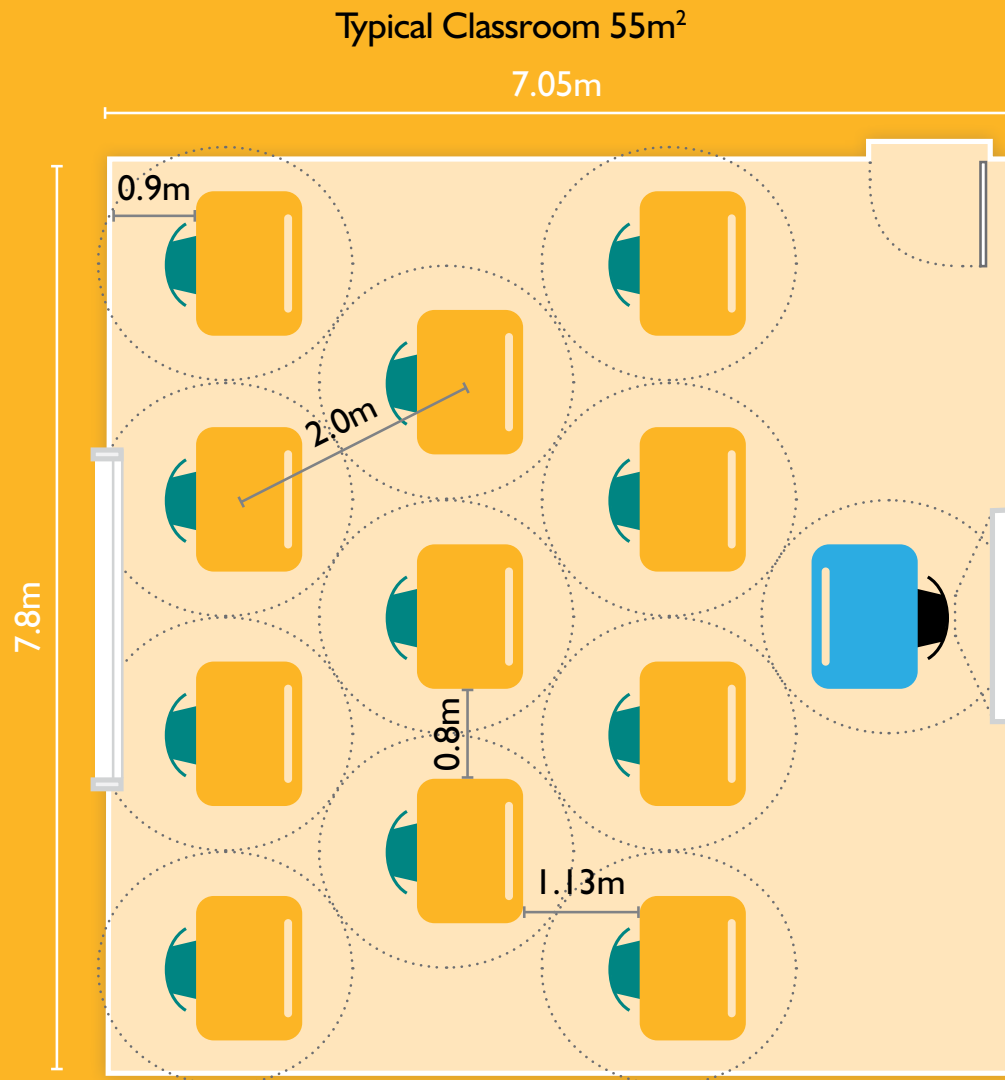


HONEY, I SHRUNK THE CLASSROOMS

A look at the history of school space standards explains why some UK schools will find it harder than others to introduce social distancing measures, writes architect Guy Shackle.



The reopening of schools in the UK for pupils beyond those of key workers has thrust the otherwise arcane matter of classroom sizes and corridor widths firmly into the limelight.

Teachers there have had to introduce physical distancing measures such as seating that is two metres apart in each class and it has not been an easy task for many.

Firstly, much of the UK school estate is over 40 years old, with nearly two thirds built before 1976. There are still Victorian board schools whose rooms were originally designed to accommodate over 60 pupils sitting in rows on shallow timber steps.

More interestingly though, changes to various government policies and guidelines in more recent years have also created issues, leaving some newer schools now desperately looking for extra space.

We can look back first to when the New Labour government passed the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act, limiting infant classes (Reception, Years 1 and 2) to 30 pupils, with just a few exceptions. Over time these rules worked through to older age groups.

This was clearly a positive move but the associated space standards for these classes were by no means generous, particularly for circulation spaces, and it was very challenging to deliver schemes within these constraints. (Building Bulletin 82: Area Guidelines for Schools, 1996 to 2004)

But in February 2003, the government announced the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme. It was a multi-billion pound government investment scheme to improve secondary schools in England.

The ambitious capital expenditure programme was matched by the raising of the bar on space standards with the publication in 2004 of Building Bulletin 98, which increased the proposed briefed area of secondary classrooms by 20 per cent.

The following year there were proposed increases in primary school classroom sizes of over 10 per cent, together with more generous learning support spaces including group rooms and specialist teaching areas.

Architects and educationalists welcomed these new standards as they allowed sufficient flexibility to deliver buildings that would remain useful across their 60 year anticipated lifespan.

Unfortunately, this new-found consensus between designers and educationalists did not last long.

The coalition government of 2010 first cancelled the BSF programme and then in 2014, the Department of Education

(DfE) under Michael Gove confirmed plans to relax the standards that set out the size of school buildings in a cost-cutting move that has led to smaller classroom sizes.

The DfE said it planned to relax space standards for schools, with a reduction of the overall gross area averaging 15 per cent in secondary schools and 5 per cent in primary schools for the entire school build.

The logic for this reduction in briefed areas was not driven by evidence that pupils were getting smaller or pupil numbers in each class would be reduced.

Instead, it was based on the need to deliver more buildings for less money and a philosophical disagreement with the idea that a high-quality physical environment improves learning outcomes.

1996

54m² - 62m² Primary Class
50m² Secondary Class
54m² Large Secondary Class

2004

60m² Standard Secondary Class
66m² Large Secondary Class

2005

56m² - 63m² Secondary Primary Class KS1 & 2
63m² - 70m² Large Primary Class

Building Bulletin 103: Area Guidelines for Mainstream Schools, published in 2014, set out non-statutory guidelines asking for a minimum of 55m² for 30 pupils in a junior classroom and general teaching space at secondary level, with a maximum of 62m² for Reception and infant classes.

There is also a statement which says that these spaces should provide “sufficient room for wheelchair users and assistants”. The overall impact of this change was to return school space standards to those that were current in the 1990s, which certainly imposed limitations on design.

The lowering of the bar in respect of what is non-enforceable guidance has allowed new build secondary school classrooms of only 50m² on a recent London school extension. Building at this size inhibits future flexibility of the space and restricts accommodating wheelchair users, teaching assistants, a variety of furniture layouts, new technology and storage of resources for both staff and pupils.

Optimism is perhaps in short supply for those looking for some inspiration in the design of new school buildings.

Devolution of education policy has allowed different approaches to emerge across the UK with Scotland (via the Scottish Futures Trust) funding primary classes of 55m², occasionally 60m² but importantly with an additional 12m² of support space beyond the classroom itself.

No government, educationalist or architect could have anticipated the social distancing measures that will now need to be enforced in our schools for the foreseeable future.

But classrooms built to current space standards will struggle to safely accommodate more than twelve pupils in either primary or secondary school settings.

Classes of thirty pupils will need to be split over three rooms so further reducing access to face-to-face learning.

After a journey through the recent history of space standards in school design what conclusions can be drawn?

The simple answer would be to advocate that government increases the briefed area of new build classrooms by approximately 10 per cent to reverse the reductions imposed in 2014, as illustrated below.

67.5m² – Primary Reception | Infant KS1

63m² – Primary Junior KS2

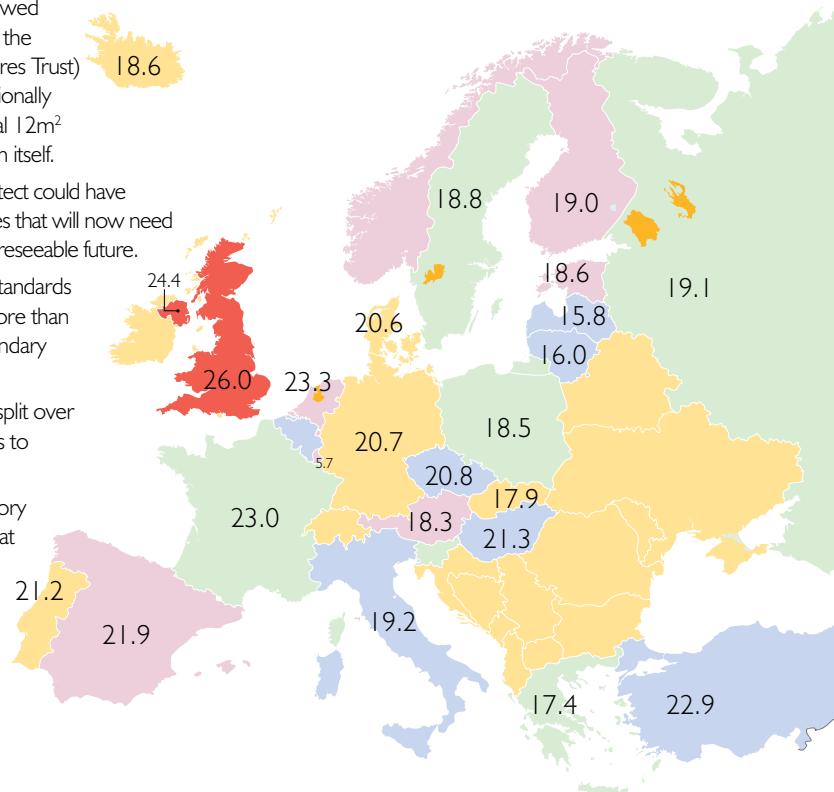
60m² – Secondary KS3 & 4

And it would perhaps mean we are better prepared to respond to the unexpected. ■

Guy Shackle is a chartered architect with over twenty years experience in the design and delivery of education projects. He joined jmarchitects in 2018 to focus on education and residential projects from their London studio. He is governor at an Adult Education College after many years service at a local Primary school.

Average class size in primary education

Data by OECD, mostly 2015.
Estonia, Denmark: 2012. Netherlands: 2014



PRODUCTS & DESIGN

we design and supply products of purpose
ultralight mobile communication for active work and learning environments
individual design solutions for your projects and products