

Education and Skills Committee Inquiry on School Buildings across Scotland

Submission from RICS in Scotland

June 2017

1. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) is the principal body representing professionals employed in the land, property and construction sectors. In Scotland, the Institution represents over 11,800 members comprising chartered surveyors (MRICS or FRICS), Associate surveyors (AssocRICS), trainees and students.
2. Our members practice in sixteen land, property and construction markets and are employed in private practice, central and local government, public agencies, academic institutions, business organisations and non-governmental organisations.
3. As part of its Royal Charter, RICS has a commitment to provide advice to the government[s] of the day and, in doing so, has an obligation to bear in mind the public interest as well as the interests of its members.
4. RICS is therefore in a unique position to provide a balanced, apolitical perspective on issues of importance to the land, property and construction sectors.
5. This inquiry arises at a time when both the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament are considering how best to approach the issues around school building maintenance, and RICS welcomes this active engagement, and the opportunity to respond.
6. Whilst RICS does not comment on individual cases, we were concerned at the potential building safety issues with Edinburgh schools, and fully supported the investigation.

General Comments

7. It is imperative that political parties, across the political spectrum, work with the Scottish Government and the construction sector to regain the trust of the public, which was hampered by recent school building collapses and closures.
8. Property maintenance is an issue that encompasses all buildings, but is not as high on the Governmental and Parliamentary agendas as it should be.
9. All buildings have an attached risk, and it is a fundamental requirement of any property professional that all developments are constructed as safe as can be.
10. The construction industry participants should be more open, transparent and vocal on issues, and work with the Scottish Government in developing and implementing attainable solutions for collective good for the public, and not their vested interests.

11. Like the rest of the construction sector, RICS cannot comprehend how so many Edinburgh schools had flaws, and that concerning building snags were not escalated.
12. In the case of Edinburgh schools, there were a number of contributing factors that led to the building failures that occurred at the same time. Whether it was a lack of professionalism, skills, or experience; fear of whistle-blowing; a lack of supervision; or insufficient reporting mechanisms or protocols to escalate concerns.
13. As such, there are a number of sectoral elements that need to be considered.

Education (resource and skills)

14. It is imperative that any future system ensures that there are sufficient levels of skills and competencies on site that are adequate for the tasks at hand.
15. Unfortunately, the construction sector is within the midst of a chronic skills shortage, with the majority of building standards teams and service provision in local authorities is decreasing due to a combination of reduction in budgets and workforce.
16. Many experienced staff will retire in the next five to ten years, and very few graduate or other trainees are coming through the ranks.
17. Indeed, most Local Authorities, where Building Standards Surveyors are employed, are under severe financial constraints, and the fees received into departments are not ring fenced and spent on the training and development required.
18. As such, Building Standards require investment in both funds and staffing.
19. Furthermore, fewer higher education institutions are offering a building control / standards option to degrees in surveying.
20. Encouraging school-age students into built environment, and ensuring they receive adequate training and onsite experience has to be elevated in this Government administration's agenda.
21. Indeed, this inquiry needs to explore an approach that ensures competency and onsite experience, and training on quality assurance systems of project managers.

Procurement

22. The public procurement strategies, and the drive for competition, push costs down, with quality of workmanship and levels of supervision often sacrificed.
23. These, together with aforementioned skills shortages and decline in numbers of experienced tradesman, impact greatly upon the outcome of projects generally, including the School Building programme.

24. As such, there is a need to ensure that any future Scottish procurement process is robust, with clients exhibiting sufficient experience and professional qualification.
25. However, a further, key problem of the procurement process is the visible reduction in the role of the professional consultants on site. It is often the case that a professional's input to the building construction is of secondary importance to that of the builder or contractor. This needs to be addressed.
26. RICS believes that relegating the regulated, independent professional consultants to a subservient role has, on many occasions, reduced the quality of construction. This is prevalent in PFI/PPP and, more recently, Hub projects.
27. This has resulted in a carving up, and ultimately a reduction, of the professional services and responsibilities provided to the ultimate client. By thin slicing professional fees to reduce costs, the key services required to ensure important aspects of the project are either dangerously reduced, or passed over to the contractor; oversight of the construction phase is one example of the key services
28. Chartered surveyors are highly trained and one of the most regulated professions in the UK, and this ensures RICS professionals must follow very strict rules when surveying property and all phases of building and construction projects.
29. We therefore recommend that future procuring bodies request the use of regulated building surveyors and structural engineers when assessing and surveying school buildings to ensure future maintenance and building construction standards.
30. The parliamentary committee may wish to consider the introduction of licensing or quality mark schemes for builders. This could improve onsite skills and ethics, leading to an overall improvement in construction quality.

Finance

31. RICS in Scotland believes that Public Private Partnerships/Public Finance Initiatives (PPP/PFI) are a credible alternative finance model attracting capital investment into infrastructure projects.
32. PPP/ PFIs allow the public sector to harness the project delivery expertise, efficiency and experience of the private sector whilst ensuring further borrowing by the public sector is limited, if not avoided.
33. However, it has become apparent during the Edinburgh schools inquiry that both sides of the PPP/PFI contract had cut corners to save money. This was not good practice, and future arrangements will need to be put in place to ensure this does not happen.
34. The cost of the contract should not be based on the lowest tender.

Leadership, Supervision and Inspection

35. It is important that future policy dictates who will provide leadership; who will regulate, monitor and enforce quality and standards: Government or industry.
36. The parliamentary committee may wish to consider the introduction of licensing or quality mark schemes for builders. This could improve onsite skills and ethics, leading to an overall improvement in construction quality.
37. This inquiry brings to the fore stand out issues: a failure of management and supervision; a passing of risk; and whether the contracts put cost and time issues above quality.
38. RICS understands that the Scottish Government is considering whether procedural regulations should specify a minimum requirement for the inspection of ongoing building works, to ensure compliance with building standards. The inspection of buildings being paramount to alleviating risk and promoting safety.
39. Whilst the introduction of procedural regulations could help advance these two notions, more detail and scrutiny on the application of procedural regulations will be required in advance of its introduction. This should include consideration of measures against developers who commence work without the verifier being informed.
40. Finally, any future amends to the system should ensure consistency within each Building Standards office, and ensure sufficient inspection protocol.