

News release

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All councils must learn lessons to maintain the safety of public buildings following Edinburgh school wall collapse

In a report out today, the Accounts Commission highlights important lessons for all councils following the collapse of a wall at Oxgangs Primary School in 2016.

There were serious faults in procurement, design and construction which also then led to the large scale closure of other schools in Edinburgh.

Similar faults to those identified in the construction of Oxgangs Primary School were also found in other City of Edinburgh Council buildings, including libraries, community centres and care homes.

The Commission's report follows its consideration of the circumstances surrounding the wall collapse at Oxgangs Primary School in south Edinburgh in January 2016. The report emphasises the importance of all councils undertaking regular, comprehensive structural risk assessments and inspections on public buildings to ensure the safety of service users.

Where a council employs a company to provide construction services, it's vital that it puts in place appropriate checks and controls.

The Accounts Commission recognises the substantial amount of learning already taken forward as a result of this case, but says it is vital that all councils have a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the control and assurance of the construction of public buildings.

Graham Sharp, Chair, Accounts Commission said: "The City of Edinburgh Council responded quickly and comprehensively to the wall collapse at Oxgangs Primary School. However, all councils in Scotland must ensure public buildings in their care are regularly checked and appropriately maintained.

"While reduced resources mean councils must make difficult decisions about service provision, they should have an appropriate level of expertise to deliver and safely maintain buildings. People must have confidence in the safety and integrity of public buildings."

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Notes to editors

1. A statutory report is the means by which the Controller of Audit highlights audit issues to the Accounts Commission.
2. The Accounts Commission considered this report by the Controller of Audit on 8 March 2018 and agreed to reach findings which are published with the report.

3. Oxfords Primary School was one of the 17 schools included within a Public Private Partnership (PPP) agreement entered into by the Council with Edinburgh Schools Partnership Limited. The collapse of the wall occurred at an early hour in January 2016 and there were no injuries. However, in different circumstances considerable injuries or even fatalities may have resulted. Subsequent surveys of the estate covered by this PPP agreement resulted in the temporary closure of all 17 schools and the need to put in place temporary arrangements for educating over 8,300 primary, secondary and nursery pupils.
4. The final settlement agreement has yet to be signed. The council is currently withholding payments of £5.176 million to reflect the unavailability of schools. This compares with £3.1 million of direct costs incurred by the council in relation to the Oxfords incident.
5. The publication of the independent Cole report into the wall collapse at Oxfords also made clear recommendations for the City of Edinburgh Council and highlighted important lessons for all public bodies.
6. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
7. The Accounts Commission is the public spending watchdog for local government. It holds councils and various joint boards and committees in Scotland to account and help them improve. It operates impartially and independently of councils and of the Scottish Government, and meets and reports in public.

Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission for Scotland.