The Education Estates Strategy Changes Everything for Facilities Management in 2026

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Why schools now need stronger estate visibility, better planning, and more confidence to procure beyond default routes

For years, too much of estates management in education has been shaped by a familiar cycle.

Something fails.
A repair is needed.
A compliance issue rises to the top.
An urgent contractor is called.
Budget is redirected.
A temporary fix is made.
And the bigger structural issue remains.

That model has survived for too long across too much of the sector — not because schools, trusts and estates teams do not care, but because many have been forced to operate in an environment where reactive pressure has continually crowded out long-term control.

That is why the Education Estates Strategy matters.

Not because it gives the market another announcement to discuss. Not because it introduces another layer of expectation. And not simply because of the funding attached to it.

It matters because it confirms something much bigger: **2026 is the year estates management in education starts moving out of the reactive era.**

The direction of travel is now clear. Schools and trusts are being pushed towards a more structured, evidence-led and accountable model of estate stewardship — one built around better visibility, stronger planning, clearer governance, improved use of condition data, and earlier intervention before issues become more costly, disruptive or difficult to solve.

That is a major change for facilities management.

Because this is no longer just about maintaining buildings. It is about understanding them better. It is about making smarter decisions earlier. It is about linking condition, compliance, resilience, suitability and spend into a clearer strategy. And increasingly, it is about whether responsible bodies can show that they are managing the estate proactively rather than simply coping with it.

That shift will reward some schools.

And it will expose others.

The schools and trusts that already have a clearer grip on their estate — where risks sit, where reactive spend is draining value, where building performance is weak, where asset intelligence is incomplete, where leadership visibility is too low — now have an opportunity to act with purpose.

Those that continue to delay, patch, defer and default may find themselves increasingly behind the curve.

Because this is not only a facilities story.

It is a leadership story.
A governance story.
A resilience story.
And, increasingly, a procurement story too.

This is not just about better maintenance — it is about better stewardship

One of the biggest mistakes schools can make right now is to interpret the estates strategy too narrowly.

If it is seen simply as a maintenance agenda, they will miss the real point.

The change underway is more fundamental than that. What is emerging is a stronger expectation that schools and trusts should know more about their estate, oversee it more effectively, and make decisions with more confidence and evidence behind them.

In practical terms, that means estates management is being pulled out of the shadows.

For years, in many organisations, the estate has been something leadership notices properly only when a problem becomes impossible to ignore. A roof failure. A heating breakdown. A safeguarding concern. A compliance issue. A classroom no longer fit for use. At that point, estates jumps to the top of the agenda — but only as a crisis.

That is exactly the cycle now being challenged.

The new direction places much greater weight on active management: understanding building condition earlier, recognising patterns of deterioration sooner, maintaining stronger asset knowledge, joining up compliance and capital thinking, and making estate decisions in a way that is visible, defensible and strategically aligned.

That is why facilities management in 2026 becomes more important, not less.

The role is evolving from operational caretaker to strategic steward.

And that matters not just for estates professionals, but for school business managers, chief operating officers, responsible bodies, governors and trust leaders who now need a much firmer grasp of what is happening across their estate, what it means financially, and what should be done next.

Why schools should be careful not to respond too passively

This is where the conversation gets more interesting.

Whenever the sector sees a stronger official steer around standards, data, planning or funding, there is often an instinct in parts of the market to narrow the conversation quickly around familiar channels, familiar buying habits and familiar framework-led responses.

That is understandable. In uncertain environments, schools often look for routes that feel safe, recognised and administratively straightforward.

But that is not always the same thing as acting strategically.

And for many schools and trusts, that is exactly the risk in 2026: that a very important estates reset becomes translated into an overly narrow buying response.

It should not.

Because if schools are now being encouraged to understand their estate more fully, plan more intelligently and act earlier, then procurement should rise to meet that same standard. It should become more thoughtful, more outcome-led and more commercially aware.

This is where the Procurement Act 2023 becomes highly relevant.

Not as a technical footnote. Not as legal language to sit in the background. But as part of a wider shift in mindset.

Schools should not treat this moment as a reason to retreat into the most obvious route to market without challenge. They should see it as a reason to become more deliberate in how they define requirements, engage the market and identify the right partners.

That matters because school estates needs are rarely standard.

One school may need to reduce repeated reactive maintenance around roofing and drainage failures.
Another may need to improve compliance visibility across ageing buildings.
A trust may need a more strategic approach to asset intelligence, lifecycle planning and condition prioritisation across multiple sites.
Another may be trying to combine fabric improvement, heating upgrades and energy resilience into one more coherent plan.

Those are not identical challenges. They should not automatically produce identical buying decisions.

The smarter approach in 2026 is for schools to resist passive procurement behaviour and instead ask tougher, better questions:

Are we defining the real problem properly?
Are we procuring for a quick response, or for a better long-term outcome?
Are we only looking at the most familiar suppliers, or the most relevant ones?
Are we buying a task, or solving a wider operational issue?
Are we using enough market insight before going to market?
Are we shaping a route that reflects our estate, or just following habit?

That is where the sector needs to get sharper.

Because the schools that respond best to this new era of estate management will not be those who simply acknowledge the strategy exists. They will be the ones who turn it into better internal thinking, better planning and better procurement behaviour.

The biggest shift of all: estates is becoming a board-level issue

One of the clearest messages schools should take from what is happening now is that estates can no longer sit too far down the organisational agenda.

That era is ending.

Facilities and estate performance are becoming far more connected to wider leadership responsibilities around financial stewardship, operational resilience, risk control, sustainability, suitability and educational continuity.

This means the estate needs to be discussed differently.

Not just as a premises concern. Not just as an operational issue. But as a strategic asset base that affects a school or trust’s ability to function well.

That requires stronger internal visibility.

Senior leaders need a clearer picture of where risk is accumulating. Governors and boards need better confidence that condition, compliance and future liabilities are understood. Trust leadership teams need to know where reactive

costs are likely to keep surfacing, where short-term fixes are storing up larger costs, and where planned interventions could create better value.

Without that, schools remain trapped in a weak cycle:
low visibility, late decisions, rushed procurement, poor value, recurring problems.

This is why the estates strategy should be seen as a prompt for governance maturity as much as operational change.

The real question is not simply whether schools can maintain buildings.

It is whether they can lead their estate well.

What proactive estate management should actually look like in 2026

This is the part that matters most.

Because it is easy to say schools need to be more strategic. The harder and more useful question is: what does that actually mean in practice?

A genuinely proactive estates model in 2026 should include five visible shifts.

1. **Better estate intelligence**

Schools need a clearer, more usable understanding of their buildings.

That means more than knowing what has broken recently. It means having enough visibility over building condition, compliance status, maintenance patterns, asset life, suitability issues and operational performance to make better decisions ahead of time.

Where estate knowledge is fragmented across spreadsheets, inboxes, contractor reports and individual memory, leadership visibility is weak and planning quality inevitably suffers.

A stronger estate position begins with stronger estate intelligence.

2. **Joining up issues that have too often been treated separately**

Condition, compliance, maintenance, capital planning, energy performance and resilience are often handled in silos.

That creates inefficiency and blind spots.

The more mature approach is to join those conversations up. For example, a deteriorating heating system should not be viewed only as a maintenance burden if it also affects energy cost, operational reliability and longer-term suitability. A recurring water ingress issue should not just trigger another repair if the wider roofing strategy needs reviewing. A compliance concern should not be isolated from the broader question of estate oversight and risk visibility.

The smarter schools in 2026 will be the ones that stop treating these as disconnected problems.

3. **Moving from annual reaction to rolling intent**

Too many schools still operate estates decisions one pressure point at a time.

That is understandable, but it is expensive.

A stronger response is to create a clearer rolling estate priority plan — something practical and decision-useful that identifies what is urgent, what is emerging, what should be addressed strategically, and where market engagement needs to begin early.

This is how schools start taking back control.

4. **Earlier leadership engagement**

If estates conversations only reach senior leaders when a building problem becomes disruptive, the school is already on the back foot.

In 2026, estates should be discussed earlier and more seriously at leadership level. Not in overly technical language, but in terms of operational impact, financial exposure, future priorities and decision timelines.

Done properly, this changes the quality of decisions because it reduces surprise, improves planning and allows better procurement thinking before urgency takes over.

5. **Better routes to market**

This is the piece too many organisations still underplay.

Proactive estates management is not just about knowing more. It is about acting better on what you know.

That includes thinking more carefully about how requirements are shaped, when suppliers are engaged, what outcomes are being procured, and whether the route to market genuinely reflects the problem being solved.

If schools want better results, they need better procurement thinking to sit alongside better estate intelligence.

What schools should be doing right now

This is not a “wait and see” moment.

It is a “get clearer now” moment.

Schools and trusts that want to stay ahead of this shift should be taking practical action immediately.

Take an honest view of where your estate management really stands

Not where it should be. Not where internal reporting suggests it is. Where it actually is.

How good is your asset visibility?
How current is your condition knowledge?
How joined up are your maintenance and compliance records?
How much of your estate operation depends on individual knowledge rather than usable systems?
Do senior leaders truly understand the biggest estate risks ahead?

An honest baseline matters more than a polished assumption.

Identify where reactive spend is hiding a bigger issue

Most schools can point to repeated spend areas that feel operationally normal but are actually symptoms of weak long-term control.

Recurring heating failures.
Ongoing roofing work.
Repeated drainage issues.

Patchwork compliance interventions.
Temporary repairs that keep returning.

These are not just maintenance lines. They are clues.

Schools should use them to identify where more strategic intervention may now be better value than another year of reaction.

Build a sharper internal estates conversation

This is a leadership issue as much as a site issue.

School business managers, finance leaders, trust operations teams and governors should all be drawn into a clearer discussion about the estate: what is known, what is unclear, what is emerging, and where proactive action now could reduce future disruption and cost.

Where estates remains poorly understood at leadership level, decision quality will remain weaker than it needs to be.

Reassess your route-to-market thinking before you procure

This is a critical step.

Before going out to suppliers, schools should pause and ask whether they are about to repeat an old buying habit rather than respond intelligently to a changing need.

Are we defining the requirement properly?
Have we thought broadly enough about possible solutions?
Are we speaking to the right types of suppliers?
Are we using the flexibility available to us well enough?
Are we buying short-term reassurance, or long-term improvement?

The Procurement Act 2023 should support more confident, better-shaped procurement thinking. Schools should use this moment to be more purposeful, not more passive.

Look for partners who improve readiness, not just fix problems

This is where the supplier market becomes highly relevant.

The most valuable suppliers in this new environment are not simply those who can deliver a service line. They are those who help schools understand the issue better, improve estate visibility, support better planning, reduce future risk and strengthen decision-making.

That may include providers supporting:

- condition surveys and estate reviews
- compliance systems and monitoring
- digital asset and maintenance visibility
- lifecycle planning
- roofing and fabric solutions
- heating and building services upgrades
- drainage, water ingress and resilience works
- energy performance and cost reduction
- trust-wide estate planning support
- strategic FM and operational improvement

For the right suppliers, this is not a background policy change.

It is a genuine market moment.

Because as schools become more aware of the need to manage their estates earlier, more intelligently and with stronger oversight, the value of credible, relevant external support rises with it.

Why this is such an important commercial moment

This is what many in the supplier market should now be paying close attention to.

Schools are not just being encouraged to spend. They are being encouraged to think differently.

And when buyer thinking changes, opportunity changes.

The suppliers best positioned in 2026 will not be those waiting passively for tender alerts or relying only on traditional routes to visibility. They will be the ones who understand the pressure schools are under, the shift now taking place, and the kinds of conversations buyers are beginning to have internally.

Those conversations are becoming more strategic.

Schools are asking:
How do we get ahead of building issues rather than keep reacting to them?
How do we improve visibility?
How do we reduce recurring spend?
How do we plan better across multiple sites?
How do we strengthen resilience?
How do we make smarter buying decisions?

Suppliers who can step into those conversations credibly, helpfully and at the right time will stand out.

Not because they are shouting louder.
But because they are more aligned to the moment.

That is why this matters commercially.

This is not simply a new estates narrative. It is the early formation of a stronger buying environment around estate readiness, proactive management, resilience, visibility and longer-term value.

The market will increasingly favour suppliers who can support that shift.

The schools that benefit most will be the ones that act before pressure forces them to

That may be the clearest takeaway of all.

The Education Estates Strategy is not really about reacting better when something goes wrong. It is about reducing how often schools need to live in that mode at all.

That is the opportunity.

A better-run estate.
Stronger internal visibility.
More informed leadership.
Smarter procurement decisions.
Greater resilience.

Lower dependence on repeated firefighting.
And a clearer path towards longer-term suitability, safety and value.

Schools that move early on this will put themselves in a stronger operational and strategic position.

And suppliers who understand where the sector is heading — and can help schools respond well — should recognise this for what it is:

A real moment to step into.

Not opportunistically.
But meaningfully.
Because the schools market is beginning to shift from reactive fixing towards proactive stewardship.

And that changes the conversation for everyone.