

What the Education Estates Strategy Really Means for Schools and Trusts

For years, many school estates have been managed one urgent repair at a time. A failed boiler. A leaking roof. A last-minute CIF submission under the Condition Improvement Fund. Now, things are changing.

Earlier this week, the Department for Education published its Education Estates Strategy: a decade of national renewal; a 10-year framework that fundamentally reshapes how school and college estates in England will be governed, funded and scrutinised.

You may be tempted to dismiss this as another empty initiative, but that is not the case. This is something that will have a huge impact on anyone involved with building management in the education sector. This article will explain what's changing, who's affected, and what you need to do about it.

What Has Really Changed?

The strategy moves the sector away from reactive maintenance and competitive annual bidding cycles, and towards:

- Structured estate management standards
- Routine condition data collection
- Annual reporting on estate health
- Long-term lifecycle and investment planning

A new digital platform, Manage Your Education Estate, launches in February 2026 and will centralise reporting, tools and funding guidance.

By autumn 2026, Responsible Bodies will be expected to submit annual estate returns aligned to the new standards.

Estates are no longer an operational back-office function. They are becoming a measurable governance discipline.

Who This Affects Most

If you're a CEO or Trustee:

This is about risk exposure, regulatory scrutiny and long-term organisational resilience.

If you're a CFO:

This is about capital forecasting, prioritisation transparency and defensible investment planning.

If you're an Estates Lead:

This is about structured lifecycle modelling, condition accuracy and demonstrating strategic control.

In short: estates have moved to the board agenda.

Funding Is Increasing, But It Will Favour the Prepared

The strategy confirms significant long-term investment:

- A phased replacement of CIF by 2028
- A £710m Renewal & Retrofit Programme addressing condition, resilience, accessibility and carbon
- Rebuilding over 750 schools and colleges via the School Rebuilding Programme
- Continued high needs and connectivity funding

This is good news to anyone hoping to get hold of funding, but it also creates more hurdles to cross. It will require that you demonstrate more clarity of data, clarity of prioritisation and clarity of governance.

Consider two trusts:

- One has fragmented condition data, no consolidated lifecycle plan and limited board-level reporting.
- The other has a live 10-year investment strategy, central compliance oversight and clearly prioritised capital pipelines.

Under the new framework, which is more likely to secure sustained investment?

This reform rewards structured readiness.

Compliance Alone Will Not Be Enough

The new School Estate Management Standards require Responsible Bodies to:

- Demonstrate compliance annually

- Improve condition and resilience
- Address climate adaptation and decarbonisation
- Optimise surplus space
- Align estates with community need

Statutory compliance remains essential, but it is now the baseline, not the objective. The objective is demonstrable strategic control.

What a Structured Response Looks Like

The Estates, Compliance & Lifecycle Management (EFM) framework reflects the progression required under this new model, moving from compliance assurance to full strategic estates leadership.

Tier 1: Compliance Assurance

A structured approach to statutory certainty, including inspection coordination, compliance registers and annual reporting.

This establishes the foundation: clear assurance that obligations are met.

Tier 2: Planned Estates Management

Condition surveys, lifecycle planning, PPM strategies, 5–10 year investment modelling and annual estates reviews.

This moves estates from reactive repair to prioritised investment planning.

Tier 3: Strategic Estates Partner

Named senior estates leadership, board-level reporting, capital pipeline development, decarbonisation planning and funding readiness support.

This is estates as strategy, aligned with trust growth and long-term resilience.

This Is Not About Buildings. It Is About Governance.

The Education Estates Strategy is not asking schools to fix buildings. It is asking them to prove they understand them. It is asking them to evidence condition, to justify prioritisation, and to align capital investment with organisational growth.

The trusts that can demonstrate that understanding (through data, planning and governance) will shape the next decade of investment.

Those who remain reactive may find themselves permanently behind the curve.

What It Really All Means

In simple terms, the government is saying schools can't just fix things when they break anymore. Instead, they want schools and trusts to properly understand their buildings, keep accurate data on their condition, plan repairs and upgrades years in advance, and report on all of it every year.

There will be a lot of money available, but the schools that can clearly show they have a plan, know their priorities, and manage their estates properly are the ones most likely to get it. Put simply, schools will need to be proactive rather than reactive. They will need to have more insight and foresight into what will need doing, and when.

So the main takeaway is this:

Stop firefighting.

Start planning.

You don't need to view this as a bad thing. In fact, this is a great opportunity to step out of emergency repair cycles and develop proper planning, making sure you don't get caught out, and can anticipate needing funding before you do.

The shift has already begun. Autumn 2026 will arrive quickly. The question is no longer whether estates need to be strategic. It is whether yours already are.

If you would like to discuss how these changes affect your estate governance, capital planning or readiness for the first annual returns, now is the time to start that conversation.