

A report on the impact of RAAC closure on the exam cohorts of St Leonard's Catholic School, County Durham

Professor Stephen Gorard and Professor Nadia Siddiqui
Durham University Evidence Centre for Education (DECE)
s.a.c.gorard@durham.ac.uk
nadia.siddiqui@durham.ac.uk

Summary

St Leonard's School, Durham has been seriously affected by the RAAC crisis. It was one of only two secondary schools in England that was required to close completely in September 2023, and is reportedly the school most affected by RAAC. This report explains what has happened.

It is important that the current exam cohorts in KS4 and KS5 are protected from the implications of the RAAC crisis, which is not their responsibility, and which has affected so few schools in England. The government, Ofqual, and exam boards need to devise a plan to relieve the anxiety of the students in this schools and any others like it, and offer them qualification outcomes equivalent to what would have happened in the absence of the crisis.

Purpose and structure of this report

In November 2023, the Durham University Evidence Centre for Education (DECE) was asked by Nick Hurn (CEO of the Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust) to report on the likely impact of disruption caused by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) in St Leonard's Catholic School, County Durham. It is clear that the measures taken to deal with the possible dangers of RAAC, coupled with the discovery of asbestos which hinders any rebuild, had many repercussions for the school, all staff (leaders, teachers and support), students in all grades, and their families. However, this report focuses chiefly on the disruption for students in the KS4 and KS5 examination years.

The report was completed at the end of December 2023. This means that it cannot compare the actual or "mock" results of current and prior exam cohorts, nor look at the progress (e.g. from KS2 or KS4) made by students in the current KS4 and KS5 cohorts. Such analyses will, of course, be possible later in 2024, but by that time it will be too late to take any remedial action for these cohorts and their one-shot at education. The report relies heavily on observation, and on accounts from those at the school.

The report starts with an introduction to the RAAC issue in England, and a brief description of St Leonard's School in Durham. It then describes the research questions, and the data used to address them. We summarise the available evidence on impact, particularly for the exam cohorts, and finally discuss some of the implications and suggestions for the future

Background

The relevance of school buildings and disruption to learning

School buildings that are enduring, reliable, safe, and built to boost the learning environment for pupils are an important underpinning factor in education. They promote the safety and well-being of both staff and students (Chithra and Negandra 2018). There is a considerable body of evidence that shows a strong relationship between sustainable school buildings and infrastructure and pupils' educational outcomes.

Appropriate school accommodation can affect attendance (Simons et al. 2010), student dropout (Branham 2004), civic participation and social engagement (Newman and Thomas 2008), mental health (Weist et al. 2003), pupils' well-being, social development, and belonging (Woolner et al. 2007, Fisher 2001). It can also affect academic achievement either directly (Young et al. 2003, Gaitani et al. 2010, Le et al. 2021), or indirectly via the former factors like attendance.

School is also a workplace for teachers, where they spend a substantial amount of time, and its suitability is important for their well-being, teaching efficiency, and long-term retention (Leung et al. 2006). Evidence from countries where natural disasters have disrupted school routines, school environment and infrastructure, all suggest that this can lead to an increase in teaching workload and extra responsibilities which means that teachers' time and efforts are diverted from their main role of teaching (Kuntz et al. 2013).

School as a place for learning serves a broader purpose for pupils, families, and for society more generally. School routines provide a sense of predictability and structure that can be crucial for pupils' learning and well-being. When these routines are disrupted, it can have a range of impacts, both in the short and long term (Gislason 2010, Barrett et al. 2019), for pupils' learning, well-being, and associated outcomes, especially for already disadvantaged students (Chetty et al. 2020). A recent example of such disruption was the Covid19 pandemic which led to the near closure of all schools in England, and internationally. According to the World Bank (Azevedo 2021), 1.6 billion schools were closed and the impact of school closure was manifested in lower attainment, a reduction in participation rates in higher education or the workforce, and lower average wages for the pupils affected (Fuchs-Schündeln et al. 2023). The RAAC issue is not as universal as Covid19, and may be resolved more quickly, but it is likely to have similar impacts for the exam cohorts involved, and they will be more discriminatory given that so few schools are affected.

By 31st August 2023, the DfE reported that 214 schools in England were unsafe due to problems with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC). The autumn 2023 school term did not start as business as usual for 156 of the schools, which received an official notice of complete or partial closure of school sites (DfE, RAAC Management Information, August 2023). The government advised school sites which were built with reinforced autoclave aerated concrete to close, because RAAC has reached expiry after a usable lifespan of thirty years. These 156 had to close at least some school buildings, and alternative arrangements were made which led to major changes in the learning and teaching arrangements. These alternatives included a delayed start of term, and/or remote or hybrid learning. These necessary safety measures have changed the way learning was implemented in comparison to a business-as-usual condition. Schools have different levels of challenges, depending on the severity of impact.

Of these 156 schools, 19 had the start of their term delayed. Another four were reported as using "fully remote learning" as the buildings were unsafe. Nationally, only two of these were secondary schools, one of which was St Leonard's Catholic School.

St Leonard's Catholic High School

St Leonard's is a state-funded secondary school with sixth form, in central Durham. The school is an academy converter and part of the Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust. There were 1,408 pupils at the start of 2023/24 academic year (in a "capacity" of 1,265), of which 11.5% are known to be eligible for free school meals (FSM), and just over 4% have an identified special educational need (SEN). There

were 236 pupils in Year 11 of Key Stage 4 and 98 in Year 13 of Key Stage 5. Ofsted notes that the school has a high turnover of staff.

The school has a KS2 to KS4 Progress 8 score of +0.64, described on the [DfE website](#) as well above average. The school is above local and national averages on all other available outcome indicators (Table 1).

Table 1 – Outcomes 2022/23 cohort, by school, area and England

Outcome	St Leonard’s	Local Authority	England
Attainment 8	59.2	45.2	46.2
EBacc average points	5.1	3.8	4.1
Grade 5 or above English and Maths GCSE	66%	41%	45%
Education/employment after KS4 (2021)	97%	92%	94%

Among the seventeen secondary schools in County Durham, St Leonard’s Catholic is in the top three schools for pupils’ progress to sixth form (87%) and participation in higher education (86%), including the highest proportion of pupils entering Russell Group universities (38%).

Having previously been graded good by Ofsted, the school was downgraded to “requires improvement” in January 2022. The report commended the quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, and sixth-form provision. However, improvement was judged to be needed in leadership and management, dealing with SEN and disadvantaged pupils, and relationships with parents.

St Leonard’s was listed as a RAAC school in August 2023, and was one of only two secondary schools in England to be closed completely at the start of the 2023/23 academic year. The school was only informed of this on Thursday 31st August 2023 at 2pm, one working day before the school was due to reopen.

The nature of this report

This report is based on an independent investigation by researchers at Durham University

In it, we present a necessarily brief summary of the impact and perceived impact of RAAC disruption to St Leonard’s Catholic High School, from August 2023 to December 2023. Our primary purpose is to understand the nature and depth of challenges faced by pupils and staff, and to judge the likely impact on pupils’ academic performance. The report documents:

- the nature of disruptions in school routines and learning formats
- measures taken by the school leadership and staff to mitigate the impact of disruptions
- the likely impact on pupils who are due to take KS4 or KS5 examinations this summer
- pupil and staff experiences and their concerns about the impact of disruptions on learning.

We collected primary data in the form of school observations, in-depth interviews and focus groups with teachers, pupils and senior leaders. We conducted three school visits, each with two researchers, in which we observed the school buildings affected, interviewed the senior leadership team, discussed the situation with 25 pupils, and with 16 subject leads and class teachers.

To enrich our understanding of the challenges and subsequent mitigations adopted by the school, we collected available resources in the form of internal survey reports and documentation of the events as developed by the school management team. We also used the DfE website Get Information about Schools, and their reports of schools affected by RAAC. This was supplemented with grey literature in the form of news, blogs and opinion pieces.

Summary of problems, and measures adopted by St Leonard's

In late August 2023, St Leonard's received notification of the RAAC problem, and the school was ordered to be closed by the DfE. In the first week of the autumn term, September 2023, the school had to cancel all lessons, and no teaching took place at all. This was necessary because of the very short notice of closure.

By the second week, the school offered some on-line learning for all year groups. This offer was restricted because IT resources were sparse with the IT hub and internet servers in restricted parts of the buildings. Pupils and teachers had only limited access to IT equipment and internet servers. A small number of pupils at risk or those facing extraordinary circumstances came to school, but still attended online learning on the school campus. A fuller timeline appears in Appendix 1.

Face-to-face and on-site teaching resumed slowly, with a continuing reduced and disrupted service for all. The school hired teaching spaces in the Radisson Hotel, St Bede's School, and Ushaw College of Durham University, four or more miles away. Pupils were transported to and from the school, using busses and coaches, to outside venues. This travel and the need to settle into a new routine decreased some of the learning time. Lunch and break times were increased to help and ensure that teaching staff receive adequate breaks. The school removed tutorial periods (pastoral time) from the timetable, due to the time taken for travel. This all reduced the available teaching time by around 90 minutes per day.

Once students were *in situ*, the new locations were not ideal. The school dissolved all classes into single year groups, and most lessons were delivered as lectures to large groups of up to 240 pupils. The new locations were a particular problem for students and teachers in vocational, technical, practical and science subjects. Practical lessons, including coursework and other projects, had to be suspended for most year groups. Practical lessons for GCSE and A-level students were delayed, and some science practical sessions subsequently took place using laboratory space at Durham University, available only in late afternoons (and not set up for school experiments or similar). Students reporting becoming tired after such a long day of studying.

Some of the rooms and buildings in the school itself were then given approval to be used safely. They included the staffroom, chapel, hall, sports hall, sixth form common room, sixth form library, the headteacher's office and other office spaces converted into use as classrooms. None of these rooms was designed as a teaching space, and they restrict the kinds of activities than took place. None permit practical sessions.

For example, the picture below shows an aerial view of the eventual conversion of the sports hall into temporary classrooms. The thin partitions with open ceilings are not sound-proofed, and the noise from parallel sessions is disturbing, and reduces the range of activities that are feasible.



(Converted sports hall: Aerial view of ten classrooms)

Students commented on these various changes:

You can't hear anything the teacher is saying

Teachers are so spread out that you can't contact them

The bigger classes mean teachers repeat stuff that others have already covered.

When the school resumed some face-to-face learning, the timetable was restructured several times so that any available classrooms and learning facilities could have maximum use. However, restructuring the timetable could not fully compensate for the challenges such as limited classroom spaces, and lack of access to science laboratories and specialised IT equipment.

The school adopted a pattern of four lessons in a day which resulted in a 20 minute reduction in the curriculum time for each subject. School, including alternative, accommodation was only open for each year group for four days per week, and on the other day pupils worked from home. Years 8 and 9 attended only one day at school (or alternative) for the whole of September. The sixth form were taught in full day blocks of the same subject, such as four lessons of Physics. These lessons would normally permit consolidation of ideas presented over several days.

Throughout the first term of over 11 weeks, the school had no access to the dining room, internal social spaces, lockers, and the chapel. There was no access to toilets. For half of the term there was no hot food. Many rooms had no desks, and some had temperatures as high as 27 degrees. There was no space for the usual individual or small groups sessions with SEN pupils, and nowhere to study or revise between periods, so some students with free periods reported not attending school at all. There were no lockers or places to put book and files, for students or teachers.

In March 2024, the current unsafe buildings will be demolished to make way for new buildings. The Sports Hall will be demolished, even though it is currently used for teaching and usually used for public examinations. The dining facilities will be demolished. All of this will cause further disruption just as the exam period starts.

The school adopted a communication plan to engage with pupils, parents and the whole school community. Communications were at individual and group levels in order to mitigate confusion, stress and anxiety. Email notifications were sent on a daily basis and changes in timetables were regularly communicated with staff, pupils and parents. Staff and pupils regularly communicated on designated chat groups and discussion forums so that pupils could receive instant information on their mobile phones.

Changes to teaching patterns by subject

In English and maths, all exam classes have lost curriculum time. Pupils were taught in groups of 120 for seven weeks, with no access to specialist texts for the full first half-term. In recent internal assessments, students are reported by the school to have achieved an average of around a grade lower than expected.

In RE, Year 11 classes were also taught in groups of 120 for seven weeks, with no access to textbooks or revision materials for five weeks. The Year 13 cohort is reported as behind on the course by several weeks.

History, geography, and modern foreign languages were mostly taught in the adapted sports hall, once face-to-face teaching resumed. Language students were unable to practice speaking or listening skills due to lack of sound proofing. Year 11 and 13 cohorts are reported as behind in curriculum time by at least three weeks. In humanities, no videos or classroom discussions were possible, which is not normal practice. Both exam cohorts are behind in curriculum time.

In social sciences, pupils are not reported as behind on curriculum coverage, but lack of space to work outside lessons has affected the quality of independent work (projects).

The subjects most affected are arguably those requiring specialist facilities and practical work.

PE and sports had to cope with no sports hall or playing fields (used for classrooms), and no access to specialist equipment. Pupils were taught in groups of 120.

In art, there was no access to facilities and Art rooms until week 5. Year 11 and 13 cohorts are behind in curriculum time by weeks.

In music, there was no access to any facilities. Musical instruments and recording facilities are still not accessible and instruments have not been retrieved. Year 11 and 13 cohorts are again behind in curriculum time by weeks.

In science, there was originally no access to science labs, and then only in off-site locations for limited access. All science lessons would usually be in labs (six hours per week).

Students in DT have no access to facilities in school at all. They had to travel to other schools to access limited use of DT rooms. Year 11 and 13 cohorts are behind in curriculum time by weeks. Practical subjects can emphasise theory versus practicals for the earlier part of the course, but exam groups need to complete coursework.

In computer science, there were no IT facilities at all until Week 4. The number of computer rooms in school has been reduced by six. A quarter of all computer science lessons have to be taught without access to computers. Year 11 and 13 cohorts behind in curriculum time by weeks.

The perceived impact on teaching

Rooming and timetabling

Teaching practices changed quite dramatically in this school. Teachers have adopted new plans and that increased their workloads. Covering the lost time with limited resources often in facilities which are not built for classroom teaching is reportedly having an impact on the quality of teaching practice. Teachers reported lack of satisfaction with the adjustments made in this time and they felt that none of the alternatives implemented could support their teaching practice to the best of standards.

Teachers made major changes in their lesson plans and modes of delivery due to the changing situation, and limited number of available resources. Teaching practices changed because the available facilities, room spaces and class sizes have changed. Teaching methods dependent on access to the internet and online materials were suspended because the IT hub was inaccessible for a long time. The school deputy-head and subject leads commented on the changes they made to adjust to circumstances at very short notice:

Teaching groups have changed because we have to accommodate with limited accessibility. This means we have not been consistently teaching the same pupils. This is challenging for year groups 7 and 8 because they need to have a consistent teaching approach in these years.
(Teacher AB)

My teaching has been really impacted by this situation. I have to make so many adjustments for each lesson and in doing so I am unable to catch up with feedback on pupils' work. I take marking home in huge bulk so that I can give any feedback to pupils.
(Teacher AC)

And this was a specific problem for practical lessons:

Our labs have not been accessible so we go to other sites. We have to finish the required number of practical sessions, and it is extremely challenging to manage teaching delivery on other sites. I had my own lesson plans but currently I have changed each plan that I have created and applied in my previous years of teaching to accommodate the changes and cover the lost time when we couldn't do any work in our own labs.
(Teacher AD)

A science teacher said:

Lack of science lab facilities have impacted on quality of my teaching practice. I cannot do much lab work now. Students hate science now as there are no experiments and lab activities for them. This would impact on their academic performance.
(Teacher AG)

The subject leads reported that their usual practice was to make specialised subjects look attractive for pupils by making classroom resources relevant to the themes taught in the subject. However, RAAC restrictions meant that they had to move to rooms and spaces where they cannot promote their subject to pupils. Most classroom spaces and available facilities are either temporary and/or jointly used by several teachers, and therefore a subject specific identity cannot be created.

In our discussions with teachers the alternative teaching practices were the best they could implement. In our observations of school buildings and facilities we can say that teaching quality could not be the best but at the same time there was no better way to improve teaching in the current situation.

Teachers responsible for pupils' university access and admissions reported that Year 13 students have difficulty in receiving offers for university. Some prestigious universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge University, conduct interviews which schools usually help prepare for. However, teachers said:

The school is responsible for providing support to prospective university students and we have done that very efficiently in the past which makes us the top school in Durham with student transition into higher education successfully, and particularly in Russell Group universities. However, this year is chaotic and we are even unable to provide physical space to support students taking interviews or submitting university applications. Only a few universities, such as Durham University, were aware of the situation and willing to provide special conditional offers to these students. Yet, most reputable universities like Manchester and Oxford, refused to adjust the entry requirements.

(Teacher AE)

Students do not have any tutoring time for choosing universities. I have to stand in front of the bus and tell students about the university reference.

Part of the problem is that “mock” exams usually held in November every year were postponed until February of the following year.

I cannot send students’ mock results to these universities as they refused to consider this situation. Many universities even did not reply to email.

(Teacher AF)

Teacher workload and stress

Additional teacher fatigue is a likely outcome of disruption in school routines. Adjusting to circumstances means that teachers’ workloads have increased this term, which can affect their work and relationships with students. Teachers’ well-being can be impacted when the school as a workplace cannot support their roles and the infrastructure makes them compromise on the quality of their teaching delivery. Teachers reported that they do not have any office spaces where they can work on their teaching and prepare lessons.

The structure of department offices was removed because they were required as classroom spaces. This means that it is more difficult for teachers to communicate with team members for teaching and learning support. This was perhaps most difficult for newer teachers, and several early career colleagues actually left the school during this period. The senior leadership team said that they have struggled to attract high quality teachers this term. There is so much going on that they could not focus on retention of early career staff. However, experienced staff members have also showed concerns about retention because the work environment is not supporting them in fulfilling their roles and the job has impacted their well-being at the workplace and at home.

All teachers involved in the discussions reported that they take more work home and this has disrupted their home and work life balance. A teacher commented:

There is no space to read or mark pupils’ work. I have to take loads of papers home so that I can work. My weekends are even not free because there is so much marking and planning to do.

Pupils could clearly see that teachers are working under great pressure, some commented:

Teachers have been working so hard in this time. I can see how they are trying their best to support but in the situation where there are no proper classrooms, libraries, spaces to do small group discussions, it is really hard for teachers to do their best.

(Student AC Year 10)

Teachers are tired and exhausted. It is so difficult to teach in sports halls where teachers have to talk loudly but still we cannot hear them clearly at the back row. The halls echo so much and teachers are disrupted by noise from other rooms.
(Student AB Year 7)

Teachers are so depressed and worked off their feet. They are tired. They have worked harder than normal. There are no breaks for them to have rest or take a short break. I can't imagine how they come every day and do this.
(Student AF Year 12)

Teachers' well-being is always associated with their retention and teaching quality. The disruption has changed teachers' existing routines and plans and added an extra burden to their teaching workloads, over and above the normal level. School leaders reported a noticeable increase in staff absences, which have been covered by supply teachers, not always satisfactorily.

Perceived academic impact

The school took rapid steps to deal with the lack of safe teaching spaces, but these best available alternatives were not generally liked by the pupils:

We sit in big halls because this school does not have classrooms for us. There are so many students and many of us cannot hear properly what teachers says in that room. Those sitting at the back cannot hear teacher at all. It is a very noisy place.
(Pupil AA, Year 7)

In September we used to attend school for two days only. We were doing lessons online. It is difficult because sometime my computer didn't work and sometimes teachers could not set up the online class properly. I don't know what they were teaching. I am not much happy about this school.
(Pupil AB, Year 7)

We go to Ushaw College for our classes. It is not the same as proper school. I feel I am not learning. We do different lessons but I cannot understand anything. We go there on bus everyday so it is a lot of time we spent on the bus.
(Pupil AC, Year 8)

Pupils taking practical subjects (including Design and Technology, Food Technology, Engineering, Physical Education or Music) are not able to have many lessons listed in the curriculum due to the inaccessibility of specialist teaching rooms. The school reported that only one of the normal 11 Science labs is accessible.

There were genuine concerns shown by all pupils in the discussion groups about their academic learning and performance in what they considered to be the most important (upcoming) examinations of their academic life. The strategies used to overcome the lost spaces, and lost curriculum time, have impacted on the quality of lessons. Blocked hours of learning the same subject and being taught in large groups were seen as worse than business as usual. Teachers' prompt feedback on pupils' work is important for the exam years but in the current circumstances teachers could not always meet the deadlines for feedback on individual pupils' work. Individualised tutoring and learning support for targeted groups are almost non-existent because the school has no space for these activities, which can make an important difference to pupils at risk and those identified as needing support.

The school prioritised lessons, practical sessions, and teachers' feedback on pupils' work, for those in the exam years groups, but still there were gaps in the form of lower quality lessons, even for these year groups, and in the amount of work pupils needed to catch up on due to time missed. Pupils noticed the difference in delivery to normal:

This period has been a real challenge and I don't feel prepared for exams at all. Classes were in blocks of five hours long sessions, and it is not possible to have the same learning as when we do the same lesson broken down in several sessions with a gap of time break in the middle. It is an important year for our academic life as GCSE results determine what we study in future, which university we will go. Our GCSE academic life was previously impacted by Covid and now this is happening. I don't think any of us could show good results in such conditions of our school.

(Pupil A in GCSE Year)

It has been so chaotic term. Each day there are drastic changes in our timetable and the way lessons are delivered. Teachers have combined class groups because there are not many rooms for teaching, and we have classes in which 60 students have been packed in small rooms and there is no proper IT equipment when teachers have delivered lessons. There is only one whiteboard for teachers and there is no access to Wifi for a long time. Teachers try their best but, in these circumstances, it is really hard to give us the best learning.

(Pupils B in GCSE year)

A few weeks in September we did online learning from home. It was very hard to concentrate on lessons. It felt like a blur day each day. The lesson quality were not the same as in real classroom. We couldn't interrupt and ask teachers as we can do in normal lessons. Maths is particularly hard to learn in this way. We cannot practice and teachers cannot see our work and feedback on our understanding in the same way. I am really worried that I will fail.

(Pupil E in GCSE year)

There is a lot to cover before exams. We have missed many weeks of learning and even now lessons are not properly conducted. Teachers are tired as they have to make changes on a daily basis. Teachers spend so much time in managing stuff which is not about lessons or our work. They spend time in managing classrooms, equipment, seating, noise, and IT for each lesson. In normal circumstances teachers just teach as everything is ready for them. Here they have to make different arrangements each time.

(Pupil G in GCSE year)

I am really working hard. I need extra support and counselling. This period impacted my academic performance because I haven't received my support hours in the same way. We don't have any space to do my sessions. All spaces are converted into classrooms. And it is so noisy during the lessons that I cannot concentrate.

(Pupil H in GCSE year)

Before this situation learning was fun. We could use more IT equipment during the lessons. Teachers used to prepare interesting and useful content for our learning. Now there is no such thing. It is just long hours of lectures in which we cannot get a chance to do things differently. Learning is not fun and I am not sure if I am prepared enough for my GCSE exams.

(Pupil I in GCSE year)

We have received feedback on our work but it is not the same. Teachers have to do a lot of management work and they cannot check our work and give us feedback as they used to do before.

(Pupil J in GCSE)

We attend science practicals on another site. Travelling to other places takes so much of our time. There is no learning when each day we spend time in getting to other sites. Travelling in buses is not learning. We have missed so much.

(Pupil D in A level year)

We are at the stage of applying for university admissions. Teachers are so busy and there is no proper space given to us for guidance on applications. While being bused from other site our teacher has been giving us some ideas and tips! My friends in other sixth form schools are doing proper sessions on this process. We don't have time and space for this in our school.

(Pupil F in A level year)

Despite teachers' best efforts, adjustments made because of RAAC are not suitable. The previous now closed classrooms are used as storage spaces to keep a large quantity of equipment and books, which are now inaccessible and unavailable as lesson resources. The converted classrooms were clearly not as fit for academic learning activities as the usual ones, because they were not soundproofed and lessons were frequently disrupted due to sounds and movements nearby, the voices of other teachers and pupils, and use of any learning tools and technology. Changes in timetable and adjustment in room allocations are frequent occurrences. Travel and adjusting to external sites added further issues. Pupils were merged into large groups so that the maximum number can make use of any space. This resulted in less space for teachers to move around classrooms and reach out to everyone while they are working on their own.

All of this is an ongoing issue for pupils at St. Leonards, and will not be resolved completely for some time (too late for this cohort). Building new infrastructure will take time, especially now that asbestos has also been found in the unsafe buildings. It is estimated that the rebuilt school will not reopen until 2026. The school is placing pre-fabricated teaching spaces on their sports fields, and these will be used for much of the teaching in 2024. This helps but is not complete at time of writing, is not ideal, is only for two of the year groups (currently taught in Ushaw College), is a 10 minute walk away across a dual-carriageway requiring staff supervision, and will have no specialist facilities. This use prevents the usual sports and exercise programmes from taking place – with possible knock-on effects for student well-being. It also does not overcome the learning loss from the first term. Building has been delayed due to bad weather.

It is clear that the academic learning experience of the groups preparing for public examinations in 2024 is not the same as that of their peers in the vast majority of other schools not facing these unusual circumstances. Exam cohorts will be mostly without specialist classrooms for most of the 2023/24 academic year. There is a plan to set up one DT room that will have to be shared by all relevant classes.

Perceived emotional and psychological effects

Pupils' emotional health and well-being appear to have been impacted. Most worries and anxieties are related to the lack of routine in patterns of learning and not being fully prepared for the exams in summer. Disruption in academic routines can have implications for pupils' emotional and psychological well-being. The stability of schedules and regularity of events at school have an important role for the learning process but the routine can also be a reassurance, and assist pupils' sense of emotional and psychological health and safety. This aspect is important for pupils' focus and concentration during crucial academic years of their life when their performance in national examination would determine their future path and destinations.

All pupils in discussion with us commented on being emotionally impacted by the changes in learning routines and formats. However, those who transitioned from primary to secondary in September 2023 and the ones in exam year groups were the most anxious and concerned. Pupils in the exam years of GCSE and A-levels were anxious because they were concerned about completing curriculum and having time for revisions for the examination:

My school experience is not very good since this term has started. I don't feel that I am learning anything in the lessons because classrooms are so noisy and groups are so big that we don't get a chance to stop teacher and ask questions. These changes have impacted on my mental health, and I don't feel like coming to school even. There is no space for us to read in our own time because the library is used as classrooms. I have missed many days and my attendance has been very low in this term. I don't feel like coming to school because it is a noisy and chaotic place.

(Pupil C in A level year)

It is a lot that we have missed since September and even now it is not the same. I am really worried that my performance will not be good and I will not be able to continue the subjects I like.

(Student AD, Year 11)

It is so hard for people to understand what we are going through. No one has RAAC issues in their school so they don't understand what it means to be studying just with clipboards and one whiteboard in a classroom full of 100 students taught by one teacher. There is no proper learning when we are so near the exams. My friends in other schools have done more things than we have here and they are far ahead from us. I am worried that my results would not be as good as I want because we have not learned things properly.

(Student AE, Year 11)

Coming to school gives me so much anxiety. Each day there are changes in the timetables and seating plans. There is no routine of classes. We do different things each day since the beginning of the term. There is no continuity of events in the school which makes me so nervous and not like to come to school.

(Student AE, Year 11)

The school has provided support and mentoring for the pupils in their exam years, but these strategies cannot fully compensate for the ongoing barriers to learning and access to required learning resources.

The adjustments and extra work faced by the leadership team are summarised in Appendix 2.

Previous and predicted results

Public examination outcomes in England have been affected since 2019 by the Covid19 lockdowns. This makes it hard to present a clear trend of prior results from St Leonard's. Table 2 shows that KS4 outcomes have improved, as far as it is possible to tell, since 2019 both in raw-score and value-added terms. If we compare these actual outcomes with the "mock" results, there is a strong possibility that the actual results for 2023/24 would have been even higher than in previous years. The Year 10 mocks in 2023 were undertaken with no knowledge of the disruption that RAAC would later cause. Given what is known it would be unfair to this new cohort if the actual results in 2024 were not at least as good as 2022/23.

Table 2 - KS4 results 2019, 2022, 2023, and predicted for 2024

Cohort	N	FSM percentage	Year 10 mock	Year 11 November mock	Year 11 March mock	Progress 8	Attainment 8
2018/19	220	21	-	-	-0.61	-0.09	50.9
2021/22	231	11	-0.53	-0.61	-0.05	+0.48	58.5
2022/23	236	9	-0.61	-0.40	+0.16	+0.64	59.2
2023/24	-	11	+0.04	Prediction +0.24	Prediction +0.70	Prediction +1.00	-

Note: Year 11 November mocks did not place in 2023, due to RAAC disruption.

With less data available, a similar improving trend is discernible at KS5 (Table 3). However, the results for 2021/22 were affected by Covid19 suspension of examinations, and may be higher as a consequence.

Table 3 – KS5 results 2019 and 2022

Cohort	N	A level equivalent average points
--------	---	-----------------------------------

2017/18	-	34.5
2018/19	93	36.3
2021/22	90	41.7
2022/23	98	-

Discussion

The school has suffered reputational damage, through no fault of its own, because of the RAAC crisis and its publicity. Both staff and students have reportedly left the school because of this. Such damage may matter for the future, but is less relevant to current exam cohorts except that it:

- Makes comparison with raw scores from other years less feasible than usual
- Contributes to the pressures on morale for the whole school.

For many of the pupils in St Leonard’s the RAAC crisis has built on the strain of the Covid19 lockdowns and disruption to school life. Covid19 affected all schools, and it was decided nationally that exams could not take place as normal for several cohorts. Nationally, new ways were devised for assessing exam cohorts and providing qualifications, based more on school “predictions”.

The RAAC crisis is much more targeted, affecting only a few schools, and only some of these most severely. The DfE has addressed this by offering crisis funding in the short term, and support to re-develop the buildings in the longer term. However, no policy has yet been devised to protect the results of the exam cohorts most affected. It is not clear why. Exam boards and Ofqual do not seem equipped or prepared to help appropriately at this stage. It is not just a matter of dealing with the eventual outcomes, but also helping to address the students concerns in the present.

Most pupils and staff at St Leonard’s have experienced the years of Covid19 pandemic, and so they can draw a comparison between the learning experiences then and under their current circumstances. We asked staff and students about this, and there was a consensus that it is worse than they experienced during lockdowns. The justification was that they could see other local schools and pupils progressing each day as normal without any disruptions. However, the situation at St Leonard’s is only impacting them, and outsiders may find it hard to relate to the problems of limited space, travelling to other sites for lessons, lack of science labs, inaccessible library and study spaces, lack of space to seek academic support for university admissions, and blocked lessons taught in noisy converted spaces.

The main concern of pupils (and staff) is that their academic performance will be judged as though their schooling was normal, without accounting for the challenges they have experienced and will continue to experience for the foreseeable future.

Implications

The plan is for exam year students at St Leonard’s to take exams in summer 2024 as normal. The school feels that this is an important process for them, and would help others to see the resulting grades as “authentic” (e.g. for university or career entry). The school has prioritised teacher time, and access to classrooms and facilities for the exam year groups, as far as possible. However, the situation is far from normal. Students in this school specifically have faced exceptional and disruptive circumstances for the Autumn term and these will continue for the rest of the year. The circumstances have reduced lesson time and quality, prevented specialist lessons, and made school life harder for all. Despite assistance and finance from the DfE and others, there has been an inevitable compromise in the quality of teaching, learning and pastoral care.

The exceptional circumstances described above are not covered by existing exam board and regulator policies on special considerations for students. It is not a question of submitting forms for each pupil, for each subject, from February 2024 onwards. The lost learning of the entire exam cohort for KS4 and KS5 should be compensated for in some way. None of this disruption is the fault of the students, and it seems reasonable that their futures should be protected by a one-off decision for this year.

Exactly how this protection could be achieved would be up to exam boards and regulators. It would presumably involve the automatic application of special considerations to all pupil's exam performances. Current guidance for special considerations suggests an inflation of 5% of marks. This could be the minimum for each exam cohort. Given the length and depth of the disruption described above, the inflation could be greater (perhaps 10%), and dependent to some extent on the nature of disruption for each subject. The DfE could perhaps direct that something like this takes place as part of their package of measures to help those few schools faced with the worst of the RAAC crisis.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the help given by the staff and students of St Leonards, for the assistance with interviews provided by researchers Carolina Gazmuri and Fujia Yang, and for data collation done by researcher Wenqing Chen.

References

- Azevedo, J., Rogers, F., Ahlgren, S., Cloutier, M., Chakroun, B., Chang, G. and Bergmann, J. (2021). The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery (Vol. 2): UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank. Available at: [The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery \(worldbank.org\)](https://www.worldbank.org)
- Barrett, P., Treves, A., Shmis, T. and Ambasz, D. (2019). *The impact of school infrastructure on learning: A synthesis of the evidence*. Washington, DC World Bank Group
- Branham, D. (2004). The wise man builds his house upon the rock: The effects of inadequate school building infrastructure on student attendance. *Social Science Quarterly*, 85(5), 1112-1128.
- Chetty, R., Friedman, J. and Stepner, M. (2020). *The economic impacts of COVID-19: Evidence from a new public database built using private sector data* (No. w27431). National Bureau of Economic Research. Working Paper: DOI 10.3386/w27431
- Chithra, V. and Nagendra, S. (2018). A review of scientific evidence on indoor air of school building: Pollutants, sources, health effects and management. *Asian Journal of Atmospheric Environment*, 12(2), 87-108.
- Department for Education (DfE). Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC): Management information. 31st August 2023. [Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete \(RAAC\): management information - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)
- Fisher, K. (2001). Building Better Outcomes: *The Impact of School Infrastructure on Student Outcomes and Behaviour*. *Schooling Issues Digest*. Report: Australian Dept. of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra. ERIC Number: ED455672
- Fuchs-Schündeln, N., Krueger, D., Kurmann, A., Lalé, E., Ludwig, A. and Popova, I. (2023). The fiscal and welfare effects of policy responses to the Covid-19 school closures. *IMF Economic Review*, 71(1), 35-98.
- Gaitani, N., Lehmann, C., Santamouris, M., Mihalakakou, G. and Patargias, P. (2010). Using principal component and cluster analysis in the heating evaluation of the school building sector. *Applied Energy*, 87(6), 2079-2086.
- Gislason N (2010) Architectural design and the learning environment: A framework for school design research. *Learning Environments Research* 13: 127–145.
- Kuntz, J., Näswall, K. and Bockett, A. (2013). Keep calm and carry on? An investigation of teacher burnout in a post-disaster context. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 42(2).

- Le, A., Park, K., Domingo, N., Rasheed, E. and Mithraratne, N. (2021). Sustainable refurbishment for school buildings: a literature review. *International Journal of Building Pathology and Adaptation*, 39(1), 5-19.
- Leung, M., Chan, J. and Wang, Z. (2006). Impact of school facilities on working behavior of teachers. *International Journal of Strategic Property Management*, 10(2), 79-91.
- Newman, M. and Thomas, P. (2008). Student participation in school design: one school's approach to student engagement in the BSF process. *Co-Design*, 4(4), 237-251.
- Simons, E., Hwang, S., Fitzgerald, E., Kielb, C. and Lin, S. (2010). The impact of school building conditions on student absenteeism in upstate New York. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(9), 1679-1686.
- Weist, M., Evans, S. and Lever, N. (2008). *Handbook of School Mental Health: Advancing practice and research*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Woolner, P., Hall, E., Higgins, S., McCaughey, C. and Wall, K. (2007). A sound foundation? What we know about the impact of environments on learning and the implications for Building Schools for the Future. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33(1), 47-70.
- Young, E., Green, H., Roehrich-Patrick, L., Joseph, L. and Gibson, T. (2003). Do K-12 School Facilities Affect Education Outcomes? Staff Information Report. [ERIC - ED479494 - Do K-12 School Facilities Affect Education Outcomes? Staff Information Report., 2003-Jan](#)

Appendix 1

Timeline - September to December 2023

Week 1: 4th September:

- All lessons postponed. No teaching takes place. Sixth Form invited to the Radisson Hotel and St Chad's College, Durham University, for pastoral induction: 1 day.

Week 2: 11th September:

- All lessons take place online. Year 7-11 invited into school for 1 day for a pastoral induction. No face-to-face teaching. Vulnerable pupils brought into school to compete online learning in a bubble. SEND pupils prioritised for this.

Week 3: 18th September:

- Staffroom / Chapel / Hall / Sports Hall / Sixth Form Common Room / Sixth Form Library / Headteacher's office and other office spaces converted into use as classrooms.
- All classes dissolved. Restructured timetable created with a 4 period day. Curriculum time reduced by 20 minutes.
- Sixth Form taught in full day blocks of the same subject: e.g. Physics all day. Year 13 taught in school. Year 12 taught in the Radisson Hotel in one open conference space. 10 different lessons happening in one space at one time with no IT facilities.
- Year 11 in school 5 days a week. Taught in groups of up to 120. Pupils taught without desks and working from clipboards. Very minimal IT facilities for lessons. Normal teachers and classmates completely changed.
- Years 7 and 10 in school 2 days a week. Taught in groups of up to 240 in the Sports Hall. Online learning in groups of 240 when not in school. Year 10 not taught Options subjects yet, 13 hours lost in curriculum time for these subjects so far.
- Year 9 and Year 8 in school 1 day a week. Taught in groups of up to 240 in the Sports Hall. Online learning in groups of 240 when not in school.
- Changes to staff timetable made on Thursday for the following week. Staff have minimal time to plan and prepare.
- No IT facilities for any department to use with pupils.
- No specialist facilities for any subject.

Week 4: 25th September:

- Sixth Form taught in full day blocks of the same subject. Year 12 taught in school. Year 13 taught in the Trust HQ: c. 20 miles away. 10 different lessons happening in one space at one time with no IT facilities.
- Year 11 in school 4 days a week. Taught in groups of 30-120. Pupils taught without desks and working from clipboards. Pupils complete independent work with no teacher input one day a week from home: due to staff not being able to be in two places at once; re in school and online (no access to IT to be able to broadcast).
- Years 7-10 in school 2 days a week. Taught in groups of up to 240. Online learning in groups of 240 when not in school. Year 10 not taught Options subjects yet.
- Changes to staff timetable made on Friday for the following week. Staff have minimal time to plan and prepare.
- No IT facilities for any department to use with pupils.
- No specialist facilities for any subject.

Week 5: 2nd October:

- Sixth Form taught in full day blocks of the same subject. Year 12 taught in school. Year 13 taught in the Trust HQ: c. 20 miles away. 10 different lessons happening in one space at one time with no IT facilities. Students spend 1 hour of curriculum time being transported to and from HQ.
- Year 11 in school 4 days a week. Taught in groups of 30-120. Pupils taught without desks and working from clipboards. Pupils complete independent work with no teacher input one day a week from home. Year 11 not taught Options subjects in person this week.

- Years 10, 9 and 7 in school 3 days a week. Taught in groups of up to 240. Online learning in groups of 240 when not in school. Year 10 finally taught Options subjects.
- Year 8 in school 2 days a week. Taught in groups of up to 240. Online learning in groups of 240 when not in school.
- Changes to staff timetable made on Friday for the following week. Staff have minimal time to plan and prepare.
- No specialist facilities for any subject apart from the Art department. The Art department can access classrooms but have no IT facilities. Only the Computer Science department have access to IT facilities to use regularly with pupils, which are recently bought in laptops.

Week 6: 9th October:

- Sixth Form taught in full day blocks of the same subject. Year 13 taught in school. Year 12 taught in the Trust HQ: c. 20 miles away. 10 different lessons happening in one space at one time with no IT facilities. Students spend 1 hour of curriculum time being transported to and from HQ.
- Year 11 in school 4 days a week. Taught in groups of 30-120. Pupils taught without desks and working from clipboards. Pupils complete independent work with no teacher input one day a week from home.
- Years 10, 9 and 7 in school 3 days a week. Taught in groups of up to 240. Online learning in groups of 240 when not in school. Year 10 not taught Options subjects.
- Year 8 at Ushaw College for face-to-face teaching everyday. Pupils taught in groups of 60. Transport of pupils taking place during curriculum time. Pupils lose on average 1 hour of curriculum time for transport. Lunch and break time increased to ensure agency and teaching staff receive adequate breaks. Curriculum time reduced by at least 1.5 hours every day. Removal of tutor time (Pastoral time) due to transport time.
- Changes to staff timetable made on Friday for the following week. Staff have minimal time to plan and prepare.
- No specialist facilities for any subject apart from the Art department. The Art department can access classrooms but have no IT facilities. Only the Computer Science department have access to IT facilities to use regularly with pupils.

Week 7: 16th October:

- Sixth Form taught in full day blocks of the same subject. Sixth Form taught in school.
- Year 9, 10 and 11 in school 4 days a week. Taught in groups of 30-120. Pupils taught without desks and working from clipboards. Year 10 finally taught Options subjects. Year 11 pupils complete independent work with no teacher input one day a week from home. Year 9 and 10 complete online learning in groups of 240 when not in school.
- Year 7 and 8 at Ushaw College for face-to-face teaching every day. Pupils taught in groups of 60 at all times for Year 8 and 75% of time for Year 7. Transport of pupils taking place during curriculum time. Pupils lose on average 1 hour of curriculum time for transport. Lunch and break time increased to ensure agency and teaching staff receive adequate breaks. Curriculum time reduced by at least 1.5 hours every day. Tutor time removed due to transport time.
- Changes to staff timetable made on Friday for the following week. Staff have minimal time to plan and prepare.
- No specialist facilities for any subject apart from the Art department. The Art department can access classrooms but have no IT facilities. Only the Computer Science department and Engineering department have access to IT facilities to use regularly with pupils.
- Access to specialist facilities: Yr11 travel to St Bede's School, 20 minutes away, each afternoon, after the school day, to focus on science practicals.

Half-Term onwards

- Ushaw College: Year 7 and 8 at Ushaw College for face-to-face teaching every day. Pupils taught in groups of 60. Year 7 are taught in groups of 30 for 25% of teaching time. Transport of pupils taking place during curriculum time. Pupils lose on average 1 hour of curriculum time for transport. Lunch and break time increased to ensure agency and teaching staff receive adequate breaks. Curriculum time reduced by at least 1.5 hours every day. No tutor time. No hot meal provision.

- St Leonard's: All pupils taught in groups of 30 following a 5-period day. Re-written timetable causing changes to teachers and re-rooming of classes happening daily causing severe disruption. No curriculum time lost in theory, in practice classroom teachers and students are moving across the site to access rooms in areas of the school that would not ordinarily be used. Surveyed teachers say that on average 10 minutes is lost per lesson before each lesson can begin.
 - Sports Hall: converted into 10 classrooms without ceilings. No sound proofing. These rooms require lessons to be re-planned with only limited discussion, videos or listening activities.
 - Specialist Facilities: none available for DT, Food technology, Engineering, PE or Music. Only 1 out of the normal 11 Science labs available.
 - External Specialist Facilities: Our A Level students are using science labs at Durham University. There is a plan to use local schools at the end of the half-term for access to DT facilities for Year 11.
 - No dining room / inside social space: Reduced so that pupils are sitting on the floor in the school gym to eat their lunch.

Appendix 2

Impact on the Leadership team

What follows is a brief account of disruption to the actions of, or additional tasks for, the leadership team in the school, with likely knock-on impacts on school functioning and performance.

- Meetings: DfE / Trust / Governance / Family Daily and sometimes up to 2-3 meetings a day between the school and various partners including holidays. This included multiple site visits to seek appropriate accommodation, 2 ministerial visits, 3 family meetings: in-person and online.
- Meetings / Communication: Ushaw College / Durham University: various and plenty.
- Communication: Family / Staff: Daily communication was produced in the first half-term to families and staff increasing workload hugely. Responding to multiple individual families on a daily basis has been extremely time consuming.
- Media / MPs: Significant work has had to be put into preparing media statements and having meetings with relevant MPs.
- Leadership: We have had to adapt completely our development and operational plans for this year including all substantial planning. We have also had to rearrange our overall roles and responsibilities to respond to the current need.
- Ushaw Site: Running the 'Ushaw site' is essentially running a mini-school: needing the appropriate levels of leadership: senior and middle, teaching and support staff and all the related work: safeguarding, teaching and learning, pastoral support and operational aspects: e.g. health and safety. Additional capacity is needed each day re safeguarding training for supply staff.
- St Leonard's Site: Adapting the St Leonard's site has taken substantial work in terms of rearranging spaces to become classrooms, toilet access and dining spaces.
- Operational: Support staff have had to contribute significant additional workload in terms of site, administration, ICT, cleaning and dining across both sites.
- Teaching and Learning: Significant work has had to be completed by Heads of Department replanning and resequencing the curriculum in light of changes to accommodation. This has included extra teaching. This report demonstrates a major piece of work in considering the impact of this situation on our students due to sit terminal examinations in the summer.
- Financial: Significant time spent on justifying revenue cost to DfE.