identified.

12. Our position remains that any building surveys seeking to identify RAAC should have been carried out by appropriately qualified people; that

effective systems are in place to ensure the condition of buildings is monitored on an ongoing basis and that any relevant issues are addressed; that there are transparent procedures in place for staff to report any concerns about their own school building; that, where RAAC has been identified, a mitigation plan has been put in place to ensure the safety of staff and pupils and any such plan has been shared with staff.

13. Our Health and Safety Advisory Group met on 14 September, and thereafter we wrote to the Head of School Funding, Infrastructure & Organisation Unit specifically highlighting feedback from our members that:

- add-ons and extensions may not have been included in the surveys in one authority;
- in one local authority, when local information was being sought an 'I can neither confirm nor deny' response was given, leading local activists to be concerned that only one on-site survey had taken place;
- small rural primary schools may be being overlooked due to lack of contact with potentially impacted Headteachers.

14. We have, to date, had no indication if these concerns are being echoed elsewhere or if the Scottish Government has been able to satisfy itself that such concerns are being addressed locally, although a meeting is scheduled this week to discuss this directly.

15. Further, a specific request was made to have clarity on how many schools with suspected RAAC are still awaiting a visit from a surveyor as part of the now weekly updates but, again, no response has been received on this point.

16. Greater urgency needs to be applied to data-gathering centrally. We have been calling on the Scottish Government to urgently take steps to assess the safety of the schools estate. Nationally we need to be clear about which buildings may be affected by RAAC and what plans are in place to

ensure children's education faces minimum disruption if their schools and classrooms are found to be unsafe.

17. We need greater transparency and urgency of action including a full survey of school buildings to get an accurate picture of the situation in Scotland.
18. Parents, pupils and school staff need reassurance and deserve leadership to ensure their safety remains the highest priority. The Government's handling of the RAAC crisis to date has been characterised by delays, obfuscation and attempts to shift the responsibility for fixing these problems onto local authorities and schools. Pupils, parents and school staff across the country have been left in a state of anxiety and limbo as they wait to find out whether their schools are safe or not. They need and deserve a clear timetable and plan for assessing and dealing with RAAC.
19. In order to help ensure such a scandal can never happen again we need a commitment to a public inquiry which can examine how this situation was allowed to occur. The scandalous condition of many of our school buildings, riddled with RAAC and asbestos and in a state of disrepair, must be addressed in the interests of children and young people. The safety of pupils and school staff should not be left to chance.
20. The Government should have more fully invested in the schools estate and taken the required steps when these problems first became apparent. Further, if there had not been real-terms funding cuts to the Health and Safety Executive and local authority inspectors, they would have been better-placed to provide support and guidance when these issues were first identified.

For further information, please contact:

nasuwt@mail.nasuwt.org.uk

www.nasuwt.org.uk

Dr Patrick Roach

General Secretary