Schools Health & Safety Update

Q. What is Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC)

A. RAAC is a type of concrete commonly used in schools and other public buildings from 1930-1990, though usage was most common between 1940s and 1960s.

It looks like standard concrete to the naked eye, but inside it is structured like honeycomb:

As a result, RAAC is weaker that standard density concrete, and more prone to damage from water and vibration. RAAC was intended to have a 30-40 year lifespan, but as successive Governments have failed to build enough new school buildings, its usage has extended to the point where critical failure is a realistic possibility.

Q. Why is this a problem?

A. RAAC is particularly problematic because it looks exactly like standard concrete from the outside. It's therefore extremely difficult to identify RAAC without specialist training. RAAC can be found in walls, ceilings and roofs, and usually only shows signs of damage just before it fails.

This first became apparent in 2018, when the roof of a primary school in Kent collapsed. Fortunately, this was at the weekend, so no injuries occurred.

Since then, a number of high-risk schools were identified by DFE and the devolved Governments in 2019 and 2020, then Covid hit, and the identification programme was effectively suspended. Union pressure forced DFE to restart their programme in 2021 and DFE have sent a survey to all schools in England, with the Scottish and Welsh Governments taking a similar approach. Around 90% of all schools have provided a response, and we are now seeing the results come into action.

Q. What do school leaders have to do?

A. DFE published initial guidance on RAAC in December 2022 (Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete: estates guidance - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)) which outlined a 5 stage process for the identification of RAAC and subsequent management:

1. Gathering information
2. Initial Assessment
3. Appointment of Specialist Engineer
4. Detailed Assessment
5. Management and Remediation Strategy.

The majority of schools appear to have concluded that RAAC is not present, but it is questionable whether this has been confirmed by a specialist engineer in all cases. DFE have contracted the majority of UK specialist RAAC engineers to perform inspection and assessment activities for them, at a cost of £6M for 600 inspections.

The response has allowed for the identification of 572 schools where RAAC is deemed likely to be present. DFE has so far investigated 196 schools, of which 65 contained RAAC and 24 required urgent action. This was followed by a report from the National Audit Office on 28th June, which identified that more than 700,000 pupils were studying in schools that require major rebuilding or refurbishment. The full report is extremely critical of DFE's management of the school estate.

Q. What can GMB Safety Reps and members do?

A. As RAAC cannot easily be identified without specialist knowledge, this is not a hazard than be included in inspections. Safety Reps must not attempt to identify RAAC themselves, and they must not try any method of disturbing the concrete, in case asbestos is present and fibres are released.

Safety reps should however request that all information on the presence of RAAC (or not) is shared with them, and they should demand evidence that the school leadership has completed the DFE survey process.

If you are working in a school that is affected, please contact your Branch or email us at schoolsteamlondon@gmb.org.uk

Q. What is GMB doing nationally?

A. GMB is part of a coalition of schools' unions that have been lobbying DFE to prioritize RAAC management. We were signatories to a joint letter to Education Secretary Gillian Keegan in February outlining our concerns and asking a number of key questions of DFE. We have subsequently met with DFE on a bi-monthly basis to receive updates and ask further questions.

GMB is also involved with lobbying the Labour Party as part of a TUC Working Group on the Built Environment.