

Cllr Ball - RAAC part of Executive Statement

In my own portfolio I am always proud of the way colleagues work across directorates and services to achieve good outcomes for our residents and businesses across Essex.

Then

This way of working, one that puts collaboration at the heart of what we do, came into its own at the end of August with the change in governmental policy when the DfE published new guidance regarding reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) in schools. As you know, this guidance outlined that urgent action must be taken at any schools with known RAAC, unless a structural mitigation is already in place. And where mitigations are not already in place, then buildings affected must not be used until the RAAC has been secured through a structural intervention.

While it cannot be denied that this was a massive challenge, with officers mobilising to tackle the crisis as quickly and professionally as possible, this thankfully wasn't a cold start. The council has always been diligent in ensuring that we have surveyed schools and ensured that when RAAC issues have been identified, we have taken necessary action.

Indeed, between 1999 and 2006 a large mapping exercise and surveys were carried out across the ECC estate, with works to address RAAC then being initiated and prioritised based on the condition of the material.

Due this programme of works, the council addressed the vast majority of RAAC present across maintained schools, for which we continue to be the responsible body. And in the last four years alone, under the previous RAAC management guidance, we spent over £2m to address RAAC within those schools, and this is why in our list of maintained schools identified as having RAAC, only four have been affected since the institute of structural engineers updated its advice on the identification and assessment of RAAC in April 2023, or since the DfE policy change on 31 August.

Present

As you know, Essex is a large county and, collectively, we have responsibility for educating circa 220,000 school aged children and young people, across an estate of circa 550 schools. Of these, 62 have been identified as having known RAAC. Of the 16 maintained schools identified, all are now back to face to face learning as of this week. And of the 46 academies, five have a mix of remote and face to face learning – with all the others being face to face.

The Secretary of State recently characterised Essex as “working furiously” to get temporary classrooms and other accommodation into school sites affected. And whilst there is still disrupted learning, we will not lose sight of the fact that we have a great deal of pupils in Essex that are accessing part of their education remotely, and working in close partnership we are continuing to prioritise their return to full time face to face education and learning as soon as we are able to.

This said, I am pleased to say that every school where there is some degree of remote education, now has a confirmed plan in place for temporary accommodation to be on site or for remedial works to be undertaken. With surveys also taking place appropriately to ensure ongoing safety.

I want to offer my huge gratitude to MPs, Cabinet colleagues, Members, district leaders and chief executives for their understanding and engagement during this difficult time for parents, children and school staff. And I particularly want to note the leadership and tireless work of officers such as Clare Kershaw, Joe Chell, Ben Finlayson and their teams, as well as Andy Allsopp and communications colleagues. Their incredible management of the situation and their work not just with our maintained schools, but also with those academies and Trusts that have been affected, has mitigated something that was a crisis to a current state of play where there is sure progress towards stability for our children and young people.

Roy Blatchford of the Essex Education Taskforce often says that Essex doesn't do things by halves. And seeing everyone come together – concertedly – including from the business community, Roy's statement is I feel equally true of the response to RAAC and the ongoing work to restore full time face to face education and learning.