

RAAC planks and its impact on local authorities

Recent reports of flat roofs constructed using RAAC planks collapsing without warning prompted the SCOSS alert.

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Employers owe a duty of care to ensure that their premises are safe and without risks to the health of their employees and members of the public with access to their premises under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. They also have a duty to take reasonable care to ensure the safety of lawful visitors such as school pupils, hospital patients and contractors under the Occupiers Liability Act 1957.

In May 2019 the Standing Committee on Structural Safety (SCOSS) issued an alert relating to the failure of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) planks used in roof construction.

RAAC planks were widely used for the construction of flat roofs in the 1960-80s and have an expected lifespan of 30 years.

RAAC appears to have been used by some municipal architects in a wide range of buildings, not all of which are still in the public sector. Many building owners are not aware that it is present in their property and will need to reconsider maintenance and inspection regimes.

Recent reports of flat roofs constructed using RAAC planks collapsing without warning prompted the SCOSS alert, which was aimed at: owners of schools and similar buildings dating from the 1960-80s with flat roofs, government departments and local authorities with schools and similar buildings in their asset portfolios, national health trusts, dioceses/parishes, building surveyors, architects, structural engineers, facilities managers and maintenance organisations.

Recommended actions

The 2019 SCOSS alert contains advice on the steps for an owner/building manager to take in identifying RAAC planks, including:

- note that RAAC planks were used for the construction of flat roofs in the 1960-80s, so buildings (or extensions) pre-dating or post-dating this period are unlikely to be affected
- ask whether any similar buildings in the area are known to have RAAC roof planks
- access any records relating to construction to see if RAAC is mentioned, although an absence of identification on records does not exclude the possibility of the material being present
- if the construction type of a roof is not known and could potentially be RAAC planks, then the roof should be inspected, and measures put in place to manage the risk e.g temporary propping of the roof.

The 1996 BRE Information Paper IP 10/96 - Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete planks designed before 1980 outlines a preliminary inspection procedure. The alert includes further advice on managing RAAC planks if they are found.

The Local Government Association (LGA) and the Department for Education (DfE) have contacted all school building owners advising on the steps that responsible bodies should take in relation to RAAC.

Structural issues relating to the use of RAAC planks have been identified at West Suffolk Hospital, and in November 2019 NHS England advised that checks were being carried out at seven affected hospitals: West Suffolk, Hinchingbrooke in Cambridgeshire, James Paget and Queen Elizabeth in Norfolk, Airedale in West Yorkshire, Leighton in Cheshire and Frimley Park in Surrey.

Following the 2020 Spending Review substantial additional funding has been provided to the NHS to help address issues within hospitals with RAAC. The aim of NHS England and Improvement (NHSE&I) is to eliminate RAAC panels from the NHS estate before 2035.

Legal issues

As outlined above, RAAC planks have failed with little or no warning and represent a significant risk to employees, visitors in affected premises, and operations. Many building owners and managers will not know whether or not they have RAAC planks in the roofs of buildings they are responsible for.

We recommend that the owners of potentially affected buildings consider as a matter of urgency:

- insurance coverage for risks from RAAC
- emergency responses to structural failure
- employee awareness of the issue, vigilance, and preparedness.

Building owners will also need to consider the financial implications of RAAC if it is found in the buildings they are responsible for.

We would be very happy to assist with any aspect of planning for or addressing the risks posed by RAAC in your buildings.

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