



15 February 2023

Dear Secretary of State

Perpetual under-investment in the school estate has led to deteriorating buildings. The House of Commons Library Report - School Buildings and Capital Funding (England) - 4 January 2023 [CBP-7375.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#) calculates that between 2009-10 and 2021-22, overall capital spending declined by around 37 per cent in cash terms and 50 per cent in real terms.

The Department for Education's (DfE) Condition of School Buildings Survey in May 2021 (based on data from 2017-2019) found that it would cost £11.4 billion to repair or replace all defective elements in the school estate. Given inflationary pressures it seems reasonable to assume that this amount will now be much higher.

Many buildings contain materials that were never intended to be still in use. This includes reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC), a material with low compressive strength compared to traditional concrete, and therefore unsuitable for some types of construction, particularly with its susceptibility to water damage.

Such failure to invest in the maintenance and renewal of our school estate inevitably has consequences and your Department acknowledged the situation had reached crisis point late last year, admitting in its latest Annual Report [DfE consolidated annual report and accounts 2021 to 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) that *'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'* and that *'the risk predominantly exists in those buildings built in the years 1945 to 1970 which used 'system build' light frame techniques.'* It is alarming that the report stated the risk level has been escalated from **Critical – Likely** to **Critical – Very likely**, as long ago as July 2021, and that the direction of travel for this risk is assessed by the DfE as “worsening”.

This is a truly shocking admission. We have reached absolute rock bottom, and this comes at a time when, as noted by the 2022 TUC report [Schools Built for the Future](#) there is also an urgent need to invest in retrofitting schools to ensure that they are climate resilient and energy efficient, and to consider how ventilation, indoor and outdoor air quality can be improved to reduce the likelihood of infectious diseases spreading.

The post-war system-built structures that are at risk of collapse are also those most likely to contain asbestos, further compounding the gravity of the situation, should a collapse occur. This will ultimately make remedial work more difficult and more costly.

Some of the signatories to this letter had a short discussion with officials during this month's meeting of the DfE Programme of Talks, following which we all wanted to share with you directly our concerns and questions, and the urgency with which we think you must instruct your Department to proceed.

It should be noted that the Joint Trade Unions are extremely concerned that the Department admitted at the Programme of Talks meeting that it does not know which buildings are of concern, as the Condition Data Collection exercise was only a visual inspection. Relying on individual schools to survey and report issues is insufficient, especially given that the Asbestos Management Assurance Process (AMAP) showed a significant number of schools not compliant with asbestos regulations. Given the level of non-compliance with statutory regulations observed in the AMAP process, it must be assumed that many schools will not be aware of the structural integrity of their buildings, as this is not a statutory requirement.

We have the following questions:

- Can the DfE either publish a full list of buildings at risk of collapse or confirm if it holds this information in part or not at all, despite the detail contained in its 2022 Annual Report?
- What steps are being taken to improve the response rate to the DfE's RAAC survey and how do current responses break down between schools in smaller and larger trusts and local authorities? We note that as of 31 August 2021 more than 8,000 academies and local authority schools were covered by the DfE's Risk Protection Arrangement, so if the DfE does not hold information on the presence of RAAC then, coupled with the health and safety risk, the Government is failing in its duty to protect against risks to public finance.
- Are local authorities aware of the risks to schools and responsible bodies in their authority?
- What measures is the Government taking to ensure it has a full and accurate picture of the state of the school estate?
- What measures has the Government taken, and what measures will be taken, to eradicate the risk of collapse?
- When will affected buildings be made safe?
- What interim measures are being taken to ensure the safety of staff and pupils? HSE needs to be fully involved and properly funded to do its job, though we recognise the strain placed on the regulator given the 54 per cent cut in its funding between 2009/10 and 2019/20.
- What mitigations is the Government putting in place to ensure continuity of face-to-face education, if a building has to be taken out of use?
- What additional capital funding will the Government provide to ensure that all school buildings can be made safe and fit for the future?
- When is the DfE going to fund appropriately the work needed to remove lethal asbestos from the school estate?

So far, the DfE has not fully responded to these issues of urgent concern and there appears to be a confused picture across various local authorities [Councils dawdle on surveying collapse risk building material \(schoolsweek.co.uk\)](#) which may extend to some academy trusts too. This does not inspire confidence that the Government has a plan to address this immediate issue with the urgency it requires, let alone the wider issue of capital funding to ensure school buildings are fit for the future. We therefore request that, as Secretary of State for Education, you provide the information requested above as a matter of urgency.

We are not alone in our concerns. They are shared by the Royal Institute of British Architects [RIBA presses govt to publish survey of collapsing school buildings \(architectsjournal.co.uk\)](#) which has called for any school buildings with structural safety risks to be immediately assessed, interim safety measures put in place, and all necessary works scheduled to an urgent programme.

Because of wider public/parental interest in this issue we are writing this as an open letter.
We would welcome an opportunity to discuss this with you in a meeting and look forward to an early response.

Best wishes

Yours sincerely



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General Secretary | Community



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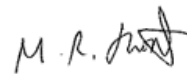
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