

# SCHOOLS WEEK

A digital newspaper determined to get past the bluster and explain the facts.

Solutions:  
How schools are getting kids back in class

P11-12

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# RAAC AND RUIN

## THE WEEK THE TORIES' SCHOOL LEGACY CRUMBLED



School building special edition: Pages 4 - 9 and 21 -23

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SCHOOLS WEEK

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education week jobs

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# RAAC crisis is predictable consequence of Tories' chronic underfunding

The problem with being in power for so long – as the Conservatives have – is you run out of people to blame when things go wrong.

Education minister Gillian Keegan did try her best. But the disastrous attempt to scapegoat school leaders “sitting on their arses” backfired when many leaders sent warning letters had done all that was required of them months ago. It turns out her department actually just didn’t record it properly.

The RAAC crisis is solely the fault of the Conservative party. Michael Gove chose to scrap Labour’s ambitious programme that would have rebuilt every secondary school by this year.

While his reasons were sound (it was expensive and bureaucratic), the issue is the Conservatives waited years before replacing it and then did so with a much less ambitious scheme.

Capital funding has been slashed by nearly half in real terms since its peak in 2010.

While squeezed revenue funding for schools dominated headlines, buildings were quietly allowed to fall into disrepair.

Any capital cash that did become available had to be fought over by those with the highest need. It was spent on fixing things that had

already broken, rather than maintenance to stop them breaking in the first place.

Keegan made a politically unpopular decision to close schools. It may be that her hand was forced with more recent serious cases, but that was the right call and one her predecessors refused to make.

Prime minister Rishi Sunak was also the chancellor who seemingly had his fingers in his ears when the Department for Education was pleading for extra rebuilding cash, warning of a critical danger to life if not.

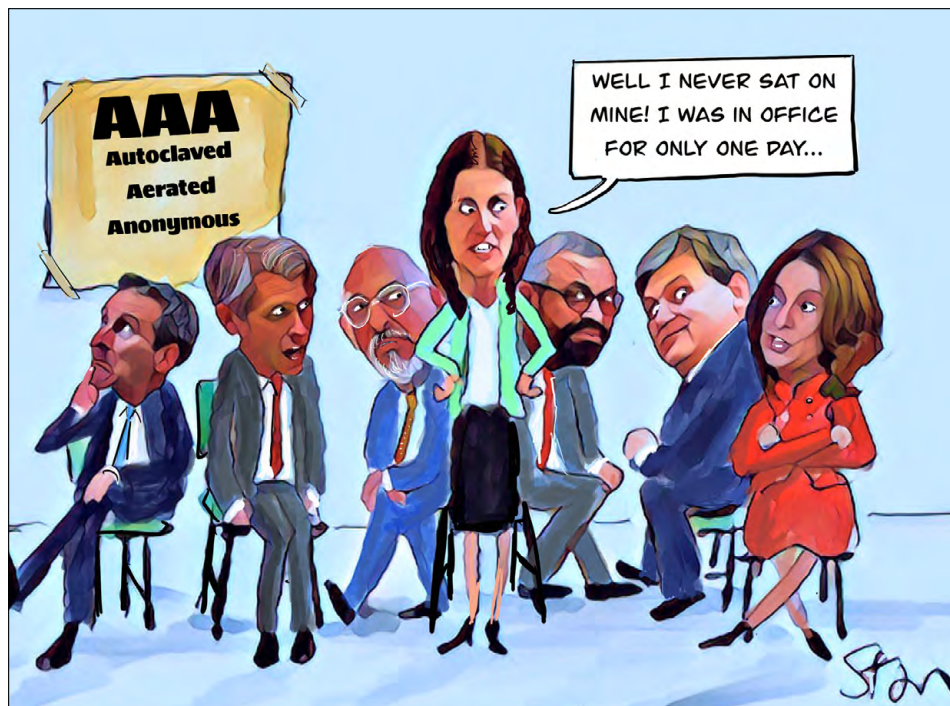
The chaos caused by emergency closures, the money spent on temporary accommodation and sticking-plaster fixes could all have been avoided.

Plus, there is no plan for properly fixing these buildings in the long term. And RAAC is just a glimpse into the dire condition of our country’s schools.

The Conservatives have done a lot right in education in their 13 years in office.

But this legacy will now be overshadowed by the image of children “cowering under steel props stopping the ceiling falling in on their heads”, as Labour’s Bridget Phillipson put it.

However, it will soon be her problem to solve. Let’s hope she has a solution.



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LONG READ: RACC

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# Conservatives' 'crumbly' concrete crisis causes classroom chaos

SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SAMANTHAJBOOTH

A minister has vowed to seek expert advice over school leaders' "grave concerns" that visual inspections required by government may not be enough to find hidden RAAC.

Senior DfE officials and ministers face being hauled in front of MPs next week to explain their "shambolic" handling of the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) crisis, which exploded last week.

The DfE said nearly 150 schools, with about 100,000 pupils, had confirmed RAAC as of last Wednesday, with dozens more emerging.

But the education secretary has remained defiant, despite intense criticism. Gillian Keegan went on the attack blaming "sensationalist" media coverage and telling schools to "get off their backsides" to complete RAAC questionnaires.

Academies minister Baroness Barran later apologised after councils and trusts were wrongly told they had failed to complete the survey.

Others were unable to provide information about RAAC presence – casting doubt on the accuracy of official figures.

Barran also vowed to look into concerns that more 'crumbly' concrete would not have been picked up by checks.

Meanwhile, heads are pleading for marquees and temporary classrooms as back-to-school week has been thrown into chaos.

Bridget Phillipson, Labour's shadow education secretary, said: "The defining image of 13 years of Conservative government is one of children cowering under steel props, there to stop the ceiling falling in on their heads."

## How the RAAC timebomb exploded

The sudden decision to close schools was triggered by three new cases that the department said it became aware of over the summer.

Previously, only schools with RAAC assessed as "high risk" had to close.

The first incident was a commercial setting, the second a failed plank at a school in a different country and the third a panel failure at an English school in late August.

In all cases, the RAAC had been



Bridget Phillipson



Gillian Keegan

considered non-critical and collapsed "without warning".

The DfE refuses to name these institutions or give exact dates of when they became aware as the cases were "under investigation".

However, *The Guardian* reported the second case was Queen Victoria School, a private boarding school in Scotland.

The newspaper claims the department sent health and safety officials to examine it in May, calling into question the government's assertions it only became aware of the issues over the summer.

Barran also told the House of Lords in July – two months later – that she was "absolutely clear" the DfE "is not aware of any child or member of staff being in a school that poses an imminent safety risk".

She is expected to be probed on the timeline of events at a special session of the education committee on September 19. Senior DfE officials are also likely to be recalled to the public accounts committee on Monday, which had closed its inquiry on school buildings over the summer.

## Back-to-school chaos

The last-minute closure decision left headteachers scrambling to draw up emergency plans.

Nearly a third had to delay the start of term or educate some pupils remotely.

Some heads handed over their own offices to convert into classrooms while waiting for news from the government on temporary teaching spaces.

The overflow carpark at



An example of propping in a hospital with RAAC

Farlingaye High in Suffolk will now house toilet blocks and eight temporary classrooms, with the first being constructed today. Eighteen classrooms, toilets and changing rooms at the school are cordoned off.

East Anglian Schools' Trust could fork out up to £300,000 in instalments over the next 12 months, with the start of term delayed.

The government said it will fund mitigation works to "remove any immediate risk", which could include propping up affected buildings.

It will also fund capital works such as installing temporary classrooms on site, but will not fund revenue costs – like bussing pupils to other

Continued on next page →

LONG READ: RACC

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schools.

“In terms of the process of getting the money, I haven’t a clue,” said Angelo Goduti, the trust’s chief executive.

Staff are being “creative” to find space inside the school, with the headteacher’s office set to be converted into a makeshift classroom.

Nick Hurn, boss of the Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust, said three of his schools in the north have been forced to close, with Durham University offering space free.

But he added: “If we have two double-decker buses with 160 kids [from one school] travelling to a different area, that’s soon going to rack up some costs.”

The South Suffolk Learning Trust needs 28 temporary classrooms to make up for lost space across three of its schools.

Sarah Skinner, its chief executive, has secured six for 12 weeks costing £125,000. But, so far, she has had “no information” about how to claim the cash back.

Keegan told MPs that the supply of temporary buildings has been increased with their installation “accelerated”. But so far, no information has been made publicly on how this will work.

Skinner said: “If they’re lined up and ready to go, as Ms Keegan said this week, I don’t know why I haven’t got a date and know how many I can have.”

‘Priority school’ confusion

Two headteachers at RAAC schools wrote to parents to say they are a “priority school” and have been bumped up the list for help.

Andy Perry, head at Myton School in Warwick, said its “DfE contact” confirmed “we are now a priority school, at the top of the list ... we are being tracked by some important people in government”.

Likewise, James Saunders, head at Honywood School in Essex, said the DfE and council has classed it as a “national priority school”.

However, the DfE told Schools Week it wasn’t a term it recognises – causing even more confusion.

Honywood is now fundraising to cover the costs of remote learning and temporary classrooms raising £2,000 so far.

It is among 53 Essex schools with RAAC, the hardest-hit area.

Councillor Carlo Guglielmi said Essex was the “highest populated area” in the country after London was ruined during the Second World War, so many new schools had to be built during the

time RAAC was in use.

Keegan shrugs off criticism

Keegan came under fire this week for telling schools to “get off their backside” and fill in a questionnaire on RAAC that has been live since last March.

But it then emerged some responsible bodies were wrongly told they had failed to complete the questionnaire.

Other trusts were unable to provide updated information about the press once of RAAC, while others had to tell the DfE they were missing from the official list.

School leaders have also been told there is a 48-hour lag between uploading RAAC data and feeding into DfE lists.

During a meeting on Wednesday with more than 400 members of the Confederation of School Trusts, Barran offered an “unreserved apology” for the issues and the “tone” of a letter that seemed to threaten naming and shaming those who had not responded to the survey.

She also gave an “assurance” that trusts and councils deemed not to have completed the questionnaire “will not be named publicly”.

Keegan has been heavily criticised, including by traditionally right-leaning newspapers. The Sun reported “fury” at the DfE spending £34 million on refurbishing its own offices, while The Mirror revealed the DfE handed a £1 million for a IT contract to a company Keegan’s husband is a director of. The money came from its rebuilding fund.

But the education secretary said others had “sat on their arse” as she and the department had been doing a “f\*\*\*ing good job”.

Defending her record in the Commons, Keegan said she was “very serious” about getting rid of RAAC.

The number of surveying companies has increased from three to eight to try and get through all suspected RAAC cases in the next two weeks.

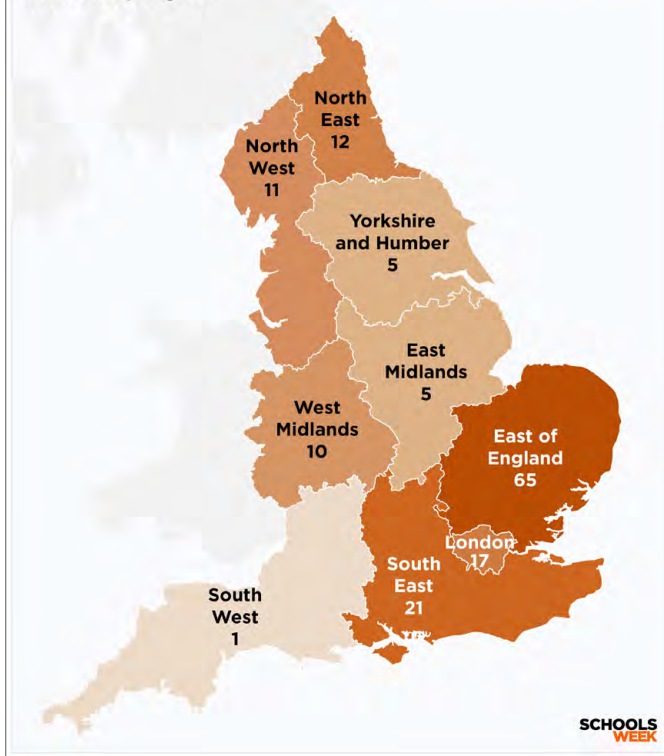
‘Concern’ over surveys

Barran has also agreed to “seek expert advice” about “grave concerns” that visual inspections of schools may not be enough to find concealed RAAC.

Previous guidance encouraged an initial “visual

Number of confirmed RAAC schools by region

Source: Department for Education data



inspection” by “someone who has responsibility for building or estate management as well as the day-to-day running of the school”.

But “depending on experience, advice may be required from a building professional”.

However it was only once RAAC was “suspected or identified” that schools were recommended to appoint a specialist structural engineering consultant, and only at stage four of the process was an “intrusive” investigation recommended.

Updated guidance last week – when the government escalated its response – also recommends an initial visual inspection, but states that if responsible bodies were still “unsure” after that process, they should appoint an expert.

Leora Cruddas, the chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, said many confederation members were concerned about the reliability of the DfE guidance and were questioning whether they could rely on it.

In response, Barran had “offered to take this issue away and seek expert advice. I have asked for the DfE’s assessment or risk and reassurance on this matter as soon as possible”.

Two MPs also raised the issue of asbestos, including fears RAAC was hiding behind the lethal material.

In response, Nick Gibb, the schools minister, said all schools had an asbestos register and the substance would be removed if needed for RAAC mitigation works.

# Everything you need (and possibly don't want) to know...

## 1. How many schools are at risk of collapse?

The government finally published an official list on Wednesday showing 147 schools educating about 100,000 children have confirmed RAAC.

Almost a third of the 147 have had to delay the start of term or educate some pupils remotely. Fifty-three are in Essex.

Nine schools initially suspected of being affected were taken off the list after visits from government surveyors.

The list only includes schools as of August 30 (last Wednesday). Many schools that have closed because of RAAC since then will not be included.

## 2. Why have ministers suddenly decided to shut schools?

RAAC has been known about for years. Last September, the Office for Government Property (OGP) issued a safety briefing notice to all property leaders warning that RAAC was "life expired and liable to collapse".

Government-commissioned structural engineers have been visiting schools for the past year to assess whether they contain RAAC. Those that did were given a rating from "critical" to "low risk".

But the government said over the summer it learned of a "small number of cases" where RAAC considered non-critical had "failed" without warning. This included education and other buildings.

The DfE says it is now "taking a cautious approach to prioritise safety whilst minimising the disruption to learning".

## 3. Should pupils learn at home if schools close?

In exceptional circumstances where RAAC disruption has meant leaders need to "temporarily prioritise" face-to-face lessons, leaders should give priority to vulnerable pupils, the children of critical workers and those about to sit exams, the department said.

Remote learning "should only ever be considered as a last resort and for a short period of time where the alternative would be no education provision".

Families of pupils in specialist provision will likely face "additional care issues" if pupils had to be temporarily educated at home.



"It is essential that this is carefully considered, and, where relevant, appropriate support arrangements are made in consultation with local children's social care teams."

Ministers are "working closely" with Ofsted to share information and make sure it is taken "into account" in scheduling inspections.

If a school is restricting attendance, or has substantial disruption due to RAAC, and have been notified of an inspection, it can contact the lead inspector and discuss deferral options.

## 4. Who will fund the repair work?

School buildings must close once a government surveyor has confirmed the presence of RAAC.

The government has pledged to fund any capital elements related to mitigation works to "remove any immediate risk", which could include propping up affected buildings.

Government guidance says any revenue costs associated with mitigation – for instance bussing pupils to other school sites – will not be covered. This will have to be funded by the responsible body (council or academy trust).

There has been some confusion about who will fund temporary buildings after government guidance changed and muddled the issue.

Officials say any temporary buildings on school sites are classed as capital, so will be funded. But renting off-site premises – such

as a local community centre – will not count. The government expects few schools to have to educate pupils off site.

However, guidance states schools that have "difficulty" funding the extra costs can discuss it with their caseworker or the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

The presence of asbestos near RAAC in some schools has prompted concerns about how remedial work will be carried out.

But the government said this week that "if asbestos needs to be removed to put in place RAAC mitigation works, it will be removed".

## 5. What happens next?

The government says it will update the list of affected schools in the next fortnight, but unions want this to happen sooner.

Schools that have not yet responded to a DfE questionnaire – estimated at about 1,100 settings at the beginning of the week – have been urged to do so.

Of those that did respond and have suspected RAAC, 450 were still waiting for government assessors to visit, Gillian Keegan said on Monday.

These visits will be completed by next Friday. The number of DfE-commissioned building surveyors has been increased to eight from three and all affected schools have been assigned a caseworker from the DfE.

## INVESTIGATION: RAAC

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# Revealed: The RAAC school rebuilds the Tories scrapped

FREDDIE WHITTAKER &amp; SAMANTHA BOOTH

@SCHOOLSWEEK

EXCLUSIVE

The rebuilds of at least 16 secondary schools with RAAC were scrapped when the Conservatives came to power 14 years ago, a *Schools Week* investigation suggests.

The government also snubbed bids from 10 schools for Boris Johnson's flagship new rebuilding scheme – schools since confirmed to have the “crumbly” concrete.

“The decisions taken by the Conservatives, including the prime minister, have led us to the chaos families are experiencing up and down this country today,” said Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary.

“The chickens have come home to roost. It is time for the prime minister and this shambolic Conservative government to take responsibility for the mess they have made and get a grip of this crisis.”

In 2010 then education secretary Michael Gove canned Labour's major £55 billion Building Schools for the Future (BSF), halting 735 rebuilds.

## RAAC fear closes 19 secondaries

*Schools Week* analysis of public documents suggests as many as 19 secondaries have had to close because they have RAAC.

None was selected for rebuilds under the government's subsequent scaled-down priority school building programme (PSBP), public documents suggest, although one was recently selected for the new rebuilding scheme.

Pupils at Thurstable School Sports College and Sixth Form Centre in Essex, praised by Ofsted in 2011 for minimising “the impact of a range of adverse problems... for example the loss of Building Schools for the Future funding”, were this week learning remotely as the school confirmed RAAC.

Grove also scrapped Wood Green Academy's BSF project, with the Midlands school now forced to close classrooms.

James Topham, its head, told parents that it was “not the start to the new academic year that we would wish for”.

Gillian Keegan, the education secretary, stood by Gove's decision, telling MPs on Monday the “wacky warehouse” schools built under BSF



Michael Gove

“cost a fortune and then cost millions to put right afterwards”.

## ‘It is an embarrassment’

Johnson unveiled a new rebuilding scheme in 2021, vowing that 500 schools would be rebuilt over the following decade. Applications were received from more than 1,100 schools.

However, almost 800 were rejected, including 10 now identified as having RAAC. Four of the 10 also had their BSF projects canned.

Myton School in Warwick was rejected for a rebuild last year. In a letter to parents, seen by *Schools Week*, head Andy Perry said the “fact that the DfE has directed us to close the block that it refused to rebuild in December 2022, declaring it structurally sound, is embarrassing”.

The school has lost a third of its teaching space, and in the short term will rotate attendance between year groups, with five on site and two remote learning each day.

He said that this year “was going to be the start of a new improvement plan that we had designed on the back of our successful Ofsted, some good exam results and following quite a lot of reorganisation to improve behaviour and engagement.”

“What is important is that it is still these things, despite the bombshell dropped on us last Friday. So whilst this is not the start we wanted, it will be the year we want, your kids will get the deal from us you expect, and it will

be successful. And one way or another we'll get a new building out of it.”

## Concerns over future of promised rebuilds

Scalby School in Scarborough was built in 1942 and is now “past its sell-by date”, according to Michael McCluskie, deputy chief executive of the Coast and Vale Learning Trust. The school was rejected for a full rebuild on a new site under the current rebuilding programme.

About 90 support posts were installed to shore up the school, and the trust was planning more work this term before the DfE told it to partially close.

McCluskie said he felt the school had “slipped through the net in terms of priority”.

The government also faces questions about whether projects already announced under the current rebuilding scheme will now be postponed.

Keegan said she believed rebuilds “will still be going ahead if they have already been approved”.

But she said projects would be “based on condition and need” and pledged to tell MPs whether projects in their areas would be “prioritised”.

The DfE said it was on track to rebuild 500 schools by 2030 – despite just four being completed so far. The rebuilding scheme was in its “initial stages” and there would be “an increase in the number of projects” starting construction next year.

INVESTIGATION : SCHOOL BUILDINGS

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# Faults (and leaks) force two schools to close every day

JACK DYSON

@JACKYDYS

EXCLUSIVE

Collapsed ceilings, “flying debris” from damaged roofs and overflowing sewage are some of the reasons behind thousands of emergency school closures since 2018.

A *Schools Week* investigation found nearly two schools on average close each day because of issues that include faulty buildings, utility failures and floods.

James Bowen, the assistant general secretary at the school leaders’ union NAHT, said: “This enormous figure shows that RAAC is just one symptom of the far wider, and systemic issue of a disintegrating school estate.”

Forty-eight of the 103 councils that responded to a freedom of information request said they kept details of emergency school closures.

Since 2018, headteachers in those areas decided to fully or partially shut almost 1,250 times because of storm damage, utility issues, structural problems, floods, gas leaks, boiler faults, pests or ceiling collapses.

It means 1.9 closures every day if the data is extrapolated nationally.

The figures are also likely to underplay the issue as it appears there is no statutory duty for schools to report such closures to councils.

Hazlehurst Primary School in Bury shut in June 2023 after “two classroom ceilings collapsed due to [a] rainwater leak”.

In September 2020, Ermysted’s Grammar in Skipton sealed off a staircase “for a few days” following a ceiling collapse.

A spokesman for the school stressed “a small area of ceiling boards and plasterwork came down as a result of historic water damage and inadequate fixings” before the start of that year’s autumn term. It was nothing to do with RAAC.

The councils also recorded three other “ceiling collapses” – two at primaries in Kirklees and one in North Yorkshire.

Meanwhile, a school in Leicestershire partially closed following a “central heating boiler fault” that emitted “carbon monoxide fumes” into a key stage 2 area.

Another in Norfolk reported in October 2019 a “persistent rain... caused sewage water to flood in the school building and on the school site”.

## School building woes much bigger than just RAAC

**24,000** school buildings (38% of the total) beyond their design life

**700,000** pupils learning in a run-down school requiring major rebuild

**‘Critical – very likely’:**  
DfE’s own assessment of a school collapsing

**72%** of schools snubbed for rebuilds under ‘transformative’ new scheme

And in a log released by Bradford Council, a primary detailed how its site was “too dangerous to open due to flying debris” from a damaged roof.

A damning National Audit Office report published in June noted about 24,000 school buildings – representing 38 per cent of the Department for Education estate – are thought to be “beyond their estimated initial design life”.

Among them are 13,800 “system-built” blocks – which are made from concrete, steel and timber, rather than brick and stone. These were built at speed between 1940 and 1980 with an initial design life of just 30 to 40 years.

It said ministers have for the past two years “recognised the significant safety risk across the school estate”. The department’s corporate risk register shows as “critical and very likely” the risk that building collapse or failure could cause death or injury.

NAO auditor-general Gareth Davies, who penned the report, said the estate’s “overall condition is declining” following “years of underinvestment”.

This resulted in “about 700,000 pupils” having to learn in “a school that the responsible body or DfE believes needs major rebuilding or refurbishment”.

Munira Wilson, the Lib Dem’s education spokesperson, said it was “no wonder so many schools shut at short notice, when headteachers have to put off repairs to

balance the books.

“The crumbling concrete crisis is just the tip of the iceberg. The government’s penny-pinching tactics are coming back to bite.”

The figures show utility issues accounted for more than 68 per cent of the emergency closures, while collapses and pest infestations were responsible for 0.5 per cent.

In responses to our FOI request, 55 councils said they did not have data on emergency school closures, with Medway saying there was “no requirement for non-maintained schools to report emergency closures to the local authority”.

Government advice published in the good estate management for schools says leaders should “communicate with parents, carers and other stakeholders” in the event of a premises-related emergency.

They should also “contact the necessary statutory bodies” – such as fire services and the health and safety executive – “to ensure the measures being taken are appropriate”, as well as their “organisations”, including trustees and diocese.

Bowen added each closure would “inevitably have an impact upon children and families, despite the best efforts of school leaders and staff.

“It reinforces our calls for the government to commit to an ambitious, long-term, school rebuilding strategy to ensure every pupil is taught in a building that is safe.”

The DfE has been approached for comment.



Munira Wilson



## INVESTIGATION : SCHOOL BUILDINGS

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## New special schools languish as contractors flounder

AMY WALKER

@AMYRWALKER

EXCLUSIVE

The DfE is yet to find construction companies for four new special schools after two contracted to do the work collapsed, one 18 months ago.

Caledonian Modular fell into administration in April 2022. It emerged last month three schools built by the company had to close, with some delaying the start of term while they found alternative classrooms.

Surveyors expressed fears that the sites at Haygrove School in Somerset, Sir Frederick Gibberd College in Essex, and Buckton Fields Primary School in Northampton would not be able to withstand “very high winds or significant snowfall”.

Two other schools in which work was started in 2021 – Newquay Primary Academy and Launceston Primary Academy in Cornwall – were demolished in spring after the government identified “defects”.

Kier Construction has been appointed to rebuild Newquay. Its pupils are currently educated in “adapted” accommodation at Newquay Sports Centre.

But the DfE is yet confirm if a new contractor has been appointed to rebuild Launceston.

Contracts for two special schools contracted to Caledonian – Greenwell Academy in Essex and River Tees Academy Grangetown in Middlesbrough – are also yet to be awarded to another company.

Meanwhile, work at two other special schools contracted to Eco Modular, – which has also collapsed – are still to be retendered.

Schools Week last year revealed a crises in special school places, with more than half of the schools having more pupils on roll than the number commissioned by their council.

It is also likely to heap further pressure on the DfE at a time when it is facing widespread criticism over its response to the RAAC crisis.

Munira Wilson, the Lib Dem’s education spokesperson, said: “When crumbling classrooms nationwide are being shut, it is beyond belief that the government can’t even finish building the new schools that it has promised.”

Caledonian is understood to have been commissioned for work at 10 school sites, under contracts totalling more than £66 million.



Haygrove School

That included a contract worth just over £544,000 for construction at Greenwell, which was due to open in a permanent building this month.

Dr Jonty Clark, chief executive of The Beckmead Trust – which runs Greenwell – said there were 16 pupils at its temporary site at Beckmead Moundwood Academy. It was due to have 64 on roll.

According to contracts published this year, the DfE has paid out just over £682,000 to Portakabin for temporary buildings.

It is now hoped the academy will move to a permanent site in September 2025, though client engagement meetings are still taking place.

“One of the difficulties in starting with a school on slow fill is...you’ve only got a certain amount of income. So trying to provide an adequate curriculum across the school for everybody is quite challenging,” Clark said.

But the trust had felt “very supported” by the DfE.

Rivers Tees Academy was due to open on its permanent site for 100 pupils last September, but is instead educating 32 in temporary accommodation. Its new building is set to be ready for March next year.

However, Christina Jones, chief executive of the River Tees Multi-Academy Trust, said the building was still “going through tender again”.

The DfE has not said how much Caledonian Modular has received and whether it recovered

any of the cash.

It has launched an investigation, but has yet to clarify its scope. The Modular and Portable Building Association (MPBA) said the situation was “not indicative of our sector”.

Eco Modular, the second company contracted under the government’s £3 billion offsite schools framework – where buildings are part-made elsewhere and then assembled on-site, fell into administration in March this year.

It was awarded an £8.1 million contract to build The Flagship School, another Beckmead special school in East Sussex, which was due to open last September.

Clark said about 90 per cent of the work had been finished. Walker Construction has been given £291,000 for temporary buildings at the site.

The school is open to 58 pupils, as opposed to the intended 65, while the Eco Modular construction is currently off-limits for education.

“Nobody’s going to come in and pick up a marginless building and have that level of liability. It’s the perfect storm really,” Clark said.

Tim Warneford, an academy funding consultant, said delays in finding new contractors could partly be due to many filling their order books “long in advance”.

Brexit-related labour shortages and rises in the cost of materials could also put companies off builds with limited profit margins.

The DfE did not respond to a request for comment.

Make  $t$  the subject of the formula  $k = 2(t+3)$

$$k(t-3) = 2(t+3)$$

$$kt - 3k = 2t + 6$$



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# How the hubs are tackling soaring absences

**SAMANTHA BOOTH**

@SAMANTHAJBOOTH

Academy trust attendance hubs are going beyond the school gates in their push to get children back in the classroom. Samantha Booth reports

One in five pupils was “persistently” absent last year, a figure that is nearly double the pre-Covid norm.

The government last year named nine attendance hubs, all in academy trusts, to help 600 schools struggling to cut these absences. So what solutions have these trusts found?

## ‘Forensic data’ is key ...

Unity Schools Partnership has two schools in the attendance scheme – Abbots Green Primary Academy, in Suffolk, and St Edward’s Church of England secondary, in Essex.

Nick Froy, its education director, said it was “absolutely granular” with data – trying to spot patterns between siblings, friendship groups and at certain times of the year, for instance around mock exams.

“We have really quite sophisticated and complex spreadsheets that track attendance of every child in every school week by week,” he said. “And in some cases, day by day, lesson by lesson.”

Rivers Tees academies, an alternative provision trust attendance hub, is spending £5,000 a year to get a visual “heat map”, showing patterns of attendance for each pupil.

Christina Jones, its chief executive officer, said it was “helpful to see it visually” as it gave an “instant picture of any patterns in their attendance”.

At North Shore Academy, part of NET which was the original attendance hub, children who were “critically absent” – attendance below 20 per cent – were now visited by safeguarding and wellbeing officers rather than attendance officers.

If the child was not open to a social care route, the officer would make an early help referral.



We also know that you can have a significant effect on {Student Name} absences this academic year and we would really appreciate your help and support ensuring that {Student Name} comes to school as much as possible so that they can get the best possible outcomes. We want to work with you to achieve this – please call or come in and meet {Student Name} class teacher or tutor if there is anything we can do to help.

**TONED DOWN:** Unity trust is using more positive language in attendance letters to parents

## ... but schools need to go ‘extra mile’

Jones said the attendance officers at her trust, which has schools in some of the most deprived areas of the north east, have worked with local charities and asked the staff team for clothing.

Research by the National Foundation for Educational Research suggests more than 95 per cent of mainstream schools provided uniform and clothing to pupils.

“We have come across families that have a house, but no beds, no curtains, no bedding – so it’s very difficult to get up and be prepared for school when you are living in these situations,” Jones said.

But going the “extra mile” and “doing everything we can to help” is building strong relationships with families.

A report by the School Home Support charity

found poor housing was a major barrier to school attendance, with a 73 per cent rise since last year in children concerned about where they lived.

“There are no quick fixes or silver bullets,” Rachel Kenningham, its head of policy, said.

“You need to build trust with the family and find out what’s going on at home, to strengthen that bridge. Improving attendance takes time.”

The charity bases practitioners in schools and works with families to find the underlying cause of absenteeism. But it costs about £1,000 to support a family, mainly funded by grants.

Schools Week investigations have revealed how schools are becoming the new frontline as social care resources dwindle.

Kate Richardson, education director at Cabot Learning Foundation, said it was now “reaching beyond the school gates” to maintain relationships

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built from visiting homes during the pandemic.

This includes running foodbanks and picking up children if they could not get into school.

“Trusted” staff members – usually teaching assistants – would also call children before the start of each term, such as inset days, to try and quell any back-to-school nerves.

Its attendance hub, Wallscourt Farm Academy, in Bristol, had attendance of 95.3 per cent, above the national average of 94 per cent for primaries.

Froy said some Unity schools had scrapped non-uniform days after it noticed increased absence amongst disadvantaged pupils because of the “peer pressure to be in the right set of trainers and the fact it’s the £2 for the privilege of doing so”.

**Positive language in letters home**

Unity has also overhauled the way it communicates with parents – changing both the tone of letters and how often they’re sent.

Froy looked at research that suggested implied parental failure could lead to further parental disengagement.

Letters now said schools “would really appreciate” parents’ “help and support”, adding: “We want to work with you to achieve this.”

The trust has moved away from fixed-penalty notices – apart from term-time holidays – and only use punitive measures as a last resort.

“There’s a realisation that the chances of making a difference to a child’s attendance actually deteriorate once you start going to the legal section,” Froy said.

In new attendance guidance for schools this week, the DfE suggested “adopting positive, future-focused messaging” with parents and “balancing a firm, factual tone with empathy”.

Meridian Trust has two attendance hubs, Bar Hill Community Primary School and Ely College, in Cambridgeshire.

Sharon Templeman, its attendance and welfare leader, trains staff on how to use positive language and be “open-minded” about the underlying causes of absenteeism. Staff have also had training on how trauma could impact attendance.

Templeman also piloted teaching mindfulness to small groups of year 10 and 11 girls. An evaluation was ongoing.

Sharon Templeman



Dame Rachel de Souza

## ‘September is a critical moment, a chance for a reset’

but she reported “a big difference in the way they were speaking and reframing their thoughts”.

Templeman said the trust tried to differentiate between physical and mental illness in its tracking sheets and had seen a rise in “low-level anxiety”.

Although the trust’s approach was time intensive, she said the key was to target the right children for each school “so it’s not just one message for all of our 30 schools”.

Chris Witty, the chief medical officer, this week said being in the classroom could often alleviate the underlying issues of mild or moderate anxiety.

“A prolonged period of absence is likely to heighten a child’s anxiety about attending in the future, rather than reduce it.”

**‘September is critical moment’**

New guidance from the Royal College of General Practitioners advises its members to “be alert to when it’s better to encourage a child to attend school rather than take time off”.

GPs should “reassure and have sensitive conversations with pupils and parents about anxiety” and “encourage parents to speak to school staff about any worries their child may have”.

Whitty added that it was “usually appropriate” for parents to send children into school with a minor cough, runny nose or sore throat. However, they should be kept at home if they had a temperature over 38degC.

Dame Rachel de Souza, the children’s commissioner, has called on other agencies to help schools improve attendance.

Writing for *Schools Week*, she has called for a national roll-out of the attendance mentors’ programme, in which persistently absent youngsters and their families in five council areas get one-to-one support.

She also wants the “working together to improve school attendance” guidance, published last year, to become statutory this term.

The DfE said last year that it would become statutory “when parliamentary time allows” but no sooner than this month.

Analysis by FFT Datalab found pupils who missed 10 per cent of sessions were between three and four times more likely to have missed school at the start of the year, compared with better attendees.

“September is a critical moment,” de Souza said. “It’s our chance for a system reset and to shift the dial on school attendance.”

See Dame Rachel de Souza’s piece on page 26 →

# Oliver sets out his priorities for Ofsted

FREDDIE WHITTAKER & AMY WALKER

@SCHOOLSWEEK

Sir Martyn Oliver, the government's pick as the next Ofsted chief inspector, faced his pre-appointment hearing in front of the education committee on Tuesday. The Outwood Grange Academies Trust chief executive is expected to be ratified by the committee today, but the government can appoint him either way.

Here's what we learned about the future direction of the inspectorate ...

## 1. Three priorities (but no revolution)

Oliver told MPs "the last thing the system needs right now ... is a revolution", but outlined three things he wanted to achieve.

The first was a "big listen" to the sectors that Ofsted inspected as the watchdog faced accusations of being "combative or cold".

Highlighting his experience turning around some of the country's most difficult schools, he added: "I've walked the walk...There is a series of expertise and experience that I can bring to the system and say, 'I know what it's like to do this. I can talk to you with empathy'."

His second priority was to get "more leaders" involved in inspections (see more in story on next page).

The third, which he was "perhaps the most keen on", was to "look holistically" at how disadvantaged children were supported by all services in each local authority.

"I was delighted that in the pandemic ... one of the things that did change is that at last this seeming divide between multi-academy trusts and local authorities really broke down. The information was just flowing one to the other.

"We've got to build upon that now and say we need to get all agents, all actors, working for all of the children, especially the most vulnerable. I want to report in a different way as well as give you the sectional headings against those services as they are right now."



Sir Martyn Oliver

## 2. Pledge to 'look at' one-word judgments

Quizzed about the reliability of the current suite of four single-phrase judgments, amid heightened criticism of the inspectorate after the death of headteacher Ruth Perry, Oliver said: "I do think it needs looking at ... is there a sense of trust in the system that you can move from one judgment to the other?"

"How can you explain that? I've got some thoughts on it, but they are quite rightly formative at this stage and I want to actually talk to the experts who are delivering on the ground and have been doing it for years."

## 3. Framework criticism toned down, but outcome concerns linger

Oliver was one of a number of trust bosses who in 2020 criticised Ofsted's new inspection framework, which placed a greater emphasis on the quality of education and less focus on pupil outcomes.

But he was far more complimentary on Tuesday, saying Amanda Spielman, the current chief inspector, "should be hugely

congratulated for forcing the substance of education front and centre".

However, his concerns over "consistency" remained, and he said pupil outcomes were also "important".

"It's difficult to explain how some schools had a 'good' quality of education and some of the best outcomes in the country and it's difficult to explain how you get some of the worst outcomes in the country getting a 'good' inspection."

A *Schools Week* investigation in January found Ofsted rated a school in which pupils achieved a third of a grade lower than expected 'outstanding', while schools in which youngsters scored a full grade more had lost their top grade.

But Oliver said the "beauty" of the framework was that "coming out of a post-Covid era, it would be hard to be in a situation where it says 'outcomes = Ofsted grade'. That wouldn't do anyone any favours at the moment."

## 4. Ofsted attendance review 'right now'

Recent statistics showed that one in five pupils were "persistently" absent last year,

Continued on next page →

NEWS: OFSTED

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with a widening attendance gap between poorer children and their better-off peers.

Oliver said that "right now I desperately need Ofsted to do a thematic dive into attendance...We need to go out and see the best practice."

This should include information on how other schools improve attendance, such as which staff they employ and how much they were paid.

"That's what heads need. They don't just need a bunch of airy-fairy 'this is what you could do'."

**5. MAT inspections 'inevitable'**

Spielman has repeatedly called for inspections of multi-academy trusts, something Labour has pledged to introduce.

Oliver said it was "inevitable ...we need to look at how Ofsted can inspect groups, and I don't just mean multi-academy trusts".

"I could mean the same when it comes to groups who own different care homes. I think the landscape is changing and Ofsted must change with the landscape."

**6. King in the north**

Oliver revealed he had asked the Ofsted board for his terms and conditions to state his base would be in the north of England. The inspectorate has offices in Manchester and York.

"The board has already intimated that that's something it is seriously going to consider. I think that's a really important message we can pass out to the system."



**7. 'Off-rolling troubles me greatly'**

While some parents removed their children for elective home education for the "right reasons", he knew there was "off-rolling taking place in the system".

He said this was a "sackable offence" for his heads, adding it was "an area where Ofsted can shine the light".

"It troubles me that there are children who could be bouncing about from one LA to another, from one service provider to another."

Some children attended unregistered provision full-time, which is illegal. He had also heard about unregistered settings creating "a second company, so for one day they can be in one organisation and then another day they're in another organisation".

**8. Inspections should consider EHCP rate**

Oliver said he was "troubled" by variations between some schools in the rate of pupils with education, health and care plans. One of his schools had "seven times the number of EHCP students than schools around it".

"What we can do is say when we're inspecting ... what is the EHCP percentage? Is there a reason?"

For example, he said where a council was not issuing EHCPs soon enough, schools might have many SEND-identified children but without the plans, which bring with them statutory responsibilities and extra funding.

"Again, can we join all of this up once and for all in this country. Let's stop just saying 'it's the school, it's the local authority' because there are great people working in these institutions."

FREDDIE WHITTAKER | @FCDWHITTAKER

'No child is ever written-off in my schools'

The incoming Ofsted chief defended his trust's record on exclusions, suspensions and isolation, saying "zero-tolerance is a term I don't understand".

Outwood Grange Academies Trust turns around some of the country's most challenging schools, many of which are now rated 'outstanding'.

But *Schools Week* revealed in 2019 how as many as half of pupils in some of its schools were placed in internal isolation.

Challenged on this finding by MPs, Oliver insisted "it's not isolation, it's a reflection

room. Students are never isolated. They're working in there with pastoral experts. No child is ever written-off.

"Zero-tolerance is a term I don't understand, I don't recognise, I don't believe anyone recognises. I have zero tolerance for bad behaviour that disrupts children's education."

Ofsted has criticised the levels of suspensions at some OGAT schools. The trust has some of the highest suspension rates nationally.

But Oliver said it was working in "some of

the most difficult and broken schools in the system".

"You go into a school like that, and you work with them, and after just one year you double their results. These are children that you are giving ... a much greater chance of succeeding in their life."

Suspensions in Outwood were "actually very short", he said, averaging a day and a half. "And our figures on permanent exclusions are lower than most in the areas in which we work."

## INVESTIGATION: OFSTED

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## Trust leaders more likely to work part-time for Ofsted

AMY WALKER  
@AMYRWALKER

EXCLUSIVE

Leaders working in academy trusts are more likely to be Ofsted inspectors than their maintained school peers, analysis suggests, after the watchdog was forced into revealing figures for the first time.

It comes as Sir Martyn Oliver, the incoming chief inspector, has pledged to look at getting more sector leaders involved in inspections. This includes allowing Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) to work part-time in other roles.

Ofsted has about 300 full-time school HMIs and about 900 additional Ofsted inspectors (OIs) who work part-time alongside their main jobs, mostly in education.

Ofsted lists OIs on its website, but does not publish information on where they work.

Last October, a series of "aide memoires" – or crib sheets – given to inspectors with inside information on what to look for in inspections were leaked online.

It led to accusations that schools with access to the sheets could have an unfair advantage, but Ofsted snubbed calls to publish the information and refused a freedom of information request from *Schools Week* to release the home institutions of its OIs.

The watchdog was concerned it would lead to individuals being "targeted to dissuade" them from the inspectorate or allow "a small number of motivated" people "to place unwarranted pressure" on them or their employers.

However, the Information Commissioner's Office ordered Ofsted to release the information after we appealed, stating there was "legitimate interest" and it was already simple to find an inspector's employer by using the Internet to search for their name.

The resulting list of 762 inspectors, which was accurate as of October last year when we first asked for the information, included either the name of a school, trust, council or sometimes just the name of a region.

We were able to identify the exact school, trust or council for nearly four in five of the inspectors on the list.

Our analysis showed 65 per cent work for academies, despite just 42 per cent of schools nationally being academised.



Thirty-one per cent of inspectors working for trusts were employed by one with 15 or more schools, compared with 34 per cent of academies nationally in a trust of that size.

This analysis was corroborated by Ofsted, which provided us with updated analysis in August of its current 900 additional inspectors.

The inspectorate said there was roughly an equal split between primary and secondary among the academy inspectors. However, the 30 per cent of council-maintained inspectors were predominantly from primary schools.

Ofsted was unable to reliably say what the home institution was for 5 per cent of the workforce.

Additionally, our analysis suggests 8 per cent of OIs work in special schools, which make up 4 per cent of the schools nationally.

Ofsted said it did not operate quotas and applications were judged on their "merits". All inspectors were "given the same training".

Julie Price-Grimshaw, a former HMI and frequent critic of the watchdog, said schools with inspectors felt they had an advantage "because they know what Ofsted's looking for".

Steve Rollett, the deputy chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts, said it was "good" Ofsted's workforce included trust leaders.

"We know how many academies serve disadvantaged communities ... it is vital that Ofsted's inspection workforce includes leaders who have this experience and perspective."

Eleven of the regional directors or headteachers at United Learning, the country's largest trust with 83 schools, also worked as inspectors.

A spokesperson said that "practising as an inspector provides an opportunity for colleagues to see practice in other schools and look critically



at what works well and what doesn't.

"The high-quality professional conversations that should happen between inspectors and school leaders during an inspection should be mutually beneficial."

Ark Schools, which runs 39 academies, said having three serving OIs "has been very helpful in our school improvement endeavours".

A number of other large trusts did not respond to a request for comment, including Delta, Oasis and Ormiston who all had five inspectors, according to our list.

The Kemnal Academies Trust and Greenwood Academies Trust employed three inspectors, while REAch2 and Academies Enterprise Trust employed two.

Speaking to MPs, Oliver made a "direct plea to all of the professional bodies, to the trade unions, to the headteachers and leaders ... how can we involve you in a far greater aspect as the Ofsted inspectors and His Majesty's Inspectors in the future?"

He said some trusts were advertising for former HMIs and "that means often we're losing all of this talent. Is there a way in which – many institutions are having to look at flexible working – does Ofsted need to embrace that?"

NEWS

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# DfE hopes £1.2m contract will boost academy trustee recruitment

**FREDDIE WHITTAKER**

@FCDWHITTAKER

EXCLUSIVE

The government is planning to spend £1.2 million in a bid to recruit trustees to parachute into failing academies, as a poll suggests trusts are finding it harder to recruit.

Schools Week revealed earlier this year how the Department for Education was considering effectively reviving the academy ambassadors' scheme, but with a focus on trusts in the greatest difficulty.

The previous trustee recruitment programme, run by the New Schools Network (NSN), allowed any trust to apply for free support to find business leaders to join its board.

But the programme was derailed when the network closed last year after losing its separate free school support contract.

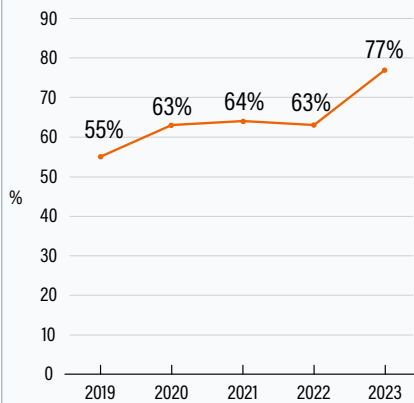
A tender published by the DfE this week states that the new scheme will be open to trusts "the department is working with to drive improvement".

Trustees joining such boards "will need to be able to deliver support effectively and at pace". The government is therefore looking for a provider "who will be able to offer a high-quality onboarding support to candidates".

It comes after a survey by the National Governance Association found the proportion of governors and trustees having difficulty recruiting new colleagues soared in the past year from 63 to 77 per cent.

Emma Knights, the association's chief

## Governors reporting difficulty recruiting to their boards



Source: National Governance Association

executive, said England more widely had "seen a falling-off of volunteering during and since the pandemic as people reconsider the priorities in their life. We think this is applying to school governors and academy trustees too.

"Many people also simply don't know this is an opportunity available to them."

In the tender, which is for a two-year contract with an option to extend to three, said the "vast majority" of trusts were "well-governed by their boards whose responsibility it is, with their members, to recruit a sufficient cadre of high-quality trustees".

They were "supported by a vibrant market of organisations that offer various recruitment services".

With this support, most were able to operate effectively. But "as a contingency, the department...requires a bespoke service to seek to ensure that, where this has not happened, high-calibre trustees, with the required skills, can be sourced for the boards concerned to appoint.

"We expect this to be a bespoke recruitment service which places the right people in the right roles, with a real focus on high-quality matches. We expect the vacancies to be filled through this service to have characteristics that make them challenging for the board to recruit to without support."

For example, the provider "may need to find trustees for trusts with challenging geography or religious characteristics, or be asked to source candidates with very specific skillsets".

Key performance indicators for the contract do not include a numerical target for recruitment, but state the successful bidder will be expected to match 80 per cent of vacancies with an "appropriate" trustee or chair within 12 weeks. This will rise to 85 per cent in year two.

Knights welcomed the tender to support certain trusts, but said the "volunteer workforce is approximately 250,000 and therefore a much wider approach is required".

She repeated previous calls for a "national marketing campaign to raise the profile of roles in the general public domain.

"This has happened for other voluntary roles of national importance – but not this one. The current RAAC crisis is underlining just how important sound governance is."

AMY WALKER | @AMYRWALKER

## More schools 'fill a void' to buy clothes and food for pupils

More than nine in ten schools are providing uniforms and clothing to pupils as the cost-of-living crisis continues to bite.

Findings from a survey of school leaders and teachers by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) also show roughly the same proportion of schools are subsidising extra-curricular activities for some pupils.

Meanwhile, seven in ten schools across different settings say they are providing food to pupils through parcels, food banks, vouchers and subsidised breakfasts.

It comes against a backdrop of warnings about schools being forced to fill a public services void.

Separate Teacher Tapp data published in May



showed a rise in schools running their own food banks – with 6 per cent of respondents saying their provision had launched in the past year or so.

New statutory guidance aimed at making uniforms more affordable also stipulates that schools should ensure second-hand uniforms are available.

A separate NFER survey shows 50 per cent of schools have had to cut back on trips and

outings in the past academic year.

"The cost-of-living crisis is having a profound impact on pupils and families. Schools are providing unprecedented levels of urgent support," said Jenna Julius, the NFER's research director.

More than four fifths of leaders said cost-of-living pressures had increased numbers of pupils requiring support.

But less than a fifth of mainstream teachers and just under a quarter of special school teachers said they felt supported by child and young people mental health services.

Responses came from 1,354 leaders and 1,317 teachers in mainstream settings, and eight leaders and 41 teachers in special schools.



## NEWS: COUNCILS

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# 'Disastrous' £100m IT system at 'bankrupt' council hits school budgets

JACK DYSON

@JACKDYDS

EXCLUSIVE

Schools are still waiting for their budgets for the new year after a council that this week effectively declared bankruptcy splurged millions on a "disastrous" IT platform.

Some headteachers at local authority-maintained primaries and secondaries in Birmingham have been told they will finally receive their year-end balances "towards the middle of the autumn term" – months later than expected.

The issue stems from the city council's controversial decision to switch to finance and HR system Oracle – which was later blamed for schools having to fork out "debt-recovery costs through no fault of our own" as bills went unpaid.

Three months after it revealed the final cost to "fully implement" the platform would be about £100m – five times its original budget – the authority issued a section 114 notice, meaning it cannot meet its financial liabilities.

Schools Week can reveal some schools are now still waiting to learn the size of their surpluses or deficits for this year, leaving headteachers unable to plan.

David Bagley, the chief executive of DRB Schools and Academies Services, said: "It's been a disaster for schools. Schools have had legal letters, there have been people turning up on the doorsteps of schools saying, 'we need our money'."

"Local authorities need to give their schools' balances by May 31. Schools are now unlikely to get their balances until November. They can't plan."

A local authority-maintained head also told **Schools Week** that this has meant he "hasn't been able to understand our budgets". Sector leaders said they have been forced to rely on carry forward projections instead.

The issue is understood to only impact so-called non-cheque book authority-maintained schools, which are primaries and secondaries that do not have control of their bank accounts.

In an email sent to leaders, council officials asked for



further financial information to be sent to them this month to "revise [non-cheque book] schools' year-end positions".

They expect to confirm "the 22–23 out-turn positions with schools towards the middle of the autumn term".

This is just one of a number of issues that Oracle's introduction has been linked to. During a Birmingham schools forum meeting last October, primary governor Pam Garrington stated that problems associated with the system left headteacher with late-payment bills.

"Because of the issues as a result of Oracle, it means that schools are having to pay out additional money – like penalties for no payments of bills, debt-recovery costs – through no fault of their own.

"My assumption would be that at some point the schools would be compensated for that because it's not part of their budgets."

CORE Education Trust CEO Jo Tyler said her chain used Oracle for payroll services for four months last year, before moving to a separate provider last August. She said several glitches saw former members of staff continue to receive salaries, while others received double payments.

Andrew Pilmore, who works with Bagley at DRB, also said one of the schools he advises "had people from the electricity company coming up saying 'we're going to cut off your services because bills haven't been paid'".

Council documents published during the summer also stated that "from the HR side, there have been issues relating to recruitment, data management and monitoring processes to update renewals of DBS checks".

The Robin Hood MAT even posted a

tongue-in-cheek job advert on the Birmingham Association of School Business Management's website telling prospective applicants to come forward if they were "tired of Oracle" and "never want to use it again".

In the wake of the issues, the council commissioned an independent governance review in collaboration with the department for levelling-up to focus on areas including the implementation of Oracle in July.

Despite this, the local authority also unveiled plans to request "£46.53m this year to fund the required work" to improve Oracle, as it predicted the final cost will be "in the region of £100m".

A Birmingham City Council spokesperson said they wanted "to improve its internal functions relating to financial management and HR" but admitted the transition proved "incredibly challenging" with "a significant impact on schools, particularly in the areas of budgeting, financial reconciliations, reports, closing of accounts and difficulties around day-to-day HR activities".

"We have apologised to schools and are continuing to prioritise work to resolve the remaining issues affecting them," she added.

Lancashire County Council also experienced problems with another Oracle system, called Oracle Fusion, which is used for managing finance, HR and payroll processes in schools.

But a spokesperson for the authority stressed there are a "small number of outstanding issues", with "many of the initial problems experienced resolved".

The Department for Education has "been liaising closely" with both councils "to help manage and resolve" issues.

Oracle declined to comment.



Jo Tyler

NEWS: POLITICS

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# New shadow schools minister in Labour reshuffle

**FREDDIE WHITTAKER**

@FCDWHITTAKER

Catherine McKinnell has been appointed as shadow schools minister in Labour's frontbench reshuffle.

The Newcastle North MP and former shadow children's minister replaced Stephen Morgan, who has been moved to Labour's transport team as shadow rail minister.

Sir Keir Starmer, the party's leader, reshuffled his top team this week in preparation for next year's general election.

Bridget Phillipson, reappointed as shadow education secretary, said McKinnell would focus on "delivering high and rising standards in all our schools for all our children".

A former member of the education committee, McKinnell has been an MP since 2010 and is the fifth shadow schools minister in three years.

She said she was "absolutely

delighted to be joining Labour's frontbench and working with Bridget Phillipson and the education team".

"All children deserve the best start in life. I'm looking forward to working to make that a reality with a Labour government."

Morgan had been in post since December 2021. He tweeted his "sincere thanks to the entire schools sector who I greatly enjoyed working with over the past two years".



Catherine McKinnell

"Your passion and devotion to children up and down the country never ceases to amaze. I'm delighted that schools will continue to have a champion in Catherine McKinnell."

Seema Malhotra will replace Toby Perkins as shadow skills minister.

Helen Hayes, the shadow children's

minister, and Matt Western, the shadow minister for higher education, kept their jobs.

McKinnell grew up in Newcastle and attended Sacred Heart Comprehensive School in Fenham. She studied politics and history at Edinburgh and then law at Northumbria, before working as an employment solicitor.

She was shadow solicitor-general from 2010 to 2011 before a brief stint as shadow children's minister between 2011 and 2012.

The MP then served as shadow exchequer secretary to the Treasury from 2012 to 2015 and then briefly as shadow attorney-general from 2015 to 2016. Until this week, she was chair of parliament's petitions committee.

Phillipson said this week she was "delighted to welcome the new shadow education team".

"By contrast the Conservatives have started the new term as they mean to go on – with a staggering display of incompetence as they fail our children again."

## Tories appoint seventh children's minister since 2019

Former education committee member David Johnston has been appointed children's minister – the seventh minister since a landmark review to reform the broken SEND system launched in 2019.

Alongside SEND, he will also be responsible for children in care, mental health, alternative provision, behaviour and school attendance.

Johnston, the Tory MP for Wantage, said he was "honoured", pointing to his 16 years running organisations for disadvantaged children, including the Social Mobility Foundation.

He has served on the education select committee and was parliamentary private secretary at the Department for Education for ten months before resigning in July last year in protest against Boris Johnson's premiership.

But Simon Knight, joint headteacher at Frank Wise School in Oxfordshire,



David Johnston

said the latest ministerial change showed "an enactment of utter ambivalence towards children with SEND.

"How are things supposed to improve if we continue to have short-term leadership? So utterly frustrating."

Claire Coutinho, the outgoing children's minister, has been promoted to energy and net-zero secretary, the first MP from the 2019 election cohort to make Cabinet.



Claire Coutinho

## Phillipson promises to bring back pay body for support staff

Labour has pledged to re-establish the School Support Staff Negotiating Body to "bring together the currently uneven patchwork of terms and conditions" for such workers.

The party set up the body in the late-2000s, but it was scrapped shortly afterwards by the Coalition government. It was meant to provide a national pay and conditions scheme for all support staff.

Pay for support staff employed by local authorities is currently negotiated through a national joint council, but academy trusts are free to negotiate their own deals.

"Teachers get their voice heard in the national conversation but too often support staff don't," said Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary.

"That's why the last Labour government was right to create a negotiating body to look at their terms and conditions across our country, and that is why the next Labour government will do the same."

NEWS IN BRIEF

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
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# Union starts action on workload

The NASUWT has instructed its members to limit their working time as part of industrial action starting from September 18.

It includes only attending one hour-long meeting a week outside pupil sessions and refusing to undertake extracurricular activities and midday supervision.

Members will also not do work-related tasks in their lunch breaks, on weekends or bank holidays, and will refuse to cover some absences and not cooperate in mock inspections (see full list below).

The union, which represents 280,000 teachers in the UK, voted in favour of the government's 6.5 per cent pay deal, but warned industrial action would go ahead over workload.

Writing for *Schools Week*, Patrick Roach, the union's general secretary, said the action would "help bring downward pressure on workload and working hours".

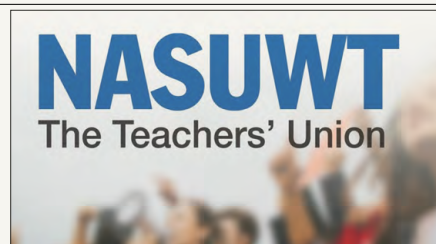
It would not disrupt pupils' education, he

said. "Instead it is focused on the bureaucracy and non-teaching tasks that we know are doing so much to increase workloads, contributing to teacher stress and burnout, and distracting teachers from being able to focus on teaching and learning. Our members will still teach and prepare for lessons."

The National Education Union and school leaders' union NAHT called off strikes after members accepted the pay deal, while ASCL halted its strike ballot.

**NASUWT's action short of strike:**

- Refuse to undertake inappropriately directed duties outside school session times
- Refuse to be directed to undertake extracurricular activities
- Refuse to be directed to undertake midday supervision of pupils
- Refuse to be directed to undertake any work-related tasks or activities during



their lunch break

- Refuse to be directed to undertake work-related tasks or activities on weekends or bank holidays
- Refuse to undertake any other duties during planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time
- Refuse to cover for absence other than in circumstances that are not foreseeable
- Refuse to undertake routine administrative and clerical tasks
- Refuse to co-operate with mock inspections
- Refuse to cooperate with inappropriate planning, marking and data management policies, practices and initiatives that have not been workload impact assessed and the subject of consultation or agreement with the NASUWT

[Full story here](#)

# NIoT appoints advisory group

Dame Rachel de Souza, the children's commissioner, is among high-profile leaders who will scrutinise the research output of the new National Institute of Teaching (NIoT).

The flagship teacher training and development provider has announced the names of the six members of its advisory group, which will also act as a "sounding board".

NIoT said the group, established earlier this year, had already supported research into intensive training and practice, as well as training for trainee and early career teachers.

De Souza will be joined by Professor Becky Allen, a professor of education at the University of Brighton and the chief analyst and co-founder of Teacher Tapp.

Carole Willis, the chief executive of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and a former director of research and analysis at the Department for Education (DfE), is chair.

The other group members are Professor Rob Coe, director of research and development at Evidence Based Education, Kathryn Morgan, the capacity improvement adviser at the Teaching School Hubs Council (TSHC) and Andy Samways, the director of Unity Research School.

The institute is set to publish early findings from a consultation to identify priorities for professional development research this month.

[Full story here](#)

# Drinkall to head GLF Schools

The former chief executive of the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET), Julian Drinkall, will take over from Job Chaloner as the new boss of GLF Schools at the end of this year.

Drinkall, who left AET in 2021, returns to the sector after a brief spell as general manager of Aga Khan Schools, the education arm of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) that works to improve welfare and prospects in the developing world, particularly across Asia and Africa.

Lynne O'Reilly, the chair of GLF Schools, said it had a "high level of interest in the role and some excellent candidates", but "is confident that Julian will bring an exceptional level of expertise and skills to the organisation".

Drinkall was credited with overseeing a huge turnaround at AET after joining in 2016, but the trust did also agree to give up schools during his time and got millions in government bailouts.

[Full story here](#)



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# Feature

JESSICA HILL | @JESSJANEHILL

## ‘Why have we tolerated this situation for so long for the children in our schools?’

Our reporter Jessica Hill was the first to investigate RAAC in schools. She explains what went wrong, who is to blame – and why this is just the start of the story

While the dangers of reinforced aerated autoclaved concrete (RAAC) have only recently been on the public’s radar, it has been on my mind for the last ten months since we first revealed that RAAC was leaving schools ‘liable to collapse’.

Now, I find myself the parent of two children who cannot attend school regularly for the foreseeable future because of this crumbly concrete.

Luckily, the multiple incidents where RAAC has caused roofs to cave in in recent years have all happened outside school hours. And Gillian Keegan deserves some credit for getting a grip on the situation before a tragedy did unfurl.

But why did it take her, and just as importantly, her predecessors, so long to act? Then do so by closing all schools with RAAC just before the start of term?

The government might not have blood on its hands. But it does need to answer for the fact

my 14-year-old daughter is currently listening to music in her bedroom, while her headteacher, James Saunders of Honywood School, in Essex, tells me he’s pinning his hopes on the Ministry of Defence coming to the rescue by supplying him with field hospitals as classrooms.

If you lived in a house that had water pouring in every time it rained, was riddled with dangerous asbestos or was built using a crumbly, lightweight concrete, you would refuse to live there any longer.

So why have we tolerated that situation for so long for the children in our schools?

### Lack of concrete direction

RAAC has been used in building structures in the UK and Europe since the late 1950s, most commonly as precast roof panels in flat roof construction, and structural deficiencies started emerging in the 1990s.

A feature published in Verulam (a journal published by the Institution of Structural

Engineers) way back in 1995 explains about RAAC cracking in a school roof.

But the government, structural engineering bodies, councils and trusts have all been aware that RAAC was present in schools and could cause roofs to collapse with “little or no warning” since at least 2018.

The Local Government Association and Department for Education contacted all school building owners to draw attention to the failure of a flat roof with RAAC planks at Singlewell Primary School in Gravesend. Signs of structural stress only appeared 24 hours before the roof gave way, luckily outside of school hours.

But since then, ministers did very little until March last year – when leaders were asked to check for the material and fill in a government questionnaire. Perhaps the most indefensible part of all this was that ministers did nothing despite knowing just how dangerous this was.

DfE officials escalated the risk level of school buildings collapsing to ‘critical – likely’ in July 2021

## Feature: RAAC

and then again to 'critical – very likely' in October that year.

This was down to an increasing number of "serious structural issues" identified, specifically in schools built between 1945 to 1970 using "system build light frame techniques", which is a category RAAC falls into. The issue was also escalated to the Civil Service Board as a cross-governmental risk.

DfE's most recent annual accounts state the high risk of collapse persists because the Treasury refused pleas in the 2021 spending review for extra rebuilding funding.

Then permanent secretary at the department, Jonathan Slater, told the BBC the then chancellor Rishi Sunak was told "there's a critical risk to life if this programme is not funded".

The department estimated 300 to 400 schools a year needed to be rebuilt. They pushed for the Treasury to up the number of rebuilds to 200 a year, but got funding for 50.

This is also despite capital spending in schools falling by 50 per cent in real terms since the Conservatives came into power in 2010.

### Survey stress

The government said its higher risk rating for school buildings was also down to being "unable to estimate the prevalence of RAAC in the school estate from existing departmental information".

The academisation of schools and changes to the role and geographic footprints of councils over the years have left schools, and government, without appropriate records of what school buildings are made of – then having to pay out for expensive structural surveys to find out.

A new school building condition data collection programme, launched in 2021 that would see every government-funded school and college in England visited by 2026, was expanded to include RAAC.

The DfE said the scheme is "one of the biggest condition data collection exercises in the UK public sector" and will provide a "comprehensive picture of the condition" of the school estate.

But in September last year, the Office for Government Property (OGP) issued a safety briefing notice to all property leaders warning



Honywood School in Essex

## 'Now, I find myself the parent of two children who cannot attend school'

RAAC is "now life expired and liable to collapse... This has already happened in two schools with little or no notice."

The government launched its own RAAC questionnaire in March last year for responsible bodies – councils and trusts – to fill in on behalf of their schools.

One in ten hadn't responded before the summer recess. Five per cent – around 1,100 schools – are yet to do checks for RAAC, government said this week.

That is five months after the second deadline to do so has passed. School and council budget cuts have left them with severely diminished capacity and fewer experts to respond to government information requests.

But leaders who had filled in surveys months ago were wrongly told by government this week they hadn't. Others have been unable to submit information.

### 'They would have had no defence'

Keegan was caught on camera this week accusing others of having "sat on their arse" over the RAAC crisis, and expressing frustration at a lack of gratitude for doing a "f\*\*\*ing good job".

The government escalated its policy last week to stipulate any school buildings containing RAAC – regardless of whether they had been deemed to be



Jess and daughter

'critical' or not – were to be closed.

Keegan said this was prompted by three cases which emerged over the summer where RAAC deemed "non-critical" collapsed. But at least one of these, a private school in Scotland, was actually examined by officials way back in May.

Matt Byatt, the president of the Institution of Structural Engineers (IStructE), cited quality control issues in the manufacture of panels, and many "were not made properly and don't have reinforcement going all the way to their ends. That's why they have the potential to fail."

New evidence relating to the unsafe width of support bearings underneath RAAC panels from IStructE in April also led the DfE to start "rapid initial assessments" across all schools with suspected RAAC.

They assessed if its presence presented "life critical risk", according to a briefing by Essex Council to its members seen by Schools Week. With 54 affected schools, Essex is one of the worst-hit

# Feature: RAAC



## 'If anyone had been hurt, they would have had no defence'

councils.

Byatt believes the policy change was mainly down to it "suddenly occurring" to "someone in government, with the best of intentions, that we cannot wait for loss of life before we act. They knew about this – so if anyone had been hurt, they would have had no defence."

### What next?

While urgent action is now being taken, 100,000 pupils in the 147 schools with confirmed RAAC have been impacted.

Some have been squeezed into the remaining suitable classrooms on their site, others are being bused to local schools. One third of those schools have had to delay the start of term or teach pupils remotely. And these figures will continue to rise as all schools get checked.

About 450 schools with suspected RAAC are still waiting for an official assessment from a government engineer.

DfE has gone from using just three to eight consulting structural engineering firms to assess for RAAC – while Byatt points out there are "hundreds" of such firms across the country that are up to the task.

But while finding out if a school building contains RAAC is "easy for a qualified and professional person", the next step – determining

the condition of it, which means investigating reinforcement on the inside and the bearings – is "not a simple task".

### "You cannot just wave a magic wand at it."

There are also grave concerns about doing this while not disturbing any potentially lethal asbestos, in around four in five schools.

While the government will foot the bill for some temporary repair costs, there has been nothing but warm words so far on funding permanent fixes.

And we're still finding out more about RAAC; it



James Saunders Headteacher, Honywood School

was only thought before to have been in use until the early nineties. But the Institution of Structural Engineers recently found RAAC in buildings constructed as recently as 1998.

And while experts previously believed its lightweight nature meant it would only have been used in single story buildings, RAAC has been found in two story school buildings – including that of my daughter.

After the pandemic and a year of frequent school strikes, she is becoming rather accustomed to life at home rather than school. Saunders has been begging for school rebuilding cash from the government since he came into post five years ago.

If the treasury and Sunak while chancellor had taken school building risks more seriously, she would be in school today.



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# Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
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**We've followed guidance to the letter but we can't repair or rebuild our school without funding, say Caroline Derbyshire and James Saunders**

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete, or RAAC, is a new concept for many people, but actually it is one that Saffron Academy Trust has been aware of for some time.

To imply that we have been, to intentionally misquote Gillian Keegan, "resting on our backsides" about RAAC is offensive to say the least. Let us explain why, because our offence has little to do with her vulgar language choices.

As the secretary of state for education has been so keen to remind us in recent days, the responsible bodies for school buildings are trusts and local authorities. As a trust, we take that responsibility seriously and we have exercised such responsibility.

In 2020, a term after Honywood School in Essex joined Saffron Academy Trust, we commissioned a full survey of the building. RAAC was identified. We learned from the survey that the concrete panels were "in good condition" and that "monitoring at a maximum of two-yearly intervals" was recommended.

We were instructed that "new roof coverings are required", so we undertook this remedial action and funded it through the Schools Capital Allocation (SCA). This rapid response was considered good practice by the DfE and we were confident that we had exercised our health and safety duty in a fully compliant way.

It was not until March 2023 that we sensed greater concern from the DfE about RAAC. We were asked to complete questionnaires about its presence at Honywood. We responded promptly, which was then followed up

CAROLINE DERBYSHIRE

CEO, Saffron Academy Trust

JAMES SAUNDERS

Headteacher, Honywood School



## Lack of funding – not lack of action – has put schools on the RAAC

with a survey in June.

The DfE report on 5 July recommended the same monitoring programme that we already had in place and the need to develop a longer-term RAAC management plan. There was no suggestion at this time

therefore, to be told on 31 August that we would need to evacuate all buildings with RAAC with immediate effect. This was a radical change in policy and guidance, which may have percolated in the expensively refurbished offices of the DfE during

**“ We were given 24 hours to close 22 classrooms**

that we needed to take emergency action, but the trust team nevertheless began to prepare the management plan.

You can imagine our shock,

August but was only communicated to us in the dying days of the summer holidays.

We were given 24 hours to work out how we would close 22



classrooms, an additional 22 office spaces and yet keep the school open for face-to-face teaching. We've managed to develop a two-week blended learning plan which gives students between 50 to 70 per cent of their timetabled lessons in our unaffected classrooms. We will deliver the rest of the teaching remotely.

Simultaneously, we are now working on a medium-term plan to source temporary classrooms and the engineering solutions to mitigate the risks for a further five years. It looks as if it will take months. Other schools nearby are affected – some entirely shut – and there is only so much capacity to make and fit these bespoke solutions.

It is not the beginning of the school year anyone wanted or could have anticipated. It has frustrated parents, it is not the excellent experience we want for our learners and it has certainly caused huge stress for staff. It is difficult to see any positives now, but we are hanging onto one thread of hope: that this chaos may finally lead to a new school building.

So, when Gillian Keegan reminds us that we are the responsible body, our response to her is that we know that. We hasten to remind her that the responsibility for policy, guidance and capital funding lies with her team.

Every year, we spend the SCA on safety and maintenance issues: asbestos removal, fire doors and fire detection, roof replacement or repair. When those issues are addressed, there is little left in the pot for anything else.

SCA was never intended to cover critical building failure. We need an extensive and properly funded rebuilding programme and a government prepared to own the responsibility for its school estate.

# Opinion : The attendance challenge

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
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## DAME RACHEL DE SOUZA

Children's Commissioner  
for England

### Everyone must obsess over full attendance from day one

**Ministers must ensure all agencies are held responsible for helping schools to solve the attendance crisis, writes Dame Rachel De Souza**

Since becoming children's commissioner in March 2021, school attendance has been an absolute priority. This year, I am calling on everyone working with children to do the same. Too many are struggling to attend regularly, absences remain at crisis levels, and if we don't act now we risk failing a generation.

When I first took up my role, the country was emerging from the shadow of the pandemic. I saw huge swathes of children who hadn't returned to school after lockdown. While attention switched to catch-up plans and lost learning, a worrying number of children disappeared from schools altogether.

They had become the so-called 'ghost children' of lockdown. I have never liked the phrase. I have met with hundreds of them and they are real flesh-and-blood children. Children we have a duty to support. Children we are letting down.

Every child has a right to access a brilliant education. Speaking as a former teacher and headteacher, I believe that children are offered the best start to further their ambitions,

relationships and learning when in school.

However, last year's attendance figures paint a damning picture of school absences. Data from the 2022-23 academic year show that 22.5 per cent of children were persistently absent. That's around one in five pupils, a massive increase from the ten to eleven per cent we were seeing pre-Covid.

Concerningly, children with additional vulnerabilities are more likely to be missing from school. Children known to social care have some of the highest absence rates. In 2022, 43.8 per cent of children in need and 56.2 per cent of children on a protection plan were persistently absent.

I have made it my mission to understand why children haven't returned to the classrooms. I hear from children that absence from school is rarely because they don't want to be learning. Often, they are desperate to get back to school but they can't access the support they need.

Children and parents have told me that if we want to support children back into school, we must tackle the barriers to attendance. Schools have an important role to play in this, but they can't do it alone. All professionals who support children have a role. Attendance is everyone's business.



“ Attendance is everyone's business

This summer, I conducted roundtables in areas with some of the most challenging attendance rates. I invited professionals from education, health, social care, youth justice and parental groups to interrogate the reasons for increased school absences and to examine how local agencies can work together to improve attendance.

Where there has been success, school leaders said that they obsessed over attendance. Teachers told me how they built relationships with families and children and put in bespoke support to aid their return.

Yet I also heard from schools who are struggling to tackle absences. The government has rolled out attendance hubs, which are promising, but given the scale of the issue we need to go much further and faster with them. We should roll out the attendance mentors programme to ensure every child who is severely absent receives the support they need to re-engage in education.

One of the most common

problems that came up was how to respond to children's mental health issues. Latest NHS data shows that the number of children suffering from a mental health disorder has risen from one in nine pre-pandemic to one in six today. We must see a joined-up approach to tackle this issue. Health and education should outline a comprehensive joint plan for student wellbeing.

My conversations with multi-agency teams highlighted how important it is for all professionals to work together. What struck me was how few agencies outside of education knew about the attendance crisis or understood the role they could play in tackling it. Today I am calling on government to make the new attendance guidance statutory for all agencies before the end of this term.

September is a critical moment. It's our chance for a system reset and to shift the dial on school attendance. We must be ambitious and aim for 100 per cent attendance. Our children deserve that.

# Opinion : The attendance challenge

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
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NADEINE ASBALI

Secondary English teacher,  
London

## Absence: the real problem is a lack of support and funding

**A 100 per cent attendance target is too blunt a tool for fixing the systemic problems underpinning non-attendance, and will only make matters worse, says Nadeine Asbali**

I'm not a maths teacher, but it strikes me as somewhat of a statistical impossibility that 100 per cent of people can ever do something 100 per cent of the time. And yet, as the academic year begins, that is exactly the aim children's commissioner Rachel de Souza has set for schools with regards to attendance.

Of course, the growing issue of school absence alarms me. Nick Gibb's recent suggestion that parents send their children to school even while unwell was ill-informed and irresponsible, but he was right about one thing: absences have a real and measurable impact on student outcomes. More than one in five children are regularly missing school and as cold and flu season peaked last academic year, school absence was as high as 14.1 per cent

In an ideal world, children would be in school. But we don't live in an ideal world. We live in a world where people get poorly, where people die and unforeseen emergencies happen, where people

are born with or develop complex and chronic illnesses that make 100 per cent attendance a physical impossibility.

Proponents of this target call it aspirational. Indeed, many schools already adopt 100 per cent attendance policies. They reward those who are in the classroom every day with prizes and vouchers and shields.

But the truth is that a 100 per cent target is only aspirational if you conceptualise the problem of school absence as a comic book stereotype of petulant teenagers hanging outside the corner shop because they can't be bothered to go to English class – belligerent truants engaging in antisocial behaviour because school is too boring.

The reality is starkly different. For ministers and others with a mandated obligation to understand the problem in its depth, complexity and nuance to think of school absence in this way displays an alarming disregard for and flagrant ignorance of the real factors pushing students out of the classroom.

In a protracted cost of living crisis where poverty is compounded by government cuts to public services, wage stagnation, inadequate housing and frozen benefits, children face significant barriers to



“ It is poverty ministers need to work to dismantle

getting to school in the first place. If they actually get there, it is only to be met by a persistent and growing attainment gap that brands them as 'underperforming'.

Any teacher in a deprived area will recount similar anecdotes: students who can't afford the bus fare, who stay at home because their already overworked parent needs to work another shift and can't afford the childcare for their baby sibling. Students who need to translate for important meetings that secure their entire household's immigration status or a roof over their heads.

Children quite literally hiding due to the social embarrassment of hygiene poverty and period poverty, of having no clean uniform or shoes with holes in during winter. Teenagers forced to take on paid work to support their families, and those moved to council housing too far away.

It is these factors – manufactured and exacerbated by successive governments occupied by people too wealthy to feel the brunt of their force – that prevent our pupils

from filling our corridors. Setting a 100 per cent attendance target for these children will do nothing other than further widen the gap between them and those who face no barriers to the classroom.

To that, we can add a wider national picture of worsening mental health among young people amid NHS waiting lists growing longer by the day. The number of children waiting for urgent mental health support is at an all-time high. To nudge pupils who are battling depression and crippling anxiety back into class on their knees – and into schools that don't have the funding or staff to support them – amounts to state neglect of the very young people who are most in need of proper, structural support.

If those in power are genuine about tackling soaring pupil absence, a headline-grabbing back-to-school campaign that adds pressure on schools is not the way to go about it. It is poverty they need to work to dismantle, and that starts with funding our starved public services.

# Opinion

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
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**Not enough has been done to ensure the harm caused at Harlow Academy never happens elsewhere, write Warren Carratt and Wayne Norrie**

While the term “unprecedented” can be a over used, the immediate closure on safeguarding grounds of Harlow Academy (a special school in Mansfield) following an Ofsted inspection in January 2022 certainly wasn't a routine turn of events.

The risk posed to children due to the woefully inadequate leadership, management and oversight of the failed Evolve Trust meant that parents, many of whom had been raising concerns for months, suddenly had no school at all for their child to attend.

The failings of Harlow Academy and those responsible for its decline have been assessed and reported in detail by a review commissioned by the Nottinghamshire Local Safeguarding Children Partnership.

Local government, NHS providers, the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted and school and trust leaders all contributed to these failings. However, 18 months later, pupils are now thriving and the school is going from strength to strength. We're proud to say pupils and families celebrated the end of the 2022/23 academic year with excitement and anticipation for what the future holds.

The DfE's regulatory and commissioning review has addressed some of the systemic problems which inhibited action being taken earlier. Bringing SEND into the portfolio responsibility of the new regional directors is a common sense move and should enable integration where there has been fragmented oversight before.

Changing how the DfE can and will respond to parental complaints and revising the data-sharing agreement between the DfE and Ofsted should also

WARREN CARRATT

CEO of Nexus Multi Academy Trust



WAYNE NORRIE

CEO of Greenwood Academies Trust

## Harlow Academy now thrives – but schools need more safeguards

provide additional means of tightening oversight of multi academy trusts (MATs).

However, there are still more questions posed by the new regulatory and commissioning framework than there are answers. If we are to ensure

July, senior civil servants adopted phrases such as 'drawing on local, soft intelligence' about MATs and the need for 'strong CEOs', but the guidance falls short of defining these concepts and determining how these judgments are made.

“We need to rapidly implement more substantive measures

a situation like Harlow Academy never happens again, we need to rapidly implement more substantive measures.

The DfE's new approach is helpful in providing greater clarity regarding its decision-making process. However, it still lacks structural certainty.

For example, once launched in

Based on our experience of leading our own and of supporting the transformation of other trusts, a helpful starting point would be for the DfE to understand what it's like to operate within the system as a trust leader, as well as their track record of working with other MATs and agencies. How effectively does a CEO

build relationships? What are their red lines and why?

There will always be a need for big-bang, short-term interventionist models of management, but MAT CEOs are the architects and caretakers of an ecosystem that extends well beyond this time-span. We need to avoid the trend of valuing those who present themselves as knights on white horses and introduce criteria that puts substance over style.

Additionally, we urgently need greater connectivity, information sharing and accountability that supports multi-agency collaborations. It is well-documented that families and staff at Harlow Academy consistently raised concerns about the provision and care at the school with the local council, Ofsted, the regional schools commissioner and even the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Yet, the siloed nature of how these organisations operate meant it was three months before meaningful action was taken. That's three months of neglect and mismanagement that should never have occurred.

We need a more systematic approach that equally supports due process and ensures responsiveness for those who are rightly ringing alarm bells. The DfE needs to be clearer about the positive role local authorities can and should play, particularly regarding checks and balances.

With that, we'd have a defined means of seeing why, when, where and how “local intelligence” is provided. This would allow us to work more collaboratively to support the needs of those we, as a sector, are committed to serving.

In our new and evolving MAT-led system, that would be unprecedented – and very welcome.



# Solutions

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
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## GEMMA DRINKALL

Education wellbeing coach,  
HeadSphere

### How to set boundaries early in your new middle leadership role

**Leadership can be uniquely challenging but some simple steps can ensure your enthusiasm for it is sustained, explains Gemma Drinkall**

This start of term is taking place in the shadow of an evolving crisis involving school buildings, but September can be a truly exciting time.

This is especially true if you are taking your first steps into middle leadership. The first few weeks and months are when you will be setting the foundations for this new phase of your career.

Though daunting, the key to long-term success is to pace yourself. You will be tempted to drive in headfirst and to go above and beyond to prove yourself worthy of the promotion.

But, before you get carried away, give yourself time for a reality check: you are taking on new responsibilities which you will want to excel in, but there will be limitless demands of you in this new role. Not only that, but you will probably be expected to do all this with only a couple of hours freed up on your timetable.

How can you achieve this, still be an effective classroom teacher

and avoid the risk of burnout? The answer is by setting boundaries early.

Boundaries are the red tape that you surround yourself with to protect and promote your wellbeing. They are vital to a middle leader's mindset. They help you to fill your own cup first so that you can keep pouring into those of your students and colleagues.

Without boundaries, you will find middle leadership unsatisfactory and unsustainable. With that in mind, here are three ways to start as you mean to go on.

**Create time for you in your diary**

Boundaries help you to prioritise your wellbeing. To achieve that, you need to allocate time to you. Plot that time into your diary before it becomes clogged with school. Whether it's exercise, hobbies or time with your favourite people, make sure there is time to fill your cup.

Once you have made this time, guard it against all intrusions, including the temptation to answer 'just one more email'. Guilt will inevitably creep in, but there is no place for it here. This is your time so you can consistently return to school each day, healthy



### “ Boundaries are vital to a middle leader’s mindset

and buoyant. You are your most valuable asset!

**Relax about not getting everything done**

Middle leadership is challenging because it has so much scope yet so little time to get everything done. It's time to get comfortable with this.

Pomodoro timers can be useful for staying laser-focused and on task, but first and foremost accept that 'done' is better than 'perfect'. Grow to love delegating. It will allow you to focus on the jobs only you can do, and it's a great tool for empowering your team.

And crucially, remember that your capacity to complete tasks bears no relation to your capability to do your job well. Focus on your achievements and dance in your own teacher awesomeness.

**No is a safe word**

To bolster the previous steps, grow confident in saying no. If

something you are asked to do doesn't benefit your students or you, the brave thing to do is to decline.

It can feel scary in the moment, so here are some prompts. "Now's not a good time, can you get back to me later?", "I need some thinking time to see if I have space for this. I'll let you know by the end of the week", "I haven't got capacity for this at the moment. If this is a priority, what will you take off my plate?"

Rather than fearing saying no, see it as an important part of the feedback loop. It's a way to open up conversations and to clarify the reality and priorities of your role.

Middle leadership is a rewarding position to work in. But beginning to have a positive impact on the wider school community does not have to come at the expense of your health and wellbeing.

Use boundaries to keep your cup filled from the start and you will flourish.

A digital newspaper determined to get past the bluster and explain the facts.

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# THE REVIEW

## RETHINKING SCHOOL INSPECTION. IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

**Author:** Tracey O'Brien

**Publisher:** John Catt

**Publication date:** 21 July 2023

**ISBN:** 1398387460

**Reviewer:** Frank Norris, independent chair, Blackpool Education Improvement Board

I rose through the ranks of HMI with Ofsted to be a divisional manager responsible for the development of school inspection frameworks. I left, exhausted after implementing a second framework within nine months in 2012 and have never inspected a school since.

As I started Tracey O'Brien's book, I was reminded of bold shifts in inspection methodology and how they were introduced to make inspection a fairer process.

A good example was the 2005 education act, which made inspections shorter and more frequent along with introducing contextual value-added measures in 2006. The ongoing adaptations to the framework since, as the author points out, have often been driven by political choices. The abandonment of the self-evaluation form to reduce the burden of inspection on schools is a classic example.

These changes have also coincided with a reduction in Ofsted's overall budget as part of a national austerity drive. Subsequent Chief Inspectors have tried to make changes fit within the 2005 framework – a case of trying to overfill a small pot.

All of which is to say that historical perspective matters when assessing our inspection model and its effectiveness. Rethinking School Inspection is not an academic study, and doesn't try to be. It oozes with personal examples drawn from O'Brien's experiences and those of notable school leaders, and the resulting realism and humanity underpinning its insights are a major strength.

O'Brien's description of the formulaic nature of inspection in recent years is a case in point. Examples of the type of questions lead

inspectors may pose during the initial 90-minute phone call with the headteacher (22 of these on the curriculum alone) make a powerful case that the current system is both exhausting and nerve-racking.

Where the book is less effective is in providing a clear insight into whether Ofsted delivers on its aim of 'raising standards, improving lives'. Ofsted, it seems to me, is struggling to find its place between the poles of improver and controller – or, as Anne Kean puts it, 'watchdogs or visionaries'.

It would have been helpful to draw this tension out in more detail.

The sections that consider how other countries, including those in the UK, undertake inspection give insight into O'Brien's preferred approach. She provides considerable detail about inspections in Wales and how it has abandoned grades and shifted to a more collaborative and supportive approach.

It is notable that these changes have been introduced at a time when the country's approach to curriculum has also been reformed.

There is a sense here that inspection can be used effectively to support other major changes in education policy if the relationship with those being inspected is respectful and honest. It is a pity that more pages are not dedicated to explaining how other parts of the world hold schools to account and use inspections, if at all.

O'Brien brings everything together well at the end, explaining the changes she would like to see introduced to improve school inspection. This isn't just a call to scrap this or that. She indicates what she would replace current practices with, and nearly all her suggestions

BOOK

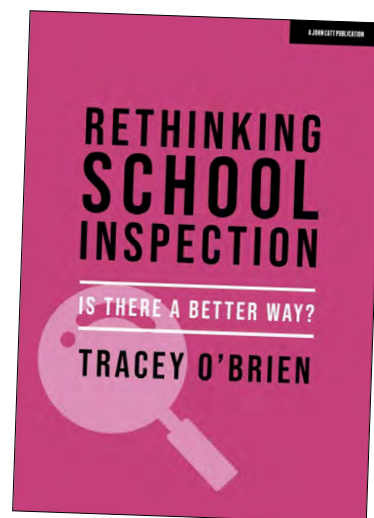
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align with my own thinking.

These include the removal of grades, the return of the self-evaluation form, strengthening of peer reviews as a key evidence source, removing safeguarding from Ofsted's remit and deploying inspectors to phases of education they are most familiar with.

The book's lack of historical perspective affects its conclusions, with O'Brien proposing phase-specific frameworks which would take inspection back nearly twenty years. These were removed because too many schools did not fit within a specific phase, and the landscape has only become more complex since. Placing a greater emphasis on inspectors' skill, knowledge and expertise might be a more effective solution.

Overall though, this is a clear and sharply written book. O'Brien's widely shared disappointment at an accountability system that restricts school improvement rather than encouraging it is palpable.

There surely must be a better way, and this book helps to define what that might look like.



Rating



What a summer that was! I hope you managed to spend some time "sitting on your arses doing nothing". God knows you deserved the break.

Mine was mostly spent on the educational lives of my children, with three at various universities, one starting post-16 education and the youngest starting secondary school. And while adjusting to being a mother of teenagers and adult men rather than young children, my local authority work hasn't stopped.

I have been pleased to see, however, that teachers and school leaders are being more conscious about taking time out and advising each other to do the same.

My social media timelines were filled with staycations and vacations, and some whose summer ended on the unfortunate stress of being stuck abroad due to the air traffic control chaos.

### SUMMER READING

Unlike last year, when it published *Education recovery in schools: Summer 2022*, Ofsted didn't provide us with much by way of summer reading. Of course, there were the usual, numerous summer updates from the DfE covering attendance and safeguarding.

But in the absence of key concerns from the inspectorate about post-Covid catch-up, some had the time to engage with a more pleasant sort of challenge, though potentially no less impactful in the classroom.



But the absence of an update from Ofsted doesn't mean one wasn't needed. A year on, what has changed? Have absence rates dropped? Has the mental health of our children improved? Have exclusion rates decreased? Are reception children starting school with fewer speech and language difficulties?

We know that quite the opposite is true and that all these areas and more are still major concerns.

Ofsted did publish its priorities for 2023 back in February, but six months is a long time in education. An update for the new academic year would have been helpful.

### CHANGE AT THE TOP

We nearly made it through the summer without any major changes to our ministers, confident that we were going into a new academic year with the same ministers with which we ended last year. But at the last minute, an unexpected cabinet reshuffle saw the children's minister, Claire Coutinho, move over to environment. David Johnston became the seventh to fill the role since the SEND review started.

Given the critical responsibilities of the job, which include children in care, mental health, alternative provision, behaviour and school attendance, this was not good news.

Many took to social media to express their frustration at the apparent lack of seriousness from government about the critical need for SEND reforms.



### SELF-CARE SEPTEMBER

I'm glad that instead of worrying all summer about the challenges in the educational landscape, I chose to do what many other educators spoke about. Catching up with sleep and spending time with special people and in special places. Many vowed to carry this renewed well-being mindset into the new school year, prioritising their self-care.

Unfortunately, many returned to find their schools getting shut down in full or in part because of crumbling concrete. Schools not yet affected are rushing around doing emergency surveys so that ministers can find out the true scale of the problem.

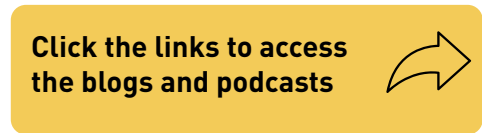
So, this might be a good time to flag up the #selfcareforSeptember campaign launched by Action for Happiness, imploring us to remember that 'self-care isn't selfish, it's essential'.

And as we all go back to school, I'm mindful that Gurdeep Singh's wise words apply to our pupils as well as our colleagues.



On a lighter note, if you want a masterclass in colour coordination, he's the account to follow.

So, all that's left for me to say is I hope you found your keys, remembered where you left your lanyard (try the glove box) and to thank you in advance for striving to do 'a f\*\*\*ing good job'.





# The Knowledge

What we've learned about schools and their communities this week



## Is the Lionesses' legacy changing the face of school football?

**Iain Ford, Senior data and reporting analyst, Teacher Tapp**

After winning the European championship last year, the Lionesses penned an open letter to government saying they wanted to see more girls playing football at school.

Change is already afoot with the DfE recently announcing its school sport plan. But changes in curriculum can take time to filter through, so what's been the impact of the Lionesses' successes so far?

Last year, Teacher Tapp sought to find out how many schools have girls' football teams and whether girls playing football is a common sight at break times. With the Lionesses coming agonisingly close to winning the World Cup this summer, have we started to see change on the playground?

### A grassroots revolution

Concrete-painted football pitches have traditionally been dominated by boys. But while jumpers for goalposts remain a mainstay of break and lunchtimes, it appears that the typical playground footballer is changing.

Around three-quarters of teachers say they see boys playing football at break time every day. Last year, however, less than one-quarter of primary teachers could say the same about girls. Secondary teachers reported an even lower proportion – just six per cent reported seeing girls play every day.

One year on, both groups have seen an increase, albeit primary teachers more than secondary. Just under one-third (32 per cent) of primary teachers now say they see girls play football every day, up ten percentage points compared to last year alone! Secondary teachers have seen a smaller increase – from six per cent to nine per cent.

Though these figures don't show the number of players, it nevertheless appears that the seeds of change have begun to take root. And that's before this year's world cup run has begun to have any impact.

### The power of policy

Of course, school-level factors can influence the level of sport that happens in the playground



## 'It appears that the typical playground footballer is changing'

each day.

Forty per cent of teachers say that if students have a PE lesson that day, then they can wear their PE kit for the entire day. In primary schools, 66 per cent of teachers say this is the norm. By contrast, only 14 per cent of secondary teachers report the same.

Anecdotally, we've heard that more students play sports at break times when this is the case, and there is some evidence that this is true. Teachers in both primary and secondary schools are more likely to report seeing girls playing football at break times if their students can wear PE kit for the day.

### The competitive edge

Many schools are taking the natural next step of establishing a girl's football team. In August 2022, 61 per cent of primary and 72 per cent of secondary teachers reported that their school had a girl's (or mixed) football team. Less than one year later, it's 71 per cent of primary and 78 per cent of secondary teachers.

Today, girls' and boys' football teams are equally common in primary schools. In secondary schools though, there's still some catching up to do: 78 per cent of secondary

teachers say their school has a girls' football team compared with 94 per cent who have a boys' football team.

In addition, the above results exclude those who said they don't know. In fact, many more teachers were unsure about whether their school had a girls' football team compared with a boys' team. So it's clear that girls' teams are not yet established in the common parlance of school sports.

### Wider impact?

Of course, there's more to life than football, and other school sports are still characterised by gender differences.

However, of the many sports on offer to students, only two show sizeable differences. Twenty-two per cent of teachers say that there is a rugby after-school club for boys, compared with just 13 per cent who say the same is available for girls. Conversely, 30 per cent say netball is available to girls, but just 12 per cent say it is for boys.

So, gaps remain to be filled, and these may take time, but we can safely say the Lionesses are already making a difference.

Week in

# Westminster

Your guide to what's happening in the corridors of power

Please see below your free, cut-out-and-keep CPD on how NOT to handle media communications during a major education crisis, as told by the Rt Hon Gillian Keegan.

## 1. CAUGHT OUT? JUST DENY ALL KNOWLEDGE! ...

Right, it's been a heavy weekend since arriving back in the country from my work-from-holiday trip in Costa del Sol. But I know most parents understand why we've closed their kid's school just days before the start of term about an issue we've all known about for five years.

I'm really confident a YouTube video where I explain everything to parents has done the trick – after all it's got \*such\* a funky house music soundtrack, who wouldn't like it?

Note to self: must check the name of the track to just double check a video about the dangers of crumbly concrete falling on a child's head isn't called something super awkward like 'Teenage Dream'.

There was a potential spanner in the works with pesky Sky News challenging me live on air about £32 million being spent on my department's office refurbishment, while we've left schools to collapse.

But I got away with it – just pretend you don't know and say you haven't done it! Just to make sure, I also threw one of those faceless mandarins under the bus in Parliament – saying it's all their fault.

## 2. ... AND ACCUSE EVERYONE ELSE OF 'SITTING ON THEIR ARSES'

It's only 8am on Monday morning and I'm smashing through the broadcast round.

People have been saying for years MPs need to be more relatable and canny. No harm in an "off the cuff" remark after the interview between colleagues, is there?

How was I supposed to know the camera was still rolling despite it being a matter of



seconds since the interview ended!

All I said was: "Does anyone ever say you know what you've done a fucking good job because everyone else has sat on their arse and done nothing, no, no, no signs of that no?"

I later set the record straight as well, confirming I was actually talking about "nobody in particular". Except the interviewer of course, who was doing his job.

No bother though – I rolled out veteran minister Nick Gibb on Tuesday to rescue it all.

When asked why I hit out, Gibbo complimented the questioning of the presenter and then sold the boss Rishi Sunak out for rejecting a rebuilding bid for 200 schools a year! Job. Done.

## 3. C'MON – SCHOOLS CAN COLLAPSE FOR LOTS OF REASONS

Oh no. Sensationalist Twitter people have picked up on another "off the cuff" comment.

Turns out I told ITV News "a school can collapse for many reasons, not just RAAC". Why the big fuss? That's just a fact!

It's obvious that 100-year-old school buildings that had been starved of cash for upkeep may just, like, fall down at anytime.

## 4. SOCIAL MEDIA GRAPHICS TO THE RESCUE!

Okay, I'm sure my whizzy social media team can fix this. 'Hands, space, face' worked a treat during Covid – let's just pull another three-word zinger out the bag.

**MOST SCHOOLS UNAFFECTED.**

Great. A child might be critically injured by concrete falling from the roof – but the majority of kids won't!

I really do not understand why everyone is laughing at Loser Labour's MOST BEACHGOERS NOT EATEN BY BIG SHARK parody. It's five words long! Rookie error.

## 5. TIME TO BLAME SCHOOLS (AGAIN)

Great, I've always wanted to go on The Jeremy Vine show. Let's hope he plays some inappropriate music such as Halo by Beyonce after I'm on air.

"Remember those walls I built? Well, baby, they're tumblin' down." A classic.

Time to seize the initiative again and get on the front foot. All guns blazing time – let's tell those schools to "get off their backsides" and answer my RAAC questionnaire.

Oh, Di Barran has just called. Turns out we've sent a load of snotty letters to schools that actually filled in their surveys months ago because our systems are knackered.

FFS!

## 6. IT MUST BE THE MEDIA'S FAULT

I've had enough. I've ran out of people to blame. Need to let off some steam at the "Conservatives in communications" event. At least it's private.

No harm in me saying those raising legitimate questions about my handling of this crisis are "not journalists, they're sensationalists".

I'm sure I'll get some laughs from saying I need fresh media training, too.

\*Thursday alarm\*

GILLIAN KEEGAN ATTACKS 'SENSATIONALIST' COVERAGE OF SCHOOL CONCRETE CRISIS

For goodness sake – I just can't catch a break.



# Executive Headteacher - All Through

Saint George's CofE All-Through School, Gravesend, Kent  
Salary: Highly Competitive to Secure the Right Candidate



## About Saint George's CofE

Saint George's C of E school was founded in 1580 and has a long tradition of working within the Gravesend community.

The motto of **'All Different, All Equal, All Flourishing'** emphasises the school's goal to ensure each student realises their potential and leaves Saint George's as a responsible, confident and articulate young person, fully prepared for adult life. The students' qualities are developed by an excellent education with a broad and balanced curriculum, a rich variety of enrichment opportunities, and experiences that extend beyond the classroom.

## About the Role

As the new Executive Headteacher at Saint George's C of E All Through School, you will have the opportunity to take this valued and consistently oversubscribed school on its next exciting chapter. The school has successfully undergone a journey of growth, with our Primary Phase opening in 2019. This role comes with huge amounts of potential for the right candidate to further develop the all-through school model and to contribute to the growth of a forward thinking and dynamic Trust.

We require someone who is driven and someone who can recognise and build on current strengths whilst leading a culture of continuous improvement. The challenge will be to ensure consistent alignment between our primary and secondary phase and ensure we maintain our reputation as the number one school of choice for our local community.

The Executive Headteacher - All Through will be responsible for providing proactive leadership and management of Saint George's in line with the vision of the Trust and will manage the day-to-day running of the school.

### Closing Date:

Monday 18th September

### School Visit Dates:

Thursday 7th September

Thursday 14th September

### Interview Dates:

Tuesday 26th September

Wednesday 27th September



## Secondary Curriculum Roles

**United Learning is developing a coherent, ambitious and aspirational curriculum to support our growing number of teachers across England. The curriculum and its resources aim to both reduce teachers' workload, and ensure that all our pupils receive an excellent education.**

We are therefore adding to our secondary curriculum team, and are recruiting for roles in **Design & Technology, French and Spanish**. Roles in secondary **Religious Studies** and **Physics** will also be opening soon.

As part of the team, you will refine and further develop an outstanding curriculum for our teachers to deliver. This will include working with the subject team to refine the KS3-4 sequence and schemes of work. Where appropriate, you will work alongside the wider secondary curriculum team to make meaningful links between subjects.

You will also develop the resources that can help teachers explicitly teach this curriculum – including lesson slides, printable resources, quiz questions, and other resources as appropriate. You will work with the subject team to ensure that the curriculum resources support high quality teaching, and you will collaborate with our central team to ensure that all resources are consistent with United Learning's overall approach to curriculum design and are IP compliant.

As required, you will develop and refine a wider range of resources for pupils, such as knowledge organisers or explanatory videos and you will respond to feedback from teachers, the curriculum team, and the Director of Curriculum.

This is an exciting opportunity to work alongside the wider curriculum team to help to shape our vision for the curriculum, and to develop resources that will have a very tangible and positive impact for teachers.

For more information about each of the roles, please visit the **United Learning vacancies page:**  
<https://www.unitedlearningcareers.org.uk/current-vacancies>

## DEPUTY HEADTEACHER



This is a unique and exciting opportunity for an inspirational and aspirational leader to join Blaise High School and further contribute to the life chances of our young people in the school and across the Trust. The school is on a rapid trajectory of improvement that will be sustained over many years and this role is a chance to be part of something very special. Blaise High School has made significant and rapid progress since becoming a part of Greenshaw Learning Trust. This role will support your career development and equip you for a further promotion within the Trust.

The staff at the school share a common purpose; that is the eradication of educational disadvantage in North Bristol. The staff at the school are committed to the school's values of Aspiration, Integrity and Pride.

The school's leadership are not only committed to developing a school grounded in academic success and the development of character but also want to build a school in which workload for teachers is sensible, manageable and well thought out. In our most recent staff survey 96% of staff said that they were proud to work at the school and planned to be here in two years' time. Blaise High School serves a diverse and vibrant community, with high levels of deprivation. It has a Resource Base within the school and this is something we are very proud of. We believe in evidence led approaches to teaching and we teach in a traditional manner built around explicit and direct instruction. The successful applicant for this post will play a key, strategic role, in the development of a strong and long lasting, school culture, taking Blaise High School into the top 1% of all schools in the country for progress made.



THE CONSORTIUM  
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Shaping Positive Futures

### DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

We are seeking to appoint a Deputy Chief Executive Officer, who will drive high standards across all schools, embedding consistent practices through policy and systems, in the best interests of learners. The postholder will:

- Act as Deputy to the CEO and provide strategic and professional leadership within this remit
- Develop and deliver the vision, ethos, strategy and performance
- Support the CEO and Trust Board through the provision of professional advice and guidance to develop and embed the ethos, values and strategic direction
- Uphold the Trust's values, and provide visible leadership across the organisation
- Work collaboratively within the Trust and schools to define and deliver high standards
- Be the lead education professional for the Trust

We are looking for a team player, who puts their heart into their work. We have some core values that run through everything we do, and we would love it if they resonated with you too.

[Click here to find out more](#)



EDGAR  
WOOD  
academy

## HEADTEACHER

Teacher Leadership Pay Scale L26 – L32 £81,927 – £94,898

The Trust and local governing body are looking for an exceptional individual with the vision, personality and strategic thinking to lead one of the most highly regarded schools in the area.

Edgar Wood Academy is a secondary school which welcomed the first year 7 students in September 2021 under wave 13 of the free schools' programme. Our brand-new building opened in September 2022. The school has already established a strong reputation in the local community and was significantly over-subscribed for 2023-24.

The school also benefits from a stable and talented staff body who are united in their aim of improving the educational opportunities and life chances of young people in their care.

The successful candidate will benefit from the full support of the Altus Education Partnership team and have the opportunity to work with colleagues from secondary and tertiary colleges and develop the sequencing of the curriculum across the phases.

ALTUS  
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The Shared Learning Trust

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