

Our policy on historic school buildings

Building Schools for the Future

The DfES Building Schools for the Future (BSF) program for secondary schools aims to “rebuild or renew” every secondary school in England within the next 15 years. In addition, the Government’s primary capital investment program for investment in primary schools anticipates that local authorities will receive funding for investment in 50% of primary schools.

Because of BSF’s focus on exemplar designs, there is a danger that local authorities will automatically assume that a new building is always better than retaining and adapting the old. This will mean an unjustified and unwelcome threat to our Victorian and Edwardian schools. Indeed, there is evidence that this is already happening in some areas.

Recognising the quality of Victorian and Edwardian schools

We agree with BSF that good design improves the quality of life and the quality of learning in schools. But most Victorian and Edwardian schools are very well designed. We want to be sure that the quality of architectural design in these historic schools is also recognised and valued.

It is significant that many of our prestigious private schools have buildings designed by our best nineteenth century architects. In these schools the architecture is inseparable from the reputation of the school. The local primary school may seem humble in comparison, but good architecture always contributes positively to the educational experience.

The architecture of our historic school buildings also contributes to local distinctiveness. Local school boards used local architects and often developed families of buildings with a character particular to that location. The school architecture of E R Robson in London, and Martin and Chamberlain in Birmingham is an important part of the identities of these cities. By contrast, new schools usually have no locally distinctive characteristics; they contribute to the decline in the differences between regions and places.

One of the main drivers for change behind the BSF program is to provide school children with inspiring educational environments. There must not be an automatic assumption that old school buildings represent an impediment to the raising of educational standards, or that building a new school will always raise those standards. In every case an audit should be carried out to fully assess the extent to which the existing school buildings (either as they are, or with some reorganisation and refurbishment) can meet the future needs of the school. This audit must include an assessment of the sustainability of retaining and improving an existing historic school building. The results should then be compared to the consequences of demolition and replacement.

The strengths of historic schools

Victorian and Edwardian schools possess many assets, and have many advantages over newer buildings. These include:

- Their generous size. Board schools, for example, often have wide corridors, and large halls which can be used flexibly, and can readily meet demands for extra space, and accommodate new ways of learning. By contrast, the minimum space standards which the DfES applies to new schools often become the maximum.
- Old schools not only provide education, they are significant and valued symbols of their community. In its document *Transforming Schools* the DfES acknowledges this:

Retaining and remodelling older or distinctive buildings, for instance those of an original Victorian school, gives a successful school a character and a gravitas valued by staff and pupils and recognised in the community.

- Given good and regular maintenance, the fabric of these old schools (which has already lasted over a hundred years in many cases) is robust and relatively easily adapted. Conserving an old school is also sustainable, in line with the Government's planning policy.

Many Victorian and Edwardian schools have already been successfully refurbished or renewed to support the modern teaching methods and perform to the modern standards envisaged by BSF. Internal alterations can be made without significant damage to a building's architectural quality. Piped and cabled services can be inserted without much complication, and wireless computer installations require no cabling at all. Insulation and secondary glazing can also be added without significantly changing the building's character. Lifts can be added where necessary, at a cost that is not prohibitively more than the cost of a lift in a new school building.

Choosing refurbishment and repair over demolition is also English Heritage's approach to historic school buildings, as set out in their document *The Future of Historic School Buildings*.

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We believe that the principles of sustainability and architectural conservation demand that the preferred order of outcomes for a locally significant Victorian and Edwardian school building must be:

1. That the building is used as a school, and in its existing built form.
2. That the existing building is adapted sympathetically to accommodate an educational use.
3. If neither of these are possible, that the building is converted to an appropriate and viable new use. This should only be necessary on a small number of cases. We believe that the great majority of our architecturally significant Victorian and Edwardian schools can, and should, continue to perform their original function.