

# **West Lothian Council's RAAC bill will top £85m**

**West Lothian Council will have to foot a final bill in excess of £85m to cover crumbling concrete issues in schools and housing.**

Holyrood has yet to contribute despite a plea two years ago for £15m financial help in the rebuilding of St Kentigern's. It is understood negotiations between the council and the Scottish Government about support for RAAC costs is ongoing.

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) was a building material widely used in the 1960s. It has been discovered that the concrete is porous when it absorbs water and can begin to crumble threatening the stability of the structure.

As councillors discussed how much the council had spent so far on RAAC issues it prompted a veteran Labour councillor to ask recently: "How many potholes could we have repaired with that."

The Scottish Government maintained that it's been in regular contact with the council over RAAC issues but stressed that local authorities own and operate school buildings, unlike in other parts of the UK, and as such they have a statutory duty to manage and maintain their school estate.

Linlithgow councillor Tom Conn told councillors debating capital budget plans for this year that the council was trying to carry out a capital investment programme with "one hand tied behind its back" because it had to pay for RAAC remediation without government help.

The bulk of the spending on renewing the schools estate has gone on the rebuild of St Kentigern's in Blackburn- two thirds of which had to be demolished after RAAC was found three years ago.

A spokesperson for the council told the LDRS: "The cost of mitigating the impact of RAAC across West Lothian Council's schools, community buildings and council homes between 2019/20 and 2026/27 is estimated at over £85 million.

"This total includes the cost of the new £24 million Craigshill Primary School, which is being half-funded by £12 million from the Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP), a joint scheme between Scottish and local government.

"The largest single RAAC-related project in West Lothian is the ongoing £35 million scheme to rebuild more than half of St Kentigern's Academy in Blackburn, with discussions ongoing with the Scottish Government regarding additional funding support for this work."

As first revealed by the Local Democracy Reporting Service in 2023, the council has already allocated £20.2 million of its own money to the project and is seeking additional support from the Scottish Government to bridge the remaining gap. In total, the project is expected to cost £35 million.

Andrew McGuire, the Executive councillor for Education and an Independent, said he would echo Councillor Conn's comments: "The council has done better than any council in Scotland at tackling RAAC head on and we should be commended for that.

"My plea would be that my SNP colleagues speak to their colleagues in the Scottish Parliament and ask that we get some additional funding to help us get the end of the RAAC situation once and for all."

Referring to the rebuild at St Kent's in an update to councillors in June of last year finance officers said: "It

should be noted that the current estimated cost of £35 million as an overall development cost is extremely challenging and officers are continuing to work very hard with the project team appointed through Hub South East and the Tier-1 contractor to maintain that position.”

The Roman Catholic high school is the largest in West Lothian, with a roll in excess of 1,300 pupils travelling from across the county each day. It was built in 1973 and refurbished in 1995/6. An extensive refurbishment of the school was completed in September 2009.

St Kent’s counts chart topper Lewis Capaldi and Britain’s Got Talent star Susan Boyle among its former pupils.

The council has carried out works on several primary schools including Knightsridge Primary School, Balbardie Primary School, Windyknowe Primary School. Another, Riverside Primary was closed and the children decanted. This school has been demolished to make way for a new Craigshill primary school.

Contracts have now been issued to carry out RAAC remediation in council owned homes across West Lothian.

A spokesperson for the Scottish Government told the LDRS: “The Scottish Government has been in regular contact with each local authority where RAAC has been identified in schools. The Education Secretary recently met with West Lothian Council and visited St Kentigern’s Academy and was reassured on progress made by the council in dealing with RAAC identified in the school.

“National guidance has been available from the Institute of Structural Engineers to local authorities since March 2022. That guidance remains good practice for councils to adhere to and uses a risk-based approach to manage RAAC.”

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter