

# **EIS response to the Education and Skills Committee's call for evidence on school buildings across Scotland.**

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The EIS is Scotland's largest teachers' trade union representing teachers and is pleased to respond to the Committee's invitation to provide evidence on this subject. Below are the EIS' views on the issues around the safety of school buildings, remediating these issues, and any lessons that should be learnt for the future.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1 The EIS, alongside the rest of the trade union movement, has long been an opponent of both PFI and PPP schemes. This opposition derived both as a matter of principle and from a practical and operational perspective. In terms of the provision of capital to provide the investment in school infrastructure, the EIS regarded existing PFI/PPP schemes as being based on too restrictive a regime of local government borrowing. The EIS was also concerned that the principles underpinning the "best value" regime were undermined by the creation of the long term PFI/PPP contracts between councils and the private sector companies involved.
- 2.2 These PFI/PPP processes have had the effect both of radically increasing the drain on the revenue budget overall and, because of contractual protections and guarantees built into these schemes, radically reducing the ability of local authorities to control their spending priorities in future years over the length of the PFI/PPP contracts.

## **3. Safety of School Buildings**

- 3.1 The event that prompted this enquiry – the collapse of an exterior wall at Oxfangs Primary School – was an extremely serious incident which, but for sheer luck, could well have had tragic consequences. The subsequent report by Professor Cole recommends that local authorities act to ensure that all buildings are well-designed, properly-built and maintained to an extremely high standard. The safety, health and wellbeing of pupils and staff must be the top priority in the design, construction and maintenance of schools. This is not an area where corners or costs should ever be cut.

- 3.2 The legacy of the PPP/PFI funding model is too many inferior buildings, for which we will all be paying a vastly inflated price for decades to come. Scotland's pupils and school staff and, indeed, Scottish taxpayers deserve far better.
- 3.3 It is a matter of great concern to the EIS that, according to a BBC investigation, at least 72 more schools in Scotland were found to have similar defects to Edinburgh schools judged to be unsafe. Clearly, similar problems could occur at other buildings constructed under the same public-private partnership (PPP) scheme and using the same construction techniques.

Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-39580308>

#### **4.0 Future Action**

- 4.1 The EIS believes there is a clear need for an independent inquiry into the PFI / PPP model, with a view to ensuring ongoing value for money to the public purse and the health and safety of PFI/PPP/SFT built projects. The inquiry should examine the ongoing cost to the public purse of PFI/PPP/SFT projects, particularly through ongoing maintenance arrangements, at a time of austerity-driven budget restraint.
- 4.2 This independent inquiry into all PFI/PPP/SFT infrastructure projects in Scotland should also review existing educational PFI/PPP/SFT schemes in terms of the impact on education and the levels of service provided
- 4.3 The remit of this inquiry should include consideration of opening of contracts and charging regimes to public scrutiny and an examination of the opportunity of historic low borrowing rates on capital to bring back these schemes into the public sector.
- 4.4 Contracts which are found to be detrimental to education should be ended and the inquiry should operate with a view to provide proper safety controls and ongoing value for money.
- 4.5 Public sector clients should not rely on the quality assurance processes of contractors to confirm the safety of building projects. Independent scrutiny of the safety of building construction is essential to ensure safety and to restore public trust and confidence in private sector building projects regardless of how they are financed.

- 4.6 With the “block and brick” design of construction, safety inspection of wall ties and head restraints etc. should be undertaken before the walls have been closed-up. This will require construction firms to review and to revise their quality assurance procedures.
- 4.7 The Scottish Government should ensure that all possible support is given to staff in affected schools to help them cope any ongoing disruption – this to include, but not be confined to:
- (a) funding additional planning and preparation time for teachers;
  - (b) suspending inspections;
  - (c) providing additional administrative support to schools; and
  - (d) providing additional staffing to schools.
- 4.8 The Scottish Government should also ensure ensure that the Edinburgh Schools Partnership and all other private sector consortia meet all costs incurred resulting from any disruption.