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23 October 2023

Dear Convener,

**Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) in schools**

Thank you for your letter of 14 September, regarding the existence of RAAC in the school estate.

As Committee members will be aware, this is an issue the Scottish Government takes very seriously. We are working closely with local authorities to fully understand the presence of RAAC in the school estate and, where necessary, the actions being taken to address it. It is the statutory responsibility of local authorities to manage and maintain their school estate and ensure their buildings are safe for pupils, staff and the public.

It is perhaps helpful if I summarise key Scottish Government actions on this issue. On all school estate issues, my officials work closely with the local authorities' Scottish Heads of Property Services (SHOPS) and Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) networks. Officials have been sharing information on RAAC through these networks since July 2022, including the Institution of Structural Engineers' guidance. In May 2023, officials drew the networks' attention to the updated guidance published by the Institution of Structural Engineers in April 2023.

In July 2023, my officials wrote to all local authorities requesting detailed school level information on the presence of RAAC in their school estate. While information was requested by early August, in practice it took longer to receive returns from all local authorities.

Separately to our work in Scotland, on 31 August, I was contacted by Baroness Barran, Minister in the UK Department for Education (DfE), to inform me of the DfE's decision to move away from the Institution of Structural Engineer's guidance in the school estate in England. This was followed by a letter from the UK Secretary of State for Education on

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2 September. It was extremely disappointing to only hear of a significant change in the DfE's approach after this had already been announced publicly in the media.

I wrote to the Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan MP, on 3 September and again on 5 September, to ask her to urgently share in full all technical evidence behind the DfE's revised policy and movement away from the previously accepted Institution of Structural Engineers' advice. I have as yet received no response to those letters. I discussed this matter with Jeremy Miles, Minister for Education and Welsh Language in the Welsh Government in September, and I am aware that they are experiencing similar frustrations to our own. I would also note that the DfE's decision has not been mirrored by other parts of the UK Government.

I wrote again to the Secretary of State for Education on 15 September regarding Queen Victoria School, an independent school in Dunblane operated by the Ministry of Defence, where RAAC was investigated earlier this year. This letter raised my concern that critical details relating to a school in Scotland were not shared with the Scottish Government as they should have been.

I am very clear that the key guidance on RAAC remains that issued by the Institution of Structural Engineers in April 2023 (available [here](#)). The Institution has recently written to the Cabinet Office to confirm that their RAAC study group has reviewed evidence from recent RAAC assessment reports. The letter has been shared with the Scottish Government and clearly sets out that following the review their guidance remains valid. Further the letter states that the guidance covers the RAAC failures described and therefore does not need to be updated in light of them.

Local authorities and others responsible for public buildings should continue to use this, and guidance from other authoritative bodies, to actively manage all buildings and ensure their safety. The Scottish Government cross-sector working group on RAAC is currently meeting frequently and works to share good practice and experience in assessing and managing risk. As you will be aware, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice leads on RAAC across the Scottish Government, and Ms Somerville gave a statement to Parliament on 7 September. She also gave evidence to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee on 3 October.

Since early August, my officials have been gathering and analysing detailed information on RAAC from local authorities. Survey returns providing initial data for their school estate and standalone early learning and childcare (ELC) centres had been received from all local authorities by early September. Further information from local authorities over September has confirmed that all public school buildings identified as being within the higher-risk time frame have now been subject to an assessment. This includes both desk-based and structural on-site assessments.

RAAC has been discovered in 37 public schools to date, across 16 local authorities. Those authorities have published a full record of the public schools and ELC centres impacted in September, along with a record of actions being taken. I welcome that decision and the transparency it brings.

In some instances, local authorities are following up initial assessments with further work and I expect them to undertake this as quickly as possible. For example, this might include moving from a desktop assessment or a visual survey to a physical or intrusive survey where required.

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We are supportive of this course of action where local authorities are investigating more rigorously on-site to ensure that the risk is fully assessed.

25 local authorities have now completed all their assessments of public schools and ELC centres within the higher-risk time period. In those local authorities where work is ongoing, the Scottish Government has written to them to ask that work is now accelerated and we understand that most, if not all, of the remaining work is scheduled to be completed this month. This includes making use of the October holidays to undertake work that may not be suitable while the public school is occupied.

It is vitally important that local authorities have robust and proportionate contingency plans in place. Officials have been in contact with representatives from ADES to ensure this point is discussed across their network.

I have also written to independent schools to seek information on RAAC in their school estate and there has been communication at senior official level with private, voluntary and independent settings, and childminders, within the ELC sector to share guidance around the management of RAAC. Officials are also ascertaining the position across grant-aided schools, with no RAAC so far identified in these settings.

It is important that school staff have confidence that the buildings they work in are safe. I met the education unions on 7 September to share information on RAAC in the school estate and following that meeting, my officials are providing Unions with regular updates on RAAC to share with their members.

I hope this is helpful to the Committee. Please let me or my officials know should the Committee require any further detail at this time.

Yours sincerely,

**JENNY GILRUTH**

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