

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC)

Purpose of Report

For direction.

Summary

The identification, remediation, and management of RAAC has been subject to substantial public and media concern in recent weeks, following the Department for Education's change in approach to managing the risks associated with RAAC. This paper sets out a brief background to the LGA's work on RAAC, recent developments, and the current key areas of interest to the Safer and Stronger Communities Board, and seeks member's views on the LGA's next steps.

LGA Plan Theme: **Championing climate change and local environments**

Recommendation(s)

That the Board notes:

- (a) Recent developments relating to the identification, remediation, and management of RAAC; and**
- (b) Provide views on the LGA's next steps in its work related to RAAC.**

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Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) update

Background

1. As members from the Board will recall from their discussion in January about the LGA's strategy to raise awareness of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) among councils, it is a lightweight, aerated ('bubbly') concrete that was commonly used by municipal architects from the 1950s until the mid-1990s, though there have been cases dating back to the 1930s and some into the 1990s.
2. It was predominantly used in precast panels, which are primarily found in flat-roof construction, but have been found less frequently in pitched-roofs, walls, and floors. It is also found more commonly in buildings with large open spaces.
3. RAAC is found in a range of private and public buildings. It is currently thought to be most prevalent in the school estate, but has been found in a number of local authority-owned settings including theatres, libraries, leisure centres and sports pavilions as well as in a small amount of social housing. As such it is a topic of interest to a number of LGA Boards.
4. It has also been found in the police estate in Devon and Cornwall (including the police station in Barnstaple) and in Scotland, in the National Health Service where it has been found at 27 sites including seven hospitals which will require full replacement, and in fire stations in Scotland. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that in a local authority context where it has been used in one type of building, such as schools, it may also be present in other local authority owned premises. It is unclear how often it has been used in private and commercial buildings.
5. The risks associated with RAAC have been known since the 1990s, where the Building Research Establishment (BRE) commented on issues identified with RAAC planks, including progressive and excessive deflections in their surface associated with extensive hairline cracking and corrosion of reinforcements. Importantly, it was *previously* thought that RAAC planks would give sufficient warning of failure through visual deterioration. A number of notable incidences of RAAC failure- such as, [collapses of school roofs](#)- contradicted this understanding. These incidents have suggested that RAAC planks can collapse with little to no visual warning, and therefore that RAAC is a clear and present risk.
6. Since 2018, the LGA has done substantial work to spread awareness on the risks presented by RAAC, which can be found on the [LGA's RAAC webpage](#).
7. In 2022, the Department of Education (DfE) started a survey of all schools to raise awareness of RAAC. Responsible bodies, including local authorities, were required to register their schools with DfE, indicate whether they had checked for RAAC, and whether they had discovered any incidences of it.
8. We worked continuously with the DfE to raise awareness of this survey by cascading it to members, and provided targeted support to those who were having difficulties completing it.

9. This was done concurrently with a number of activities aimed at raising awareness of the risks of RAAC, such as Leadership Essentials courses, webinars, and circulating relevant policy and news developments.
10. We similarly engaged frequently with members councils that had dealt extensively with RAAC in order to gain a fuller understanding of its extent, and any costs or issues associated with its management and remediation.

Recent developments

11. Members are likely to be aware of the substantial public and media attention that is currently being given to the identification, remediation, and risk management of RAAC – particularly in the school estate.
12. DfE's advice to schools changed at the end of August due to three incidents over the summer involving the collapse of RAAC structures without prior warning: two in schools settings and one in a commercial setting. The view of DfE officials was that under previous DfE guidance, as well as the current RAAC guidance from the Institution of Structural Engineers, the planks that collapsed would have been categorised as non-critical and therefore not requiring immediate evacuation. This has led to a shift in DfE's risk management approach whereby any incident of RAAC in a state-funded education setting (community, voluntary-controlled, foundation schools and maintained nursery schools) must be taken out of use until appropriate mitigations are put in place.
13. DfE has put in place a process to support schools where it is suspected there is RAAC present, including access to technical expertise to confirm whether or not there is RAAC present. There is funding available to schools to cover the revenue and capital costs of taking buildings with RAAC out of use and remediating them.
14. Since the DfE announcement there has been nationwide activity to identify RAAC in the public estate. The LGA has drawn local authorities' attention to the guidance available to assist them in checking whether their estates have RAAC, and this has led to the identification of RAAC in a range of local authority sites outside the school estate.
15. In order to provide member authorities with appropriate support and guidance, we have created a RAAC specific e-mail inbox (raac@local.gov.uk) where local authorities can raise issues they are encountering in managing RAAC in their estates.

Issues

16. **Guidance:** The Institute of Structural Engineers are presently reviewing [their guidance](#) in light of the three incidents that prompted a change of approach by the DfE. This review process is expected to be completed shortly. For the moment government departments are keen to stress that the Institute of Structural Engineers' guidance should be considered technically sound.
17. In response to the change in approach from the DfE, the LGA is currently producing an advice note for local authorities which sets out the guidance from the Institute of Structural Engineers and from government on identifying and managing cases of RAAC,

including key background information, risk profiles. This advice note will be published on the LGA's website in due course.

18. The LGA also sits on and represents the local government sector in the Office for Government Property's (OGP) RAAC Working Group. This is the cross-Whitehall group established to coordinate the approach across government departments to identifying and remediating RAAC, as well as creating a collective understanding and approach to RAAC across the public sector estate. In addition the LGA has been invited to participate in the Construction Leadership Council RAAC Industry Response Group which brings together leading organisations and individuals in the construction sector and academia to coordinate activity, share knowledge and experience and make recommendations to government.
19. Local authorities have raised a number of questions on which it would be helpful to have further guidance from government:
 - 19.1. In particular they have asked for clarity over the approach to be taken where RAAC is suspected as being present or is confirmed as being present, given the current differences between the advice from DfE and that in the Institute's guidance.
 - 19.2. They have also asked what approach should be taken to commissioned services. Should for example care homes or children's homes be asked to confirm that they do not have RAAC present? If they are asked this question and RAAC is found then it is possible residents would have to be moved from the premises, and found alternative accommodation.
 - 19.3. If the Institute of Structural Engineer's guidance remains unchanged there are likely to be instances outside of schools and education establishments where RAAC is identified but stays in situ. However there is little evidence about how quickly RAAC can deteriorate in a UK context, and therefore how frequently it should be reinspected to ensure it will not collapse. In the absence of any advice on this local authority surveyors and engineers will have to make assessments based on their own experience and judgement.
20. The LGA will be lobbying for further guidance from government that addresses all these issues.
21. **Supply of appropriately qualified surveyors:** The DfE currently requires surveyors or structural engineers to have 1-year of experience on RAAC-related projects to be considered 'appropriately qualified' to confirm an incident of RAAC. Prior to the Department's announcement, there was already concern within the sector about the supply of these surveyors. In light of recent developments, the LGA has highlighted concerns that the substantial increase in demand for surveyors will now drastically outstrip the supply, leading to backlogs and hindering the ability for local authorities to take quick and decisive action on RAAC.
22. **Data collection:** As part of the OGP RAAC Working Group, central government departments are required to submit data on cases of RAAC in their estates according to a uniform template. The expectation (but not requirement) from the OGP is that the LGA

would cascade this template to local authorities and require that local authorities submit extensive data returns using this template.

23. We continue to welcome member authorities sharing their data on their management of RAAC, but are concerned about the impact this could have on councils:
- 23.1. Local authorities are already making strong progress identifying and remediating RAAC. Many have been addressing this issue before the DfE's decision at the end of August, and councils have already been asked to check some of their estate, for example the Regulator of Social Housing has instructed social landlords to check their properties for RAAC.
 - 23.2. An extensive data collection exercise of this nature would be burdensome and would detract from councils on-going work in relation to identifying and remediating RAAC, as well as placing further financial and resources pressures on councils at a time when they are under significant budget pressures.
 - 23.3. A data collection exercise led by the LGA would also impact on our relationship with our member authorities.
24. With many buildings councils being accessible to the public, local authorities there is already considerable information in the public domain about which and how many buildings are affected. Councils with buildings with RAAC present will also want assistance and seek expertise and guidance on how to manage and make the RAAC safe. Rather than reporting to central government it would be more helpful if information on buildings with RAAC was shared with key partners such as fire and rescue services where knowledge there is RAAC will inform their fire fighting strategies.
25. **Funding:** There also continues to be significant uncertainty around the funding of remediation and related activity. It is not yet clear what costs councils will be incurring to remediate RAAC, and the LGA is interested in gaining a robust understanding of what 'typical' cases of RAAC are costing local authorities in order to inform our lobbying work. For example some councils with schools with RAAC in their areas are reporting they are incurring costs assisting non-maintained schools respond to the DfE advice, and it is not yet clear if they will be able to recover them. The LGA has been raising this issue with DfE.
26. **Private sector buildings:** The focus so far has been on public sector buildings with RAAC, but we know it is present in commercial settings and it is likely to be found in other private sector settings. At this point it is not clear how building owners in the private sector will be encouraged and assisted to check whether any buildings they own have RAAC present.

Implications for Wales

27. The Welsh government has been working in Wales to identify and remediate RAAC since 2019, when SCOSS issued their alert and the WLGA notified Welsh local authorities about RAAC following the SCOSS alert in 2020. There has been a programme of work in Wales to identify RAAC in the public estate, but following the DfE

decision at the end of August to change their approach the Welsh government has commissioned further surveys of public buildings in Wales.

Financial Implications

28. The costs of remediating RAAC will vary for building owners depending on the extent of its use, but in some cases these will be substantial. The NHS has allocated £698 million between 2021 and 2025 to remediate and put in fail safe measures. It is not currently clear what the costs of remediating RAAC outside of the school estate might cost local authorities, and we are in the process of gathering information on this.

Equalities implications

29. Given the range and type of buildings identified with RAAC, and what appears to be a very limited presence in social housing and other residential settings, it does not appear at this stage there are any particular equalities implications arising from the presence of RAAC.

Next steps

30. Officers will incorporate members' views about the support the LGA is providing to our member authorities into our ongoing work around RAAC.