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Convener
Education and Skills Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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School infrastructure – the independent sector

Thank you for your letter of 3 October drawing our attention to the Committee’s Report into school infrastructure, following the findings of the Cole Report. As the Committee will understand, the issue of building standards and safety is integral to our schools as their autonomous status requires that the school Governors/Trustees, and senior management, are responsible for the upkeep of the entire schools estate.

The independent sector

In the case of the independent sector in Scotland, this includes residential accommodation for boarding pupils and some core staff, as well as a wide range of properties related to teaching, sport and fitness, music, expressive and plastic arts, science and design technology, Combined Cadet Corps, and a range of extra-curricular activities and services. In one case, a school hosts and crews a fire service which is a Volunteer Unit of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

The independent school estate in Scotland includes 15 mainstream schools, and 1 additional support needs school, which are in or include Category A listed buildings of national or international importance. The foundation stone of the principal building of George Heriot’s College – still used for teaching today - was laid in 1628, and the “Bog o’ Plewlands” House at the core of Gordonstoun School was commenced around the same time. Many of our schools also have buildings currently under construction or renovation – so almost 4 centuries of building materials and practices need to be overseen.

Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS)

As the umbrella body for the independent sector in Scotland, SCIS aims to keep the entire sector apprised of developments in legislation and regulation affecting teaching and learning, child protection, workplace standards, etc. This includes any consultations and updates which originate with the Scottish Government’s Building Standards Division (BSD), including changes to the non-domestic technical handbook – such as to fire-suppression systems – based on the Building (Scotland) Regulations 2004 and other legislation.

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The Bursars of Scottish independent schools, senior management staff often responsible for the estates and buildings management in schools, are part of Scotland and UK-wide professional associations which share developments and best practice in a range of areas, including building design and upkeep.

Cole Report

In your letter of 3 October, you pointed out that the Committee had drawn the attention of SCIS to the Cole Report into School Infrastructure, and asked that SCIS support its members to understand any potential risks for the estates of independent schools and the appropriate actions to take. I can confirm that we have communicated with the schools both to convey the original Cole Report and its findings, and to do the same for the Education and Skills Committee Report. As part of a Bursars' Conference in St Andrews in November, the Bursars of the schools confirmed to me that they have studied the Cole Report and their Governing Boards will implement any recommendations which apply, both for existing buildings and for building projects of the future.

As far as existing school infrastructure is concerned, the majority have responded that most of their buildings are low rise and are solid in their construction. They have survived many severe storms with only occasional partial damage such as to roof slates and lead. Schools will make annual checks of flat roofed areas, conscious of the impact that snowfall and high winds might have.

Schools can confirm that existing building standards legislation is fit for purpose, and the independent sector uses its autonomy to provide facilities that are at least as good as the legislation requires. The next contribution to this will be the update of "The School Premises (General Requirements and Standards) (Scotland) Regulations 1967", which are currently open for consultation.

Grenfell Tower and fire risks

Fire safety is always a key concern for schools, not least those with kindergarten and nursery care, or school care accommodation services (boarding). In March 2013, the independent Glasgow Steiner School, based in the former Overnewton School building in Lumsden Street, Yorkhill, was gutted by fire after 65 pupils aged between 3 and 12 were evacuated safely.

Schools are kept abreast of all developments in fire safety, and are currently being consulted on the "Practical Fire Safety Guidance for Existing Premises with Sleeping Accommodation". In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, Education Scotland asked all schools, state-maintained and independent, to carry out checks of any exterior cladding and other materials. The Care Inspectorate made a similar request of all boarding schools and childcare facilities.

As an example, the High School of Dundee has an off-site dining hall which lies within a building of the University of Abertay. That building has aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding, so was included in a detailed response to Education Scotland. The High School is holding a test evacuation from the facility during term 2, and is discussing linking the fire system of the University of Abertay to the school's own to ensure they are alerted to any fire as early as possible.

In recent consultations, schools have made it clear that fire suppression systems, such as sprinklers, are primarily designed to protect the fabric of buildings, rather than their occupants. As a result, they see these as an issue for boarding and staff accommodation, as well as new or refurbished buildings. Schools' primary concern is pupil and staff safety, focussed on building design, fire prevention and evacuation drills.

Non-domestic rates

One issue of particular concern for the upkeep of school infrastructure in years to come will be the Scottish Government's recent decision to accept the Barclay Review of Business Rates' decision on non-domestic rates relief for independent schools. State school infrastructure is funded entirely by the taxpayer, and higher and further education receives considerable public support. Independent schools fund all works entirely from fee income and other fundraising. The decision to introduce a five-fold increase in business rates, unlike any other of the 24,300 charitable bodies in Scotland, has very serious implications for already-established school budgets in the short and medium term.

I trust this response reassures the Committee that the issues raised in the Cole Report about existing buildings have been considered in detail by the independent sector and will form part of their planning for any future school infrastructure. SCIS and the schools would be happy to provide any further detail required.

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