



10 Downing Street
London
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25 September 2023

Dear Prime Minister,

We are writing to raise our serious concerns about the state of school buildings in England.

Parents, school staff and children and young people have been alarmed to hear – at the start of the new academic year – about crumbling school buildings and the deterioration of the school estate, which could present a very serious risk to their safety.

The crisis involving Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) has shone a broader light on the crippling underfunding of our school buildings, which has left many unsafe and no longer fit for purpose.

On 7 September, six education unions wrote to Education Secretary Gillian Keegan, asking a number of questions which we believe need to be urgently answered. As yet, we have not received a substantive reply.

We met with Gillian Keegan on 18 September but have still not had a timeframe on when all schools at risk will be investigated by qualified structural engineers to assess the extent of the problem and measures that need to be put in place to rectify the presence of RAAC. Nor has there been a deadline set to clear RAAC from every school.

According to the Department for Education (DfE)'s own [Condition of School Buildings Survey](#), published in May 2021, schools in England face a repair bill of an estimated £11.4 billion. And only four years previously, the National Audit Office (NAO) estimated a total repair bill of £6.7bn.

Although the two surveys calculated their estimates slightly differently, there is no doubt that the leap from £6.7bn to £11.4bn – almost twice the original amount – signifies a considerable worsening of the fabric of the school estate in England over just a few years.

The NAO report also found that nearly two-fifths (38 per cent) of school buildings were believed to be past their estimated initial design life, which could be extended with adequate maintenance.

In May 2022 the [Observer](#) reported that civil servants had warned Downing Street that some school sites were a “risk to life” and demanded £13bn for repairs. Emails sent by senior officials working for then education secretary Nadhim Zahawi showed they had raised the alarm on two occasions within the previous six-week period.

The officials called for the Treasury urgently to make extra funding available, to increase the number of school rebuilding projects from 50 a year to more than 300.

The first email, sent on 30 March, included the following text: “School buildings: the deteriorating condition of the school estate continues to be a risk, with condition funding flat for FY [financial

year] 2022-23, some sites a risk-to-life, too many costly and energy-inefficient repairs rather than rebuilds, and rebuild demand x3 supply.”

On 4 April, the officials raised the alarm again and repeated the warning that some school sites were a “risk to life”. The second email adds: “We would like to increase the scale of school rebuilding.”

A report from the Work and Pensions Committee published in April 2022 highlighted the risk of asbestos across the schools estate and expressed concerns over asbestos management. The Committee recommended the publication of a national register and called on the Government and HSE to publish a strategic plan to secure the removal of asbestos and the early removal of asbestos from the highest risk settings including schools. It is clear that there is a link between the use of RAAC and the presence of asbestos in some schools and we believe that a national register of the location of asbestos and RAAC in schools is essential.

All these reports, and the worrying situation that has occurred so close to the start of this academic year, have only shone the spotlight on what many school staff and parents have complained about for years – crumbling school buildings, asbestos, leaking roofs, and temporary accommodation that had long outlived their intended lifespan.

The Office of Government Property has calculated that, to maintain the school estate in line with best practice, the Government should be spending at least £7bn a year. Your Government is currently spending just over a third of this amount, £2.6bn a year. This follows reports that funding for rebuilding the school estate was cut when you were Chancellor of the Exchequer.

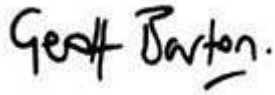
As education unions representing more than one million workers in the sector, we wrote to you in February 2023 with concerns about the school estate. In her response to the letter, Gillian Keegan said: “I want to be clear that the department is not aware of any open school buildings where we know of an imminent risk to life. This risk rating reflects the fact we have identified increased numbers of structural issues through our continuing engagement with the sector, and also the overall age of the estate.”

This situation has now changed so we are writing to call on you to act, as a matter of urgency, to ensure that our school estate is upgraded and made safe for education in the 21st century.

As your Secretary of State for Education has said, it is the duty of the UK Government to protect the safety of pupils, teachers and other school workers. Moreover, your Chancellor stated that the Government would “spend what it takes” to deal with the crisis.

If these words are to become reality, we call on the Government to invest at least an extra £4.4bn annually to upgrade school buildings at the upcoming Autumn Statement, bringing the total yearly spend to the £7bn your own officials have previously recommended. This will help ensure this crisis never happens again and show the Government is prepared to spend whatever it takes to keep children safe in education.

Yours sincerely,



Geoff Barton,
General Secretary,
ASCL



Roy Rickhuss CBE,
General Secretary,
Community



Gary Smith,
General Secretary,
GMB



Paul Whiteman,
General Secretary,
NAHT



Dr Patrick Roach,
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