



Podcast Transcript - Exploring the different approaches of multi-academy trusts and overcoming the common hurdles they face

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Hello and welcome to the AHR podcast where we engage in captivating conversations about the built environment and its influence on shaping a more positive future. I am Samantha Smith, Director of AHR Building Consultancy and have worked with many schools, academies, academy trusts, diocese and local authorities in helping them to strategically develop their portfolios. I have worked in the education sector for over 30 years and can honestly say that it's the most rewarding sector I have ever worked in. However, the challenges that don't change with aging estates, limited budgets, how can we manage our educational estates in a way that accommodates the needs of an ever increasing and evolving school population? I'm joined today by Sue Corbett, Head of Capital Programmes at STAR Academies and John Robinson, Director of Operations at the Rowan Learning Trust.

So, let's begin. Welcome Sue. Can you give us a brief background of your role please?

Sue Corbett

Hi Sam, I'm Sue Corbett, I'm Head of Capital Programmes at Star Academies. My role is far reaching. I look after the condition of our school estate, our capital funding for that. We also have two schools in the School Rebuilding Programme, so I'm overseeing those two projects. And I also have a number of free schools, pipeline free schools. We have 33 schools in our trust, 18 of those are free schools, some of which we've self-delivered. So yeah, busy role, lots of schools, but very exciting.

Samantha Smith

That's great. Thanks, Sue. And John, please, can you tell us a bit about your role and background?

John Robinson

Hi, my name is John Robinson. I'm the director of operations for The Rowan Learning Trust. We're a medium sized map with nine schools based in purely in the Northwest, ranging from secondary primary, and we have an AP provision as well. My background's in actually in IT, but I moved into the estates arena a number of years ago. And I wear a number of hats as well, estates, compliance, health and safety, IT and a few other bits as well. We've seen much of our growth more recently with voluntary conversions rather than sponsorships. So that's given us a slightly different experience.

Samantha Smith

Great, thanks very much both. So we've heard a little bit about the size of your trust and estates, but what I'd like to explore is how do you manage your estates within the constraints of a limited budget, whether you're a large trust or a small trust, the problems are the same, I believe. Sue, do you want to start on that, please?

Sue Corbett

Yeah, that's right. So because of the size of our trust, we get our school condition allocation annually, which we prioritise using condition data. So we have the DfE's condition data collection data, but we

also run our own series of condition surveys within the trust. So any school over five years old has a condition survey. And then we have a five year programme.

Although our funding is annual and we never know quite how much we're going to get each year, sort of over the course of the SCA allocations, we have a rough idea. So we have a pipeline of work which we review each year before the start of each sort of year's work, using that condition data. Obviously over the course of each year we have sort of unexpected estate matters that come and surprises such as, I mean the most common ones are roof leaks, sort of failing windows, sort of flows out all of a sudden become spongy, stuff that I hadn't really considered before I took on this job because my previous role was a bit more strategic so you're sort of, daily, coming up with sort of quite reactive maintenance issues.

Samantha Smith

How do you manage that funding? Because obviously you don't have that. You've planned your five-year lease, you've got your annual budget, but how do you actually plan those ad hoc financial requirements?

Sue Corbett

So it's quite difficult because there isn't the fund. We always have a little bit of contingency that we keep in the pot of our FCA budget. But that contingency is primarily for the pipeline projects that we are planning to do that year. Depending on the urgency, sometimes we'll have to delay a project to pay for something if we've got a roof that's pouring in water in a classroom, for example, we always prioritise educational impact. So, for example, if we've got a windows condition issue on a school, we'll always prioritise the teaching spaces, those education spaces first. So we may have to reduce scope on another project to deal with an urgent issue at another school. So yeah, it's a balance act, a juggling act all at the same time.

Samantha Smith

Yeah, it is. And John, interesting Sue sort of mentioned about using the DFE asset data, but also having their own condition surveys, presuming more detail to allow you to do that five-year planning. How do you deal with managing your, obviously it's a smaller estate, but you'll have similar problems and obviously probably more financial constraints.

John Robinson

Yeah, some definitely some parallels there. We also receive FCA funding. So we're in our fourth year of receiving FCA and we did a very similar thing. We have the five year plan, which never usually makes it past year one without some changes. But having the FCA, although it's not a guaranteed amount each year, at least we know we're going to get something which really helps with the planning aspect. We use condition data as well. We have condition surveys as a rule every five years. We plan to redo our condition surveys on the estate. And we also survey schools that are planning to join as well. So we have an idea of what liabilities we might be taking on with conversions. The other thing that we do is I think we use the condition data as a starting point. But we always want to have that discussion with head teachers as well because what was on a condition survey might not necessarily reflect the reality of the challenges they're having in the school. So we do have that dialogue with head teachers and schools and that does sometimes change the priorities and change the plan. A number of things might go into that because it might be in terms of how the school wants to use a space. It might be changing the use of a space or something like that that wouldn't necessarily show up on a condition review, but might be important for the school. So we try and bring all that together when we're formulating a plan.

Samantha Smith

Okay, so how do you manage? I mean, it's obviously a challenge in the fact that your buildings have got to be fit for purpose. And, you know, we've talked about leaking roofs, because those are the things that, you know, even after so many years, we're still seeing. But how do you manage the school and the education in terms of the quality of environment when you've got leaking roofs, boilers,

and all the things that, you know, cost an excessive amount of money, but yet you don't see anything for it? Is that a bit of a challenge or how do you balance those or is that more with the school?

Sue Corbett

I think, again, it's that juggling act, Sam, but I think what we do is we have a business case process. So because we've got 33 schools, we like to give the schools an opportunity. So we're looking more building fabric side of the estate, whereas the schools, obviously, because they're teaching and creating those sort of inspiring learning environments, they're thinking more about the sort of quality of the internal spaces. We run a business case process, an annual business case process, where schools can put forward projects that they wish to deliver over the course of the next academic year. Some of which are in response to water damage or operational issues that, as John said, wouldn't come up on a condition survey, particularly in our schools that have come into our estate, there are some challenges there like historical legacy challenges, fences, access, that schools have dealt with over a period of time but sometimes a small amount of investment can make a massive difference to an operational issue within a school. So we look at those individual business cases and we have a governing system and a capital board that will make recommendations and the capital board will sort of make decisions as to which business cases go forward and they can be school funded from their devolved formula capital because obviously there's two, there's the central trust SCA funding but also the schools have a small amount of sort of devolved formula capital that they can spend so we support them with those sort of you know making the right decisions on sort of how to invest their capital funding.

Samantha Smith

How do you correlate that with, so I'm sat here as a professional saying, well, you really need your roof to be replaced, but you've got a capital investment request for refurbishing of your classrooms. John, maybe you could answer this one, because I know that you've had these sorts of experiences. And, you know, how do you link the two? So you've got the request for classrooms, but do you look at the fact that the condition survey says that the roof is shot and really that ought to be a priority?

John Robinson

We do, and it is a source of tension, not to the point of arguments, but it's difficult decisions that we have to make. And I think often it comes down to a bit of a risk-based approach. And can we squeeze an extra year out of the roof, or do we really need to have it done now? Because we may get the classrooms refurbished, but then if they start leaking the week after they're finished, it's going to ruin everything we've done. So there's certainly a risk-based approach to it. And we do have to take the educational context into account as well. I think one of our schools, for example, has a challenge with numbers and we need to get bums on seats because if we aren't full then it has really significant implications for funding. So we have to weigh that up against the cost of not doing something. So if we don't refurbish learning spaces, the school is not going to be an attractive proposition for the local community. So there is a trade-off in there somewhere as well. So it is a challenge, but I suppose our priority has to be keeping the school safe, warm and dry. I think that will always come first, but it can be frustrating when you feel you can't have that impact on the learning environment because of all the other things that we do have challenges with.

Samantha Smith

Great, some good tips there. So just to put in that together, how do you manage your capital budgets? Sue, I think you said you manage them annually. How do you actually manage those with the schools and the trust? And is there any sort of, I suppose, nuggets that we can share for smaller trustors to help?

Sue Corbett

So how we manage the SCA programme, we have a programme management team that sort of look after the full programme of projects. And then we appoint technical advisors for the individual projects that sort of define the scope and do all of the tendering for us. In terms of the actual money, our

technical advisory firms always give us sort of an indication of budget before we go out to tender. So that's super helpful for us to sort of see where we're at and sort of have the right balance of contingency. We also over programme, which sounds a bit strange, but sometimes projects fall away, or sometimes the feasibility takes longer because when we start, for example, if we're doing like a boiler replacement, often it's more than just the boiler. It will be your pipe work, your radiators. We might find other stuff within that project. Obviously with net zero we're looking at different types of systems which are going to take longer to develop. So if we've allocated a big chunk of money to a boiler replacement which we may not be able to sort of programme for that particular academic year we'll have back up projects to fill that gap and to make sure that the money is spent. So that's kind of how we over programme. And then obviously when we go out to tender, then we'll get the true tender prices back, which are usually bob on with our teams or over as the market, we're fighting the market at the moment. Or it's not as competitive as we'd hoped. So we'll end up with less prices coming back, but we can't control that. That's something we just can't control. So they're the sort of top tips, but the over programming is an important one for us because we always want to make sure that we have backup plans. And we're always really clear with our schools that, you know, sometimes they wish to do something and we'll submit a business case but you know whilst we support the principle of what they're asking us to do we don't necessarily have the budget to do it so in order for us to build our pipeline of projects over forthcoming years we will do feasibility and we'll say we're supporting the project we'll do some feasibility and scoping and then we'll try and fit it in sort of like a future programme or if they want to invest to bring it forward into the programme sooner, we can do that as well.

Samantha Smith

Interesting. Just one quick thing there is that you talk about feasibility, but how does a trust afford to have those feasibilities undertaken in the first instance? Because again, I'm sure John will come to you, but that sounds like a really interesting way of being able to plan better. But I suppose again, it's the cost as to how you manage that.

Sue Corbett

I always think it's essential. Doing the feasibility is worth the investment, in my opinion, and it's worth investing in firms like yourself, Sam, to do those feasibilities for us because it gives us options. So what we think the solution is may not transpire through a feasibility study. A recent example is all of the RAAC survey work that we've done across the school estates, so all of those schools that were built within that period, which I can't remember, but we've done RAAC surveys on them all. What's happened as a result of that is that is identified other issues within our estate that we hadn't seen before because we hadn't been lifting all those roof tiles and getting into the guts of our roof voids, etc. So what we're doing now is invested in feasibility studies and further survey work to identify, you know, whilst we didn't find a new RAAC, thankfully, we did identify other areas of structural concern which we need to work on. And the only way we can do that is through doing proper feasibility. And we're starting to see those surveys come back now and that feasibility work come back. And some of it is just saying we need to continue to monitor. So that then moves into the estates domain.

Samantha Smith

Yeah, and there's a saving there, I presume, as well, rather than you spending that funding on works that you didn't need to do. Yeah.

Sue Corbett

Absolutely, rather than it's just knee-jerk thing. Oh, we've got wood wall. We need to replace all of that. We've actually done, you know proper, you know feasibility work to look at you know what options we have available and you know on a couple of schools we've just been told actually it is fine for the next 10 years. Just do annual monitoring.

Samantha Smith

John, any thoughts around feasibility? So how do you deal with your capital funding? Any nuggets there that you can take from Sue's comments?

John Robinson

Definitely, I think as a smaller trust, we've obviously got a much smaller team, very jealous of Sue's programme team there. In our trust, it's just myself at the moment. We're looking to grow the estates team as the trust expands a little. But certainly, they are probably a little bit less well -developed in terms of, we know what our condition surveys say about future projects, but not necessarily have the feasibility studies done to look at those things, and whether there's opportunities to do things in different ways. So yeah, we're probably slightly, well, not quite as developed in that sense, but it's a really interesting approach.

Samantha Smith

I do think as well, and I know that you do work with several professionals, both of you, and it's worth getting them involved at an early stage and seeing whether they would look at some R&M

, smaller feasibility studies, particularly on the smaller trust, that will just help you, but also have that as part of their overall fee. So in effect, if you're suggesting that there will be potentially a job that comes out of it, if they can then develop that, it's a bit like, I suppose, a bit of a loan. Can you do a bit of work for us? But actually, there's a job coming. And I think a lot of professionals in the education sector do work on that. We certainly do on that basis. And I know that others do as well, because ultimately, I think estate development, estate strategies is about a team approach and you need a professional in your team. And it works for us because once you've got, you know, you're working with a trust and you know the trust then hopefully you'll get more work out of it. So you can afford to put a little bit of investment in as well. So I think for the smaller trust, certainly that is something that you should be trying to leverage wherever you can, John. I'm sure other consultants are probably spitting at the moment, but push wherever you can. Yes.

Sue Corbett

I mean, we've got 20 million of backlog maintenance, Sam, so there's always plenty of work. But that is the point, isn't it? But we only have that finite amount of money. But just getting that little bit of, I mean, it's professional opinion, isn't it? So we identify the problem and it's getting a range of solutions to that problem, you know, that isn't necessarily, I mean, feasibility is quite a loose term, isn't it? It's sort of, you know, feasibility for me covers, you know, is there a project here? What's the advice? What are the options? And that can be really detailed or it can be a conversation. You know, it's quite broad, like a feasibility study is something quite different, but sort of just, you know, finding out the range of kind of approaches to issues. I mean, we've got a project at the moment, Sam, haven't we, with AHR, where we, it's one of our sponsored academies. And, you know, there's a range of projects, condition projects that we're pulling together in a range of different approaches that we can do and packages and stuff. So, yeah, I think there's benefit in sort of having both the studies and the conversations to a green approach and sort of, you know, not everything needs to be done straight away.

Samantha Smith

Yeah, and I think that is key. As you say, we've packaged those works differently than we'd originally anticipated. And I think John, again, working as a small academy trust, you've still got those same issues, but economies of scale, how do we best get best value? Because there isn't enough funding to go around. And I think it is important that we try and look at that bit more of a holistic approach and see what we can put together.

And that can be done with small or large Academy Trust, I think.

Okay, so we'll just talk a little bit about what funding there is available. Obviously, we've talked about the SCA. There's lots of other things. We've talked just now about RAC. We've talked about Asbestos.

Obviously, we've got the net zero carbon decarbonisation. And just interested, John, what, if anything, what are the trusts looking at from your point of view in terms of Asbestos, RAAC, net zero? How far are you on with that agenda at the moment?

John Robinson

So, we, in terms of, if I cover the RAAC one first, so we're pretty fortunate we didn't find any RAAC. We did a similar thing to Sue and had surveys done of all of the buildings that were within the window. So we don't feel we have any works to do there, but obviously it'll be a continual thing as schools join, making sure that the surveys they've had are detailed enough, because we did have some concerns in some cases that the initial surveys that were done were not intrusive enough to really give us the full picture. And in terms of asbestos it's always a tricky one isn't it because you always find little pockets as and when you do work but it's more about the planning, making sure we were having the surveys done at the appropriate time for the works and just making sure we're as compliant as we can be I suppose around asbestos. And we do have a little bit of work to do just with the site teams in terms of making sure that training is kept up to date and they know and all the checks are in place. In terms of net zero, we've not done much yet. We had some heat decarbonisation plans done a couple of years ago, but they didn't really amount - We didn't take them forward to projects. We considered a bid last year but for us it's quite challenging because I believe the decarbonisation fund relies on quite a significant contribution from the trust and it was challenging for us when we do have quite significant issues with roofs and other things to find that sort of investment at the moment. So whilst we know we can definitely, there's definitely opportunities for moving towards net zero, we're struggling at the moment to justify the large contribution it would need over other more critical projects, if that makes sense.

Samantha Smith

Yeah, I think that's particularly for the decarbonising funding, but I would suggest that you are working towards that in terms of when you do new roofs and you add insulation and you are working towards that, similar with windows, double glazed, triple glazed. And I think it is important that we understand that actually all these projects still do work towards decarbonising your estates. And you can still go quite away with your, you know, the smaller number of schools in your estate as maybe obviously STAR does as well. Sue, I know that you've put a couple of decarb bits in. What are your thoughts about where you are at?

Sue Corbett

Yeah, so we applied to the LCSF programme to do the decarbonisation schemes, but we weren't successful. So, we decided to bypass that and went straight for the public sector decarbonisation scheme. And we worked with the firm to put together a couple of bids, a bit like what we were saying before, sort of like no win, no fee sort of situation. But we've been successful. So we've got sort of over a million pounds kind of grant funding for two schools. So we're doing the sort of more detailed scoping works now. But as John says, that does require a considerable amount of sort of trust funding. So that will have to come out of our SCA budget. But the sort of beauty of it is it's over a couple of years. So we can sort of programme that in. But then if the project doesn't develop in the way that we want to, we would have to look at sort of reallocating that or sort of potentially submitting a change to the Salix scheme. So we just have to sort of see how those develop over time, but it's quite a fast paced programme. So you actually, I think it would be challenging for a smaller trust to sort of do it by themselves. Trust such as ours that has got resource, we couldn't do it by ourselves either because it is that sort of level of technical detail that we just haven't got. So that's interesting. We've got a carbon reduction plan across the trust. So again, that's something. We have a statement and we've sort of done some LED and PV schemes. So, we're always looking at that investor save model and the payback periods, which we're cited, depends who you talk to as to how long the payback periods are. But for PV programmes, we're told between six and eight years payback on our investment, which if we achieve that, that'd be brilliant and we deem it as worth it. I think our LED replacement programme has been really successful. We've definitely seen changes in energy usage. So we've kind of welcomed now with our new schools LEDs as standard spec from the DFA as

opposed to enhanced. So that's helpful. But we are sort of retrofitting our LEDs and we use our sort of SCA, the terms and conditions of our SCA include this type of work now, which is beneficial.

Samantha Smith

Yeah, I think that's really interesting actually, because working with lots of academies, I find that if we look at replacement heating and heat source pumps and everything, they seem to be significantly higher in costs at the moment. One in terms of making sure that you've got the right incoming power and fuel supply. Whereas as you say, the payback on your PVs and your LEDs, they seem to be a good win and I think again sharing that with sort of the smaller academy trusts or each individual academy is a sort of again, key information to them because obviously you guys have already done the work and we know you've got a decent payback. So thanks for that.

Sue Corbett

Yeah, LEDs have been a good quick win for us. But yeah, I think some of the new heating technology, I think our concern with that is such as like air source heat pumps. I mean, you know, with our PSDS bids, we're sort of developing a scheme at one of our schools, which will have an air source heat pump. You know, and I think there's a lot of kind of urban myths or reality. I'm not quite sure which one it is, but about number one, the running costs are much higher. So we have to consider that alongside having PVs that will offset that additional running cost and also getting to the right temperature in the winter months. And that is something that we're quite worried about. So as we're designing, we're constantly saying to the M & A engineers, look this is our worry and we're reassured that what they're telling us is if it's designed right, you won't have any problems but let's see what happens. I hear all these stories about how we changed air so we had to get a back up gas boiler, we sort of defeat the purpose and also falls outside of the PSDS funding because obviously the whole principle of that is to get rid of your fossil fuel. So, yeah, slightly nervous about these projects, I have to say, but if they work, fantastic.

Samantha Smith

Yeah, well there you go John, that's a good, we'll see whether Sue can confirm if they work before you perhaps tend to go down that route. But what are you doing John on that, PVs and LEDs presumably?

John Robinson

Yeah, we've got LEDs throughout, except at our PFI school actually, because that's not managed through our funding, it's through the PFI contract. But yeah, we did Salix schemes a number of years ago now to have the LED lighting swapped out, or the flash lighting rather swapped out for LED, and that was really successful. We've got PV at five of our schools, but it's the quite old systems now, and some of them have started to deteriorate and I think the technology has obviously moved quite away hasn't it over the years and when we've looked at some of the older systems they weren't delivering on the you know the returns that perhaps we were promised but I know the technologies move forward now and we're looking to invest further in those because obviously we have a lot of roof space across our estate and it makes sense to make use of it to generate some returns particularly with energy prices as they are it's obviously going to speed up the rate of return at the moment as well. So it's certainly something that we were actively considering.

Samantha Smith

Okay, one thing that we found is that often the income in mains is not sufficient for any future works anyway, in terms of if you are changing to a different heating source. But I'm wondering, you know, what you're doing around the income in mains, because obviously schools have developed, and I really don't think that we've considered that previously until now we're getting to a stage where they are maxing out the electricity supply. And when we're trying to get new supplies and increase supplies into schools, it is at a significant cost. Any thoughts around how we can plan going forward for trying to increase the supply to allow us to continue to develop our buildings and strategies over the next few years?

John Robinson

I think from our point of view, we had an issue at one of our schools where one of the phases was blowing all the time and it was because of load. We'd put extra kitchen equipment in and not really considered the impact on the three-phase supply. So I think, I guess the first step is around load monitoring and understanding the power draw of the school. Because you write over the last maybe 10 or 15 years, we've added computers and you know, technology and many other things. And obviously with heat pumps that are going to really increase it, we've seen a significant increase in the number of air conditioning units that schools have just put in over the last few years just because it's got a bit hotter or they've added an IT suite and that has just slowly crept load up over the years without anybody really thinking of the implications. So I guess load monitoring is a start to see where we are. But the planning is obviously really important because if you get to the point where your heat pumps in and then all of a sudden you've got a problem it's not ideal.

Samantha Smith

Okay, Sue, thoughts about load monitoring? Is it something you're doing across STAR annually?

Sue Corbett

Yeah, well we don't think it's something that we routinely do annually. But definitely when we've got a project. We've done some DT rooms and food technology rooms recently when we did load testing. So that information is really good to have now. So we've got that load testing for that point in time. And what we should probably do is test it once we've done the work. And that's something that we've done. And just during this conversation, I thought, actually, that's what we should be doing to see what the difference is. And I think as part of the PSDS projects, I mean, there's an allowance in the budget. But that's the highest risk almost item in those projects, not just in terms of cost, but in terms of delay of increasing the capacity. So, that's the first hurdle that we have really to sort of do that load testing and see whether we've got the capacity currently and if we haven't then we have to go back to the district network operator and start negotiations. So yeah, that will be a challenge I think on a couple of our schools.

Samantha Smith

Yeah, and I think for me, it should be part of your condition survey. So, you know, because you're planning your works for the year, you're planning your capital works and investment in new areas, but ultimately, you know, you haven't included the cost of upgrading and you don't know when that needs upgrading as well. So I think it should be something that, you know, we need more awareness around and getting it done sooner than later. We all want, you know, our kitchen refurbished in the summer and we plow on and then as you say, John, you get to site and you go, ah, we can't provide all these new equipment because we haven't got the capacity. So, I think it is a real, for me, it's become one of the most important elements of any project planning going forward. So, bit of a challenge there, but we'll hopefully, you know, it's simple to do, simple load monitoring over three to six weeks while you're in school, obviously, to make sure where the peaks are. And I think also we have identified recently where you can maybe smooth the peaks. So, you don't always need to take on new, have a new incoming mains, but by smoothing the peaks, you end up in a situation where actually you can get more capacity just by moving things around in the working day. So I think that's something again that, you know, we're trying to look at in these high level feasibilities when we're looking at projects with Academy Trusts and academies. Great. I just want to also talk about maybe SEND provision, which again, we're talking about challenges to our existing buildings. And it's something that we've got more requirement in mainstream school to support all SEND students.

And just wondering Sue whether I think there's been recent increase, significant increase in SEND. I think 2023 there was a 10 % increase in students in their education, health and care plans. And I'm sure there was more than that. It's just actually that's been noted. So, Sue, are you seeing anything across STAR in terms of SEND requirements and how we educate our children?

Sue Corbett

Yeah, we're seeing increases in ACHP pupils, sort of 10% at least per year coming into our schools. And I think there's also a backlog of children and young people being assessed. So, we're also seeing an increase in requirements for SEND support. And that can look different depending on each individual child's needs. So, you know, anything from one-to-one support, quiet external space. Yeah, it's a really diverse range of how your estate needs to respond to these pupils' needs. And what we're finding, which is quite interesting for me, is some of our newer build schools are less flexible to create additional spaces because you have less area to adapt because they're built to minimum area requirements. Then sort of our more aging estate, we find that we've got more kind of, you know, some of our schools are over current area standards. And so we're able to adapt and sort of, you know, create a couple of extra one-to-one rooms, for example. And you don't need a lot of space, but you do need to have some space. So, but what we don't have is additional funding to meet those needs. So, yeah, it's a complex issue and a very real issue. And we're the same year on year, all of our schools, and we've got 33 schools all with different, you know, with increasing SEND requirements within the school and not a pot of money to sort of respond to that.

Samantha Smith

And is that predominantly in high schools or are you seeing that throughout the education?

Sue Corbett

Throughout.

Samantha Smith

And John, are you seeing any of that at the moment? I know you have three high schools. Are you seeing an increase in SEND requirement in terms of how you educate the children?

John Robinson

Yeah, certainly. And I'd say similar to Sue in terms of percentage increase, really. Our estate's predominantly older stock. So there have been a few projects to kind of adapt and change spaces to meet need. And particularly, we've got one school that is slightly under capacity. So we are fortunate in that there are extra spaces that we've been able to make available. But like Sue says, the funding just isn't really there to support, those changes and it has to either come from limited school budgets, the DFC, or it has to come from the condition pots. So it is a challenge. And certainly at our PFI school, obviously with the nature of PFI, making any changes to the fabric and to the spaces themselves is quite costly under the PFI terms. So that's an additional challenge that we've got there. But yeah, I'd say very similar challenges.

Samantha Smith

That's another podcast in its own right, it's PFI I think, and potential new PFI as well. So yeah. Okay, so again, it looks, literally we've got more to consider in our estates and the same pot of funding. And it is a real challenge for individual academies and trusts. And I think the only thing we can do is plan, but it's having all these elements, the RAAC, the asbestos, you know, everything that we've talked about is how do you plan and pull all that together annually or biannually so that, you know, because ultimately you are, I suppose, again, going to have to start to think about your SEND projects going forward. So unless we can, you know, encourage DFE or new governments or whatever to put more funding into the education. And obviously there's a lot of conversations around that at the moment around that, it looks as though your jobs are not going to get much easier.

So that really brings us to the end of today's episode, I think. A big thank you to Sue and John for joining us and sharing your experiences and being great discussions. And I hope that you've found our discussions of help and relatable and provided some food for thought in how you could better manage your buildings and estates. So big thank you very much. Hope you've enjoyed it. You can find all podcast episodes on our website, or you can subscribe via your preferred podcast platform. Thank you so much for listening, and we look forward to joining us again next time.