

School Buildings

The law lays down that the maintenance and safety of school buildings is the responsibility of the Council acting as the Local Education Authority or the Educational Trust in the case of Academy schools. The Governors and senior management team of each school should also take a close interest in the state of the fabric and the safety of pupils, and are best placed day by day to see faults, cracks and problems with the building structure. They report to the LEA or Trust and should be accountable to them.

It was apparently well known and much discussed over recent years that any building built more than 30 years ago with RAAC concrete contains beams and sections in this material that may have gone beyond the end of its useful life. For some years those in charge of buildings or responsible for maintenance should have been on watch to see if there were any signs of loss of strength, cracking or other signs of degeneration in RAAC concrete components. It was clear to all concerned that if there were there might be a temporary fix of providing extra support to beams or sections that could weaken or snap , preparatory to replacement.

It appears that the government was also monitoring this problem as it may well have direct responsibility for other public sector structures. It decided it needed to intervene with schools, sending them a questionnaire to see how many RAAC buildings at possible risk there were. It then circulated more guidance about the issues this concrete poses and put in Inspectors to review those buildings that did have RAAC. Now the government is being attacked for telling the schools to take tougher action with some of these given recent evidence that there can be RAAC failures in beams or sections that did not show signs of decay. The government has also promised central taxpayer money to fix the issues.

Surely we need to ask how come more of the expensive local bureaucracies that control our LEA schools did not take stronger action earlier, and why they had not reviewed and surveyed on their own initiative? We have many examples of power delegated to local government or to quangos in the UK, yet whenever anything goes wrong blame is usually transferred by the Opposition and media back to the government. If the government is to be to blame for everything maybe we should save the money on the delegated authorities that are not doing the job.

We need to ask what role did LEAs have in using RAAC concrete in the original buildings? Did they not keep a record of how the building was built? What actions had they taken in recent years when it came to light this concrete can deteriorate and has a limited useful and safe life in various cases? You would have thought LEAs and Governing bodies of schools would know the details of how the schools were built and the risks in the form of construction undertaken. They could have taken action to avert problems before the beginning of term. The idea of delegation is based on the simple fact that the school and LEA managers know these buildings and visit them daily or regularly. Ministers have visited very few of them.