

Information for Unitary Councillors

Sheet Number:

2022-27/68

From:	Chris Palmer
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Date:	08.09.2023
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To:	All Unitary Councillors
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RAAC and Somerset schools

Somerset Council position statement. 7.9.23

As you will be aware the Department for Education (DfE) has a list, published yesterday and accurate as of 30 August 2023, of schools many of which will have to at least partially close because of the presence of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) in their buildings. The DfE has contacted the schools on that list, and I can reassure you that no schools in Somerset were on the original DfE list. However, one academy school, Selworthy School, run by the Oak Partnership Trust, has identified RAAC in one building since the letter was initially sent. We expect that school to open for all but one class today (7.9.23) with the final class returning to school on 8.9.23 .

By way of background, RAAC was widely used between 1940 and 1998 and many school buildings nationally had floors, walls and ceiling slabs made of RAAC because it was lightweight compared to other forms of concrete.

RAAC has a limited lifespan and recent research has found that it can fail can very quickly without warning once it has reached the end of its lifespan. It is no longer used in modern construction.

As a local authority we have responsibility for the condition of local authority-maintained schools, apart from those that are Voluntary Aided, where the Diocese of Bath and Wells, or the Diocese of Clifton, have responsibility. Academy Trusts and the DfE have responsibility for academy schools in the county.

When the risk of RAAC became clear to government, before 2020, the then county council reviewed our school building records. This review concluded that there was low probability of RAAC being present in Somerset's local authority-maintained schools.

In the light of new guidance that came from the DfE in the most recent academic year, an accelerated new programme of on-site investigation began across LA maintained schools to test this earlier study. This programme has not yet concluded, but to date all the on-site surveys have found no evidence of RAAC in local authority-maintained schools. We anticipate that all initial surveys will be complete in the next two weeks.

Where more detailed surveys are recommended, these will continue through the autumn term.

In the past few days, we have seen local speculation about RAAC in some Somerset schools - with suggestions that it could be present in the buildings of Bridgwater and Taunton College Trust schools, including Brymore school, as well as Preston Primary Trust schools in Othery, Paulett and Middlezoy. Additional comments have been made about Huntspill's academy trust schools at East and West Huntspill. None of these schools are on the DfE list.

Bridgwater College Academy Trust has confirmed that it had a survey undertaken on its buildings in the last academic year and no cases of RAAC have been found. Preston Primary Trust has also confirmed that it has no confirmed cases of RAAC in its premises and is awaiting DfE surveys. Huntspill's Academy Trust has confirmed it has DfE surveys happening on its sites this week.

However, the condition of maintained schools' buildings remains a significant challenge for this Council and for other education authorities around the country with many older schools reaching the end of their designed lifespan.

Somerset Council, and previously the County Council, has seen government funding for school repairs and maintenance has reduced from £10m in 2011/12 to £2m in the current financial year. Over the past three years the council has invested some £18m (over and above the dwindling level of government grant) to address the most critical building maintenance issues but we still face an estimated backlog of high priority repairs in the range of £30-£40m for LA maintained schools.

Potential issues with RAAC elsewhere in the council estate.

RAAC wasn't just used in schools, and we are now looking at what impact this may have for the rest of the council's property estate. This is complicated by our bringing together the estates of five council and the need to prioritise work on school buildings.

Officers in the Strategic Asset Management department have undertaken an initial data review of over 1000 buildings and commissioned some follow-up surveys. Again, no RAAC has been identified to date it will be some time before we have a comprehensive view on the risk posed by RAAC in this part of the estate. We will continue to review Health and Safety Executive and any other relevant sector guidance as the national response develops in this very challenging area.

The Council owns and manages 10,000 homes through its housing services. Most of these homes are traditionally built houses and bungalows using well established techniques and materials; concrete slab construction methods are present in our housing estate, but with relatively few large blocks we believe that the risk of RAAC being present is likely to be low. Additional verification work is being undertaken by the housing services to provide assurance in this area.