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Standards for School Premises – Response to Consultation

Background

The Institute of Acoustics is the leading professional body in the United Kingdom concerned with acoustics, noise and vibration. The Institute is a nominated body of the Engineering Council, a member of the International Institute of Noise Control Engineering and the International Commission on Acoustics, and a founding member of the European Acoustics Association. Its members are active in research, educational, environmental, consultancy and industrial organisations, and take a leading role in the development of UK, European and International legislation, policy and standards on acoustics and noise. Many members are involved in research or consultancy concerned with the design of school buildings.

Members of the Institute were invited to respond to the consultation document 'Standards for School Premises'. Their comments form the basis of the response of the Institute of Acoustics presented here.

Section 3.1 Question

Do you agree that this [the acoustic regulation] adequately covers the requirements for acoustics. If not, why not?

The Institute welcomes the retention of the regulation on acoustics in the School Premises Regulations. It is essential that acoustic conditions within schools are designed to the high standards required to provide optimum teaching and learning conditions.

The regulation as stated is appropriate as an overarching statement subject to the qualification set out in Annex C. The Institute also welcomes the retention of a framework for the acoustic design of school buildings in the form of the revised document 'Acoustic Design of Schools', to replace Section 1 of Building Bulletin 93 (BB93). The link between the SPR and Requirement E4 performance standards provided by Annex C is a particularly useful addition to the SPR.

According to Annex C the SPR must ensure that school premises comply with Requirement E4 of the Building Regulations so that every room in a school has acoustic conditions appropriate to its use, as specified in the new document 'Acoustic Design of School Buildings' to be published in 2012.

It is noted that, according to Annex C, Requirement E4 will in future be satisfied if the specified performance standards for sound insulation, reverberation time and indoor ambient noise levels are satisfied. The implication is that speech intelligibility in open plan areas will in future be governed by the SPR alone. This requirement should be highlighted in Annex C.

Section 3.3 Question

Do you agree that these regulations adequately cover the requirements for boarding schools? If not, why not?

It is not clear whether residential and sleeping accommodation in boarding schools qualifies as 'rooms for residential purposes' subject to Part E of the Building Regulations, in which case standards for sound insulation should apply. This needs clarification here and in Annex C.

Section 8.3 Question

Which of the current guidance documents do you particularly value and why?

Building Bulletin 93 is extensively used by members and its value as the only comprehensive source of technical and design guidance for acoustics in schools is widely recognised. Since 2003 it has helped to ensure that all new schools are designed to similar acoustic standards which provide appropriate acoustic conditions for teaching and learning.

It is recognised by members that BB93 requires revision and updating to reflect current aspects of school design and educational practice, in order to continue to maintain optimum acoustic standards in schools and other educational establishments. Guidance on the refurbishment of existing buildings or change of use will be particularly important in the current climate.

Additional comments

In addition to the responses to specific questions, the following areas of concern and query were raised by members.

Enforcement

It is generally felt that the current system of 'design checks by Building Control Bodies', referred to in Annex C, is a very unsatisfactory and inadequate means of enforcing the regulations. While Annex C refers to 'recommended' acoustic testing of new school accommodation it is felt that mandatory pre-completion testing of at least

a sample of rooms is required to ensure compliance with both the SPR and the Building Regulations.

Application of SPR

It is understood that the revised SPR will apply to all maintained and independent schools including academies and free schools. It is noted that nursery schools are also covered by the regulations but it is not clear whether they apply to all early years' provision or to sixth form colleges.

Concern was expressed about the difficulty of ensuring that *all* school estates including existing school premises comply with the performance standards of Requirement E4 of the Building Regulations, as now required by the revised SPR.

Management issues

This section under 'Acoustics' in Annex C should be expanded to include particular advice on the importance of effective timetabling of adjacent and linked spaces (particularly open plan areas); using spaces for the purposes for which they were designed; and realistic expectations with regard to sound insulation.