Navigating the Condition Improvement Fund

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A Comprehensive Guide for Eligible Schools

As schools across England face aging infrastructure and rising maintenance costs, the Condition Improvement Fund (CIF) remains a critical resource for addressing urgent building needs. Administered by the Department for Education (DfE), CIF provides capital funding to eligible academies, sixth-form colleges, and voluntary-aided (VA) schools that don't receive direct School Condition Allocation (SCA). With the 2026–27 bidding round likely approaching in late 2025, this guide offers practical insights to help schools navigate the process, drawing on the 2025–26 round while advising readers to check gov.uk for updates. It covers eligibility, project types, application steps, common rejections, regional nuances, specific examples, and support resources. Whether addressing a leaky roof or expanding facilities, understanding CIF can boost your chances in a competitive program where only about a third of bids succeed.

What is the Condition Improvement Fund?

CIF is an annual bidding program to keep school buildings safe, operational, and compliant. Its primary focus is "condition" projects addressing significant issues like health and safety risks, poor building fabric, or compliance failures that revenue budgets or other funds can't cover. A smaller portion supports expansion for high-performing schools facing overcrowding or demand for places.

Funding prioritizes need, with the DfE favoring projects that prevent closures or disruptions. In 2025–26, £470 million funded 789 projects out of thousands submitted. For 2026–27, expect similar funding, though criteria may evolve—monitor DfE announcements. Applications typically open in October and close in December, with outcomes in May. CIF is not for routine maintenance, ICT software, or land purchases. Projects must enhance capital assets for pupils aged 2–19, with completion generally by March 2027 (most by March 2026). Eligible schools can submit up to two projects, but only one can be expansion.

Who is Eligible to Apply?

CIF targets schools not receiving SCA, based on size at the start of the academic year (e.g., September 2025 for 2026–27):

- **Stand-alone academies** or those in MATs with fewer than 5 schools **or** fewer than 3,000 pupils (per spring census or Individualised Learner Record).
- **VA schools** in bodies with fewer than 5 schools **or** fewer than 3,000 pupils.
- **Sixth-form colleges**.
- Schools with a signed academy order converting to an eligible body by April of the funding year.

Special rules:

- Special/alternative provision schools multiply pupil counts by 4.5.
- Dual-registered pupils' counts are divided by institutions.
- Nursery schools and sixth-form colleges use full-time equivalent (FTE) pupils.

If a school joins a larger MAT mid-process, approved funding is paid to the new body. VA schools contribute at least 10% of costs (excluding non-reclaimable VAT). PFI or Priority School Building Programme (PSBP) schools can apply for issues outside existing contracts—consult your project director. Schools in the School Rebuilding Programme (SRP) have limited eligibility, typically for high-risk, non-overlapping needs up to £250,000.

Eligible schools receive DfE email invitations. Confirm via the Customer Help Portal or Get Information About Schools (GIAS) entry.

Types of Projects Eligible for Funding

CIF supports three project types: condition, condition with expansion, and expansion. Projects must meet minimum cost thresholds (£20,000 for primary/special; £50,000 for secondary/all-through/sixth-form) and a £4 million cap. They're assessed for urgency, value, and alignment with priorities like sustainability.

1. **Condition Projects**

These dominate bids (~70–80% in 2024–25), focusing on repairing/replacing existing elements without increasing gross internal floor area (GIFA). Sub-types, ranked by priority:

- **Highest Priority (Legal Compliance/Health & Safety with Closure Risk)**: Building safety, fire protection (e.g., alarms, doors), gas/electrical safety, emergency asbestos removal, ventilation/thermal comfort, water/drainage. Zero-carbon heating (e.g., heat pumps) scores well if failure risks closure.
- **High Priority (Life-Expired Replacements with Closure Risk)**: Structural/weather tightness (e.g., roof repairs/replacements), mechanical/electrical systems (e.g., boilers, wiring), utility capacity.
- **Medium Priority (Life-Expired Replacements)**: Building fabric (e.g., windows, walls), structural defects.
- **Low Priority (Special Functional Areas Below Standards)**: Teaching spaces, kitchens, toilets, circulation—must show health/safety impacts.
- **Lowest Priority (Other Works with Strong Case)**: Accessibility, non-teaching fabric (e.g., sports halls)—evidence teaching impact required.

Examples:

- A primary school in Manchester secured £180,000 to replace a leaking flat roof, preventing classroom closures. Their bid included a surveyor's report, photos of water damage, and closure day estimates.
- A secondary academy in Birmingham won £350,000 for boiler upgrades, showing energy savings and risks of heating failure in winter.

2. **Condition with Expansion Projects**

These address condition needs but allow up to 10% GIFA increase (or more for

standards compliance). The focus remains condition improvement. Example: A VA school in Kent received £250,000 to repair a roof while adding a small accessible entrance, supported by structural reports and accessibility audits.

3. **Expansion Projects**

Limited to Ofsted “good” or “outstanding” schools, addressing overcrowding (>10% over capacity) or added places. Example: A secondary in London secured £1.2 million to build a new classroom block for 150 additional pupils, backed by oversubscription data and Regional Director approval.

All projects should integrate sustainability (e.g., Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme) and safeguarding (e.g., security upgrades with police evidence). RAAC issues are typically handled via separate grants or SRP.

Regional and School-Type Nuances

Needs vary by region and school type, influencing bid priorities:

- **Regional Variations**:
  - **North West/Yorkshire**: Wetter climates drive roof repair bids (e.g., 30% of 2024–25 condition bids), as rain accelerates deterioration.
  - **London/South East**: High pupil demand fuels expansion bids, but condition projects (e.g., asbestos in older buildings) remain dominant.
  - **Rural Areas**: Smaller schools often prioritize heating/electrical upgrades due to limited budgets and older estates.
- **School-Type Differences**:
  - **Primary/Special Schools**: Focus on roofs and heating due to smaller estates and urgent safety needs. Minimum threshold (£20,000) makes smaller projects viable.
  - **Secondary/All-Through**: Larger campuses prioritize electrical rewiring and fire safety, reflecting complex systems and higher pupil numbers.
  - **Sixth-Form Colleges**: Often seek accessibility upgrades or specialist facilities (e.g., labs), aligning with post-16 standards.

Tailor bids to your context—e.g., coastal schools should emphasize

weatherproofing, while urban secondaries highlight overcrowding data.

The Application Process: Step-by-Step

Applications are submitted via the DfE's CIF portal (see user guide). The 2025–26 window was October 22–December 17, 2024; expect similar for 2026–27.

1. **Register or Access the Portal**: Request access via the Customer Help Portal by early December (e.g., December 10). Use your trust's Companies House number or school's URN; opt for a generic email.
2. **Prepare Your Bid**: Collect evidence (e.g., condition surveys <3 years old, photos, cost plans). Summarize rationale; attach documents (max 1MB, named "URN_SchoolName_Need").
3. **Complete the Form**: Detail project type, costs (exclude reclaimable VAT for academies), timelines, and options appraisal (e.g., "do nothing" vs. proposed). Consider a CIF loan (2–10 years, PWLB rates) to boost scores.
4. **Review and Sign**: The Accounting Officer signs a declaration (Annex A) confirming accuracy.
5. **Submit by Deadline**: No extensions; submit early to avoid portal issues. DfE may request clarifications.

For urgent needs, apply for Urgent Capital Support (UCS) via separate forms.

Common Reasons for Rejection and How to Avoid Them

Only ~33% of bids succeed due to oversubscription. Common rejections and fixes:

- **Insufficient Evidence**: Generic or headteacher-only claims fail. **Fix**: Use independent surveys (CDC2 format), structural reports, or labeled photos showing damage (e.g., ceiling leaks).
- **Low Urgency**: Cosmetic works (e.g., redecorating) or non-essential items (e.g., car parks) are rejected. **Fix**: Focus on high-priority needs (e.g., roof leaks risking closure) and quantify impacts (e.g., days lost).
- **Poor Value for Money**: High professional fees (>10%) or uncompetitive tenders. **Fix**: Obtain multiple quotes; keep contingencies reasonable and justified.
- **Ineligible Projects**: RAAC, routine maintenance, or ICT software. **Fix**: Confirm eligibility via DfE guidance; bundle RAAC with condition works if applicable.

- **Duplicated Bids**: Identical bids across MAT schools. **Fix**: Customize each bid with school-specific evidence.
- **Late/Missing Documents**: Incomplete forms or unsigned declarations. **Fix**: Double-check requirements; submit early.

If rejected, review feedback and appeal within 10 working days for process errors (not reassessments).

Tips for a Successful Bid

- **Evidence**: Use third-party surveys, quantify risks (e.g., closure days, repair costs), and include sustainability metrics (e.g., energy savings).
- **Costs**: Ensure fees <10%; tender competitively. Justify contingencies.
- **Loans**: Opting for a loan adds points; assess affordability via DfE's calculator.
- **Avoid Pitfalls**: Don't start works pre-approval or rely on crime stats for safeguarding. Respond to DfE queries promptly.
- **Consultants**: Use DfE-approved frameworks; declare conflicts.

Support and Resources Available

- **DfE Resources**: CIF guidance, loan calculator, Building Bulletins, Output Specification 2022, Good Estate Management for Schools (GEMS) tool.
- **Customer Help Portal**: For eligibility, portal, or bid queries.
- **External Support**: Bid consultants via DfE frameworks; local authorities for VA schools; dioceses for church schools.
- **Appeals**: Contact DfE within 10 days of outcomes for process issues.

Looking Ahead: Preparing for 2026–27

With a £13.8 billion backlog (NAO, 2023), CIF is vital but constrained. For 2026–27, expect:

- **Tighter Budgets**: Inflation (~10% in construction) may limit funding, reducing approved projects (e.g., 789 in 2025–26 vs. 866 in 2024–25).
- **RAAC Focus**: Continued scrutiny on RAAC roofs may prioritize related bids or shift some to separate grants.
- **Sustainability Push**: Net-zero goals will favor low-carbon projects (e.g., heat pumps, insulated roofs).
- **Oversubscription**: Roof repairs (25–30% of 2024–25 bids) will remain

dominant, especially in wetter regions.

Start estate surveys now, align with net-zero, and build robust evidence. Check gov.uk for 2026–27 updates, as timelines and protections may shift. By following this guide, schools can craft strong bids to secure funding for safer, efficient learning environments.

The School Network encourages schools to share bid experiences in the comments. Stay tuned for more funding insights.