

# CONDITION REPORTS ARE KEY TO FUTURE FUNDING AND MAINTENANCE

Mark Few

Mark is a Director at Watts Group PLC and he says that the James Review has called for every school to carry out an independent condition report on their premises. In a funding climate where all expenditure is under scrutiny, now is the time to ensure that a diligent approach is taken towards the upkeep of school buildings

"We must have a system for school building which is much simpler, less bureaucratic, and which targets priority projects." This is the conclusion of the James Review of Education Capital, commissioned by the Government to look in detail at how the Department for Education (DfE) could achieve better value for money and improve efficiency via capital investment in schools. The review was carried out by a steering group led by Sebastian James, Group Operations Director of Dixons Retail PLC, and included Barry Quirk, Chief Executive of the London Borough of Lewisham, and Sir John Egan.

The review argues for reform of the capital allocation system so that investment is focused on the condition of buildings. Schools should take responsibility for their own maintenance; rather than replacing school buildings, vast amounts of money could be saved if they are not allowed to fall into disrepair. The report also urges making "best use of professional expertise" to ensure that optimum use is made of school budgets. In a letter to Education Secretary Michael Gove accompanying the release of the review in April, Sebastian James blames the failure of the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) Programme to spend funding wisely, on the fact that the "Government has not ensured that contracts are always negotiated by those who have the appropriate expertise."

The review makes a number of key recommendations. These include:

- Establishing a central database of school condition and carrying out independent building condition surveys on a rolling 20% sample of the estate to provide a "credible picture of investment needs";
- Revising and simplifying school premises regulations;
- Developing a clear, consistent DfE position on what 'fit-for-purpose' facilities entail;
- Reducing bureaucracy around BREEAM assessments;

- Putting in place a small number of new national procurement contracts to drive quality and value from any future building programme;
- Maximising the value for money delivered through maintenance and small projects; and
- Promoting standardised design.

In its initial response to the review published in July, the Government commented that "having carefully considered the review, we agree fully with its aims of focusing the available capital where it is needed most, and getting the best possible value from the capital that is spent...we must ensure that buildings are procured as efficiently as possible, so that the greatest possible number of children and young people benefit from the funding available. We must also ensure that buildings are fit for purpose."

In particular, the Government agrees that:

- The Department for Education must immediately start work to collect information on the building condition of the education estate;
- The funding available should be used efficiently, allocated by a funding formula that addresses greatest need;
- There should be flexibility in how best to deploy the available funding locally; and
- There are clear potential efficiency benefits from using a more centralised approach for procurement and building project delivery.

The importance of ensuring that condition surveys are undertaken across the school estate is further underlined by the latest round of capital funding for schools via the Government's new Priority School Building Programme. The demise of the BSF programme has left many schools around the country in desperate need of capital investment and some now find their buildings beyond economic repair. To tackle this problem, earlier this year the Department for Education launched a privately financed programme to provide school facilities, designed to address the problems of schools in the worst condition.

Provision of funding (to be announced in December) will be prioritised by determining the condition of school buildings and tackling the worst schools first. The application form calls for schools to provide evidence of need, based on a building condition survey obtained or updated within the last two years. Schools that cannot provide a condition report will not be eligible. This emphasises the necessity of school authorities to ensure they have their buildings surveyed on a regular basis – not only for the current funding application but also to ensure that future maintenance can be planned and carried out in the most cost effective and efficient manner.

Promoting effective maintenance, based on data provided by condition surveys of the school estate, is a cornerstone of the James Review. Making the right decisions across the whole range of school buildings from classrooms through to science, sports and arts facilities requires a thorough, strategic and systematic approach, bringing together the critical components of building fabric and services, energy and carbon.

Planned preventative maintenance (PPM) and stock condition surveys are an essential tool that enable those responsible for school buildings to monitor and control costs. To manage school property effectively it is vital to measure performance and determine future requirements. A successful PPM programme enables schools to do this by relating the condition of their property assets to projected improvements and their cost over a range of different timescales. With carbon management now high on the local government agenda, PPM also has a key role to play in promoting an understanding of the direct impact on carbon and energy reduction associated with a broad range of strategic property decisions.

A successful PPM programme also prompts consideration of a diverse range of property issues, timing projects to achieve economies of scale. A good example is that of a window replacement programme which could be tied in with other structural works such as roof replacement or external redecoration so that scaffolding only has to be erected once. With effective long-term maintenance in place, internal refurbishment programmes can also be scheduled to include aspects such as disabled access and works can also be brought into line with environmental issues so that, for example, a roof replacement programme could incorporate installing a green roof.

In collaboration with Franklin & Andrews, Watts has now developed a software tool linking lifecycle cost with in-built carbon and energy impact assessments. One of the key benefits of this software is the ability to perform scenario testing on different maintenance strategies at the touch of a button, enabling schools to make the right decisions about their asset strategy. This can be employed across an entire school estate or at micro level, looking at a single component, such as roofing, in one building.

The Department for Education has made assurances that new maintenance strategies will deal with the future upkeep of schools. This is another good reason for local government estates departments to ensure they have access to current and meaningful information on the fabric of the school buildings that fall within their remit. Without robust data, effective and cost-efficient maintenance schedules are impossible to implement. In the current fiscal climate, any tool that can be employed to keep expenditure to a minimum and achieve economies of scale should be used to best advantage. Pupils can still be taught effectively in poor buildings – bricks and mortar are only one part of the school environment. However, there is no doubt that good educational facilities enhance both the wellbeing and the life chances of our children. It is clear that only a proportion of those schools in need of new buildings will be provided with them in the foreseeable future. However, as Sebastian James points out, making best use of professional expertise to maximise budgets, promoting sharper accountabilities for maintaining buildings and utilising better procurement routes, “will help ensure that the current estate is able to deliver for our children in the decades ahead.”

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