

Education and Skills Committee

School Infrastructure Inquiry

Submission from Association of Directors of Education in Scotland

5 June 2017

The safety of school buildings is vitally important for the pupils, wider communities, staff and, indeed, the authority as a whole.

Councils will have a range of approaches to managing the school estate and, in the main, these are robust with few incidents over many years.

However, recent events have shown that there is a requirement to reassess current arrangements. The investment in the school estate over the last 10-15 years has been welcomed, albeit there remains a number of schools that still require replacement/investment. Clearly, some of these newer buildings have failed to meet expectations and, therefore, there are risks associated with the current estate which had to be addressed. From an ADES perspective, while as an organisation ADES does not have professional/technical expertise in terms of building structures and related regulations, we are committed to ensuring appropriate and proportionate arrangements are in place to provide reassurance that school buildings are fit for purpose.

Current arrangements include regular inspections, provision of core fact data on condition and suitability (to Scottish Government), and processes to enable staff to report concerns about any aspect of the building. In a number of cases this includes providing information via a help desk.

Following the Edinburgh schools incidents a number of schools across the country have been reassessed (including intensive surveys). This has resulted in remedial action being required in some of these buildings. While it would appear that the buildings in question were not at risk of imminent failure the fact work was required demonstrates current processes need improving.

ADES is aware of the recommendations from the Report (Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Construction of Edinburgh Schools), and supports these recommendations. In particular, the recommendation that Public Bodies Act as an 'intelligent customer' (1.1) is supported.

There should be clearer guidance on expectation and regarding Independent Certification.

In particular, it is suggested a national standard should be considered. Furthermore, it needs to be demonstrated that the Independent Certifier is independent. Equally important is inspection during the construction period to ensure any defects are reported and rectified.

It is important when public bodies procure projects through, for example, hubco there needs to be processes in place to provide diligence, and ensure that robust inspection processes are in place during and after the construction phase.

There are a number of recommendations in the report and ADES (Resources Network) are happy to be involved, where appropriate, in contributing to how recommendations are implemented. For example, ADES are represented on a group to refresh Core Facts condition and suitability guidance. This is particularly important for building users to have confidence that condition (and suitability) is being assessed rigorously and consistently. ADES understands that, in the main, surveys are mainly based on visual inspection and this needs to be reviewed. Where appropriate, and based on risk, include more extensive/invasive surveys.

A related issue is investment available, both for new schools and maintaining existing schools. As resources available to local authorities will decline this will become ever more challenging.

The 2009 Scottish Government/COSLA publication 'Building Better Schools : Investing in Scotland's Future' sets out a vision for the schools estate which remains relevant. However, this can only be achieved (and sustained) through appropriate investment. In some cases, in order to sustain schools of good condition and suitability, there may be need to be rationalisation of the school estate. Clearly, educational benefit will be imperative in this regard, but cognisance also needs to be given to the cumulative impact of limited resource being spread across potentially too many schools.

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