

Top 10 estate checks for boards

Introduction

Boards need to be confident that the school premises are safe and suitable, and will keep staff and pupils warm and dry. Good management of the estate reduces the risks associated with buildings. It helps to prevent the need for significant capital expenditure and disruption which can follow building failure.

The 10 checks below identify the most important issues around school property and premises.

They can be used as a checklist to make sure that land and buildings are managed effectively and efficiently.

This checklist will also be useful for executive leaders in schools and academy trusts, such as school business professionals. This may include finance directors and business managers.

1. Are we managing the estate effectively?

Boards should understand the fundamental requirements that all organisations should aspire to in the management of the estate. This includes taking a strategic approach, ensuring appropriate organisational processes and policies are in place and that the estate is kept safe.

Check whether you have the  [fundamentals of estate management](#) in place.

2. Who is responsible for the estate?

You should be aware of who owns the land and buildings, and who is responsible for:

- the safety and security of pupils and staff
- maintaining the condition of land, premises and equipment
- making decisions about investment in the school estate and prioritising maintenance

You should also be clear about when the board should be consulted about capital expenditure.

3. Do we have the necessary skills, knowledge and capacity to manage the estate?

Once you have established who is responsible, you can ask about their skills, knowledge, experience and qualifications. This could be individuals, the executive leadership team or the board.



Are their skills, knowledge and experience sufficient to carry out the roles described here?

Any skills audit of the board should include skills, knowledge and understanding of property-related issues. Where the board lacks specific experience and skills in this area, you should seek to recruit to fill the gap.

Where the school lacks the specific skills, experience, and capacity, you will want to discuss how this can be addressed. Options might include:

- training existing staff
- new recruitment
- sharing with another school/trust
- buying-in external expertise

You may want to check on the arrangements for using external expertise. For example, how does the school decide when to use professional advice from architects, surveyors or project managers? How does it source these?

4. How do we manage the estate?

Good estate management should provide:

- safe and well-maintained premises
- appropriate teaching facilities
- a positive pupil experience

You should have arrangements for:

- long term planning – where you consider future maintenance needs, projects and funding priorities for buildings and land. This might be in the form of an estate strategy
- asset management planning (AMP) – producing an AMP for the estate will help you plan, manage and deliver the maintenance works and improvements that have been highlighted in the long term plan
- day-to-day management – delivery of ongoing services and maintenance requirements to ensure that buildings operate as intended on a daily basis and support the continued delivery of education

5. What is the condition of the buildings?

A good understanding of the condition of the school estate will help you to make clear decisions about:

- ongoing maintenance and repairs
- capital spending

- wider property issues

Identifying future maintenance needs and projects relies on the quality of information available. Condition surveys of the estate, using suitably qualified professionals, will help the school to:

- understand maintenance needs
- prioritise delivery of works within available funds

Was a full survey carried out within the last 5 years or does it need updating?

The [Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors](#) can help you find a qualified surveyor.

6. Are we complying with our legal responsibilities?

Boards should be clear about how the school knows it is complying with all necessary legal requirements relating to the occupation of the estate, including:

- health and safety law and other relevant laws and regulations
- planned preventative maintenance
- statutory inspecting and testing

You can ask to see copies of maintenance and testing schedules. Further advice on [safety and compliance](#) is available. Particularly important is an understanding of asbestos and fire.

Asbestos

A record of all asbestos, known or assumed to be in school premises, must be held for all school premises. Where asbestos is identified in school premises, an asbestos register and asbestos management plan must be in place and reviewed regularly.

For further information, please read the [asbestos management in schools guidance](#).

Fire

A risk assessment identifying the general fire precautions needed to safeguard persons in case of fire must be undertaken and regularly reviewed for all school premises. Procedures should be in place to reduce the likelihood of fire, maintain fire detection and alarm systems, and ensure staff and pupils are familiar with emergency evacuation procedures.

7. What do we do in emergencies?

Unforeseen circumstances can arise that result in severe damage or disruption to school premises.

Ask what insurance is in place to cover emergencies, and what the arrangements are for:

- ensuring the safety and security of pupils and staff
- communicating promptly with parents and carers
- contacting emergency services and meeting the requirements of the statutory bodies
- where necessary, making alternative arrangements for education to continue as soon as possible following the incident
- invoking emergency and business recovery plans
- seeking professional advice on immediate and longer term action required to replace or repair the affected area where appropriate

8. What funding is available for investment in the estate?

Schools and their boards need to keep up to date with what sources of funding are available for capital projects and maintenance. They should identify whether these are grants, loans or formula based funds.

Section 6.10.4 of the [governance handbook](#) provides information on government sources of capital funding.

You may know of alternative sources of funding for smaller projects.

9. Are we spending wisely on the estate?

You should consider how you:

- decide how much to spend on capital projects and maintenance each year
- prioritise expenditure
- know you're getting value for money
- monitor and manage estate budgets and costs
- ensure you are complying with procurement regulations

10. Can we become more effective with our expenditure?

You should make sure you review your contracts regularly. This should include contracts for:

- maintenance
- facilities management



- professional support and advice

When doing this you should ask:

- are we getting the best deals?
- can we work with other schools and trusts to reduce costs?
- can capital expenditure lead to revenue savings – for example through energy efficiency projects and refurbishment leading to lower maintenance costs?

You will find general advice on effective buying in our guidance on [buying for schools](#).