

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 Children and Young People Board, and seeks member's views on the LGA's next steps.

LGA Plan Theme: **Putting people first**

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. Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) 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. Although the media focus has been on the presence of RAAC in schools, it has been found in a range of private and public buildings. These include a range of local authority-owned settings such as 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. 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.
5. 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](#). This was created in 2019 and followed a joint communication from the LGA and the Department for Education (DfE) in late 2018 following the collapse of a school roof that year.
6. In 2022, the Office of Government Property wrote a letter to government departments about RAAC, and the LGA replicated the letter on its website and drew it to councils' attention. In the same year 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.
7. In December 2022, DfE published updated guidance on the identification and management of RAAC in educational buildings.
8. We worked continuously with the DfE to raise awareness of their RAAC 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.

Recent developments

10. 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.
11. 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.
12. As of 14 September 2023, 174 schools and colleges had been identified with cases of RAAC. Of these 148 settings were providing face to face learning for all pupils, 23 had put hybrid arrangements in place and 1 had moved to remote learning. This information was based on responsible bodies having submitted responses to DfE's survey for 98.6 per cent of schools with blocks built in the target era.
13. Since the change in DfE advice councils have been working to support schools in their area identified as having RAAC. 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.

Issues

14. **Funding:** DfE has committed to provide schools with RAAC with the capital and revenue funding to cover all mitigation works and any other associated costs. However there are wider costs implications for councils as a result of DfE's announcement:
 - 14.1. Some councils with schools with RAAC in their areas are reporting they are incurring a range of costs assisting non-maintained schools (for example around school transport, school meals and staffing), and it is not yet clear if they will be able to recover them. The LGA has been raising this issue with DfE.
 - 14.2. There may also be wider costs associated for councils while mitigation and remediation work is undertaken at schools with RAAC such as respite and other costs arising from changes to SEND provision.
 - 14.3. It is not yet clear what the implications of funding RAAC related mitigations and remediation work will have on wider education capital budgets.

15. **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 for buildings outside and educational setting.
16. 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.
17. 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.
18. Local authorities have raised a number of questions on which it would be helpful to have further guidance from government:
 - 18.1. 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.
 - 18.2. 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.
 - 18.3. 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.
19. The LGA will be lobbying for further guidance from government that addresses all these issues.
20. **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.

21. **Data sharing:** an issue raised by councils following DfE's announcement at the end of August was the slowness in the flow of information about schools in their area suspected or identified as having RAAC. The LGA called for councils to be given the information they needed to be able to support schools, staff, pupils and their families. While the process of identifying any remaining schools with RAAC continues the LGA will press for a better process for sharing information.

Implications for Wales

22. 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

23. 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 in the school estate will cost local authorities, and we are in the process of gathering information on this.

Equalities implications

24. DfE have been clear in their guidance that the duties under education and equalities legislation to secure special educational provision for pupils with special educational, and also relating to disability continue to apply. Councils and schools therefore have to work to ensure these duties are met.

Next steps

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