Browne Jacobson

100+ schools told to close immediately due to threat of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete

01 September 2023 Scott Mounfield

In light of new evidence, more than 100 schools in the United Kingdom have been told to immediately shut buildings that were built with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) due to the risk of collapse, unless mitigations are put in place.

The Department for Education (DfE) previously conducted an investigation into RAAC in schools for over a year and concluded there is a "very likely and critical" risk of injury or death from a school building collapse. This latest move by the DfE to close more than 100 schools further highlights this risk, with many students and school staff set to be disrupted a matter of days before the new school year and term commences.

Why is RAAC problematic?

RAAC resembles conventional concrete but is a lightweight alternative that was used extensively in building projects across the United Kingdom from the 1950s through to the 1990s. However, subsequent examination revealed its inferior durability compared with traditional concrete – it has a lifespan of only 30 years and it remains vulnerable to collapsing upon exposure to moisture.

In cases where RAAC is identified within school structures, repairs and corrective measures are critical because of the speed at which it can deteriorate and collapse. Notably, a primary school in Kent saw its roof collapse just 24 hours after the initial indications of structural strain surfaced. Following this incident in Kent, the Office of Government Property issued a safety advisory outlining the perils associated with RAAC and explicitly stated that "RAAC is now past its useful life and prone to collapse."

Assessing and responding to the risk of RAAC

Acknowledging RAAC as a foremost hazard to schools, the DfE has released non-statutory guidelines to help those responsible for their management. These guidelines set out a five-step process, providing a foundational framework for school administrators to better understand and respond to the risks that RAAC poses.

It is important that the risks posed by RAAC are investigated thoroughly (such as with a structural assessment conducted by a qualified provider) and quickly, with appropriate management and remediation strategies adopted to ensure the risks posed by RAAC are mitigated. Failure to do so puts staff and students alike, as well as schools and their reputations, at significant risk, as well as causing major disruption to the learning of students.

If you have further questions on this, or on any other related matters, please contact us on the details below. We will be glad to help.

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Key contact

Scott Mounfield

Partner

scott.mounfield@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)330 045 2813

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