

# Trilborne



## Advanced Strategic Integration of the Department for Education Estate Management Standards at Level 4: A Comprehensive Framework for Schools

The publication of the Department for Education (DfE) School Estate Management Standards in April 2025 established a rigorous maturity model for educational infrastructure in England.<sup>1</sup> While Level 1 defines the baseline essential for safe and legal operations, Level 4 (Advanced) represents a paradigm shift where the estate is no longer viewed as a static operational overhead but as a strategic asset capable of driving educational excellence, fiscal resilience, and environmental transformation.<sup>1</sup> For a school, achieving and maintaining Level 4 status requires a holistic integration of property data, governance, and financial strategy that is proactive, data-led, and deeply aligned with the institution's pedagogical mission.<sup>1</sup> This level of practice is characterised by a "whole-school" approach where every facet of the physical environment, from carbon capture on the school boundaries to the digital twin modeling of heating systems, is optimised for long-term value and student outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

## The Convergence of Strategic Vision and Fiscal Synchronisation

At the advanced level of estate management, the separation between physical asset planning and financial forecasting is eliminated. The standard dictates that the asset management plan (AMP) and the estate vision must align seamlessly with the budget management cycle.<sup>1</sup> In a typical school context, this synchronisation ensures that capital investment is not a reactive response to failure but a planned deployment of resources designed to enhance the learning environment.<sup>2</sup>

### Practical Integration with the Multi-Year Budget Cycle

In practice, a Level 4 school utilises a three-to-five-year rolling financial forecast that incorporates the revenue implications of all planned capital works.<sup>1</sup> This process begins in the autumn term with a rigorous review of the building condition survey and the strategic priorities identified in the School Development Plan (SDP).<sup>10</sup> The estate vision acts as the primary filter through which all spending is justified, ensuring that every project, whether a roof renewal or a classroom reconfiguration, contributes directly to the long-term goals of the institution.<sup>1</sup>

| Month               | Strategic Estate Activity   | Budgetary Outcome  |
|---------------------|---|--|
| September - October | Strategic review of the Estate Vision and review of current Condition Data Collection (CDC) reports.        | Formulation of Budget Guidelines that prioritise estate resilience and sustainability. <sup>10</sup>     |
| November - December | Detailed options appraisal for major capital projects; finalisation of the three-year maintenance schedule. | Integration of "invest-to-save" schemes into the preliminary budget forecast. <sup>10</sup>              |
| January - February  | Mid-year performance review of the estate; benchmarking of utility and FM costs via the FBIT tool.          | Refinement of the budget based on actual occupancy costs and identified efficiencies. <sup>11</sup>      |
| March - April       | Board approval of the Asset Management Plan alongside the final annual budget.                              | Secure allocation of Devolved Formula Capital (DFC) and School Condition Allocations (SCA). <sup>7</sup> |
| May - June          | Procurement of summer works using standardised digital data to ensure value for money.                      | Finalisation of capital contracts before the start of the new fiscal year. <sup>13</sup>                 |

The relevance of this timeline lies in its ability to prevent the "funding lottery" often associated with reactive bidding. By the time a school enters the spring budget planning phase, the estates lead and the School Business Professional (SBP) have already modeled the impact of different scenarios, such as the potential savings from transitioning to LED lighting or the revenue pressures of an aging boiler system.<sup>8</sup> This foresight allows the board to make informed decisions about whether to hold funds in reserve or to release capital for urgent renewals that extend building life by 15 to 40 years.<sup>17</sup>

## Data-Led Strategic Prioritisation

The advanced school utilises a weighted scoring system to prioritise works, moving beyond the simple categories of "urgent" or "essential." The analysis indicates that schools at Level 4 rank projects based on their intersection with safety, educational continuity, and carbon reduction.<sup>2</sup> For example, a heating system renewal in a high-density science block would receive a higher priority score than a cosmetic refurbishment of a staff area, because the former impacts both statutory compliance and the delivery of the core curriculum.<sup>2</sup> This mechanism ensures that limited capital is directed toward the "root cause" of estate risks, thereby preventing the school from falling into a "patch and mend" culture that ultimately increases long-term costs.<sup>18</sup>

## Governance and Leadership: The Role of the Dedicated Estates Trustee

Level 4 standards mandate the appointment of a dedicated board member to oversee the effective management of the estate.<sup>1</sup> In the complex environment of a school, where multiple buildings often span several decades of construction, this role is critical for ensuring strategic oversight and accountability.<sup>3</sup>

### The Estates Governor as a Strategic Partner

In practice, the dedicated estates governor or trustee acts as a "critical friend" to the executive leadership team. This individual is not necessarily a technical expert, but they must possess the skills to interpret estate data and challenge assumptions.<sup>4</sup> Their primary function is to ensure that the board maintains a strategic overview rather than becoming embroiled in day-to-day operations.<sup>4</sup>

The interaction between the estates lead, the SBP, and the dedicated board member forms a triad of accountability. The estates lead provides the technical data from condition surveys; the SBP provides the financial context of the revenue and capital budgets; and the board member ensures that these align with the trust's mission and the DfE's standards.<sup>1</sup> This collaborative approach ensures that the governing board receives clear and concise monitoring reports at least six times a year, covering:

- **Statutory Compliance:** The percentage of the estate that is fully compliant with fire, water, and electrical safety regulations.<sup>22</sup>
- **Condition Categorisation:** The distribution of the estate across DfE condition grades A to D, with a clear plan for addressing Grade D (life-expired) elements.<sup>22</sup>
- **Project Performance:** The status of capital works against time and budget targets.<sup>21</sup>
- **Risk Mitigation:** The status of the estate-related risk register and the effectiveness of disaster recovery and business continuity plans.<sup>8</sup>

## Professional Capability and Skills Audits

An advanced school recognises that estate management is now a specialist discipline touching upon property law, procurement, and sustainability.<sup>3</sup> Level 4 practice involves conducting annual governors' skills assessments that specifically include estates expertise.<sup>1</sup> If a gap is identified, the school actively recruits professionals from the construction or facilities management sectors to join the board, or invests in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for existing members through organisations like the Confederation of School Trusts (CST).<sup>3</sup> This ensures that the leadership team is equipped to ask the "right questions" during the 2026 spending reviews and can provide the necessary checks and balances on high-value procurement decisions.<sup>4</sup>

## Advanced Financial Intelligence: Total Cost of Occupancy and Value for Money

Achieving Level 4 requires a deep understanding of the "Total Cost of Occupancy" (TCO), the aggregate cost of purchasing, running, maintaining, and eventually renewing the school's assets.<sup>1</sup> For a school, knowing this figure is the only way to demonstrate true value for money and to challenge the efficiency of the physical environment.<sup>1</sup>

## Measuring the Performance of the Estate

Performance at the advanced level is measured through a suite of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that are benchmarked against similar institutions via the DfE's Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool (FBIT).<sup>14</sup> The use of these metrics allows the school to identify where resources might be diverted from ineffective buildings to support higher-quality teaching and learning.<sup>27</sup>

| Performance Indicator                  | Data Source   | Advanced Utility  |
|--|---|---|
| Property Occupation<br>Cost per $m^2$  | Condition surveys, scaled plans, budget outturn. <sup>22</sup>  | Identifies inefficient building fabric or disproportionate FM spend. <sup>22</sup>                              |
| Maintenance Need per $m^2$             | Up-to-date condition survey with estimated costs. <sup>22</sup> | Justifies capital funding bids by quantifying the backlog of "life-expired" assets. <sup>18</sup>               |
| Planned vs. Reactive Maintenance Ratio | PPM schedule vs. emergency repair spend. <sup>22</sup>          | Aiming for a ratio above 70:30 to minimise high-cost reactive repairs and disruption. <sup>17</sup>             |
| Space per Pupil (Utilisation)          | Floor areas vs. Pupil Number on Roll (NOR). <sup>22</sup>       | Identifies surplus capacity that could be repurposed for "Inclusion Bases" or community lettings. <sup>18</sup> |

|                              |   |   |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| Energy Consumption per $m^2$ | Utility bills and half-hourly meter data. <sup>22</sup> | Tracks the impact of decarbonisation projects and identifies "phantom" energy loads. <sup>5</sup> |
|------------------------------|---|---|

The implications of these metrics are profound. If a school finds its "occupation cost as a proportion of total budget" is significantly higher than its peer group, the SBP and the estates lead investigate the causal factors. This might reveal that a particular wing of the school is thermally inefficient, leading to a strategic decision to decommission or rebuild that area rather than continuing to fund expensive heating and maintenance.<sup>18</sup>

### Value for Money in Capital Investment: The 3G Pitch Case Study

A hallmark of Level 4 practice is the ability to demonstrate value for money through sophisticated business cases for high-value assets. For example, the installation of a 3G artificial grass pitch is a common project for schools seeking to enhance sports provision while generating revenue.<sup>31</sup> An advanced business case goes beyond initial capital costs to consider the full lifecycle.<sup>8</sup>

The evidence suggests that a well-managed 3G pitch at a school can generate over £100,000 in annual community rental revenue.<sup>32</sup> However, the Level 4 practitioner calculates the "net" return by accounting for:

- **Operating Lease Costs:** If the pitch was funded via an operating lease, repayments might be £50,000–£60,000 per year.<sup>32</sup>
- **Sinking Fund:** A mandatory reserve of approximately £30,000 per year must be set aside to replace the surface every 10 years.<sup>31</sup>
- **Operating Costs:** Maintenance, business rates, and floodlighting typically cost around £100,000 annually.<sup>31</sup>

By modeling these figures, the school can prove that the asset "pays for itself" while providing a surplus that contributes to general school finances.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the advanced school uses this data to justify the investment's qualitative benefits, such as increased student admissions and the creation of "ambassadors" for the school within the local community.<sup>32</sup>

### Sustainability as Strategy: Decarbonisation and the Nature Park Ecosystem

Level 4 standards require the Climate Action Plan (CAP) to be a living document, embedded into the heart of the estate strategy.<sup>1</sup> By September 2025, every school must have a nominated sustainability lead and a comprehensive CAP that addresses the four pillars of the DfE's strategy: decarbonisation, biodiversity, green skills, and adaptation.<sup>5</sup>

## Decarbonisation and the Transition to Net Zero

For a school, which is typically among the largest emitters of carbon in the public sector, the decarbonisation plan must be robust and data-driven.<sup>35</sup> The UK government aims to reduce all direct emissions from public sector buildings by 75% by 2037.<sup>36</sup> In practice, this means moving away from a "patch and mend" approach to heating systems.<sup>18</sup>

The Level 4 strategy focuses on:

- **Fabric First:** Prioritising insulation, glazing, and draft-proofing to reduce overall energy demand before replacing heating plant.<sup>8</sup>
- **System Renewal:** Utilising the £710 million Renewal and Retrofit Programme to replace life-expired gas boilers with heat pumps or other ultra-low carbon solutions that extend building life by decades.<sup>18</sup>
- **Smart Infrastructure:** Integrating digital Building Management Systems (BMS) that use real-time data to optimise heating and cooling based on room occupancy.<sup>16</sup>

## The National Education Nature Park and Biodiversity

Participation in the National Education Nature Park is a core component of Level 4 sustainability.<sup>1</sup> This initiative empowers students to take agency over their environment by mapping and improving the biodiversity of the school site.<sup>37</sup>

In a secondary school setting, this "five-step cycle" is integrated into the curriculum (KS3/4/5) across subjects like Biology, Geography, and Citizenship.<sup>40</sup> Pupils use GIS technology and the "Nature Park Climate Curriculum Framework" to:

1. **Map the Site:** Creating a digital baseline of habitats, from playing fields to "the bits in between" buildings.<sup>6</sup>
2. **Identify Opportunities:** Using data to decide where biodiversity can be improved, such as through the creation of ponds or pollinator-friendly grasslands.<sup>39</sup>
3. **Make Decisions:** Collaborating on a vision statement for the site.<sup>40</sup>
4. **Make Change Happen:** Planting for a purpose and creating wildlife habitats.<sup>40</sup>
5. **Record Change:** Monitoring the impact and sharing data with scientists at the Natural History Museum to contribute to real-world research.<sup>39</sup>

This approach transforms the estate from a mere physical boundary into a learning laboratory, fostering "green skills" that prepare students for the future economy while simultaneously building climate resilience against risks like overheating and flooding.<sup>5</sup>

# High-Integrity Asset Management: Digital Twins and Asbestos 4.0

Advanced estate management is underpinned by the digitisation of records and the use of digital Building Information Modeling (BIM).<sup>1</sup> For a school, this creates a "single source of truth" for the condition and location of all physical assets.<sup>12</sup>

## Digital Information Modeling (BIM) and Asset Data

In practice, Level 4 schools move beyond fragmented spreadsheets to integrated asset management platforms. These systems act as a digital twin of the estate, where every component, from fire doors to server racks, is tagged with its installation date, maintenance history, and expected end-of-life.<sup>2</sup> This allows the estates lead to predict capital spikes ten years in advance, ensuring that renewals are factored into the multi-year budget before they become emergencies.<sup>9</sup>

The introduction of the "Manage Your Education Estate" service in February 2026 will standardise this data collection.<sup>3</sup> From Autumn 2026, schools will be required to submit an annual return on how they are meeting these standards.<sup>18</sup> Those with high-quality, digital evidence of their building condition will be prioritised for funding, as the era of competitive "CIF lottery" bidding is replaced by data-led allocations.<sup>18</sup>

## Advanced Asbestos Management: The Digital Register and Response Drill

Asbestos management at Level 4 is proactive and highly transparent. The standard requires an updated asbestos register enriched with photographs and material assessment scores, as well as the conduct of an emergency response exercise.<sup>1</sup>

For a school, where asbestos is often present in ceiling voids, floor tiles, and pipe insulation, the register must be exhaustive.<sup>45</sup> Each entry in the register is scored using the HSG264 algorithm, which considers the product type, extent of damage, surface treatment, and asbestos type.<sup>46</sup>

| Parameter              | Score (1-3)  | Impact on Risk  |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Product Type           | Asbestos cement (1) vs. Insulating board (2) vs. Thermal insulation (3). | Determines how easily fibers are released if disturbed. <sup>46</sup>         |
| Damage / Deterioration | Good condition (0) vs. Medium damage (2) vs. High damage (3).            | Indicates the immediate urgency of remedial action. <sup>46</sup>             |
| Surface Treatment      | Composite material (0) vs. Unsealed board (3).                           | Affects the likelihood of fiber release under normal occupancy. <sup>46</sup> |
| Asbestos Type          | Chrysotile (1) vs. Amosite (2) vs. Crocidolite (3).                      | Defines the carcinogenic risk level of the fibers. <sup>46</sup>              |

A combined "Material Assessment Score" of 10 or more is regarded as high-risk, triggering immediate removal or encapsulation.<sup>47</sup> To satisfy the Level 4 requirement, this data is accompanied by photographs that allow staff to monitor the condition visually during annual reinspections.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, the school must conduct a live or table-top emergency response exercise.<sup>1</sup> In this scenario, staff simulate an accidental disturbance of asbestos during a maintenance task.<sup>50</sup> The drill tests the "Stop, Restrict, Decontaminate" protocol:

1. **Stop Work:** Immediately vacating the area and turning off ventilation.<sup>52</sup>
2. **Restrict Access:** Locking the room and posting warning signs.<sup>52</sup>
3. **Decontaminate:** Simulating the wiping down of clothing with damp rags and the double-bagging of waste.<sup>52</sup>
4. **Reporting:** Testing the communication chain to the board and the HSE via RIDDOR.<sup>52</sup>

This level of preparedness ensures that the school's management of hazardous materials is not just a paperwork exercise but a practiced safety culture.

## Strategic Capital Planning: Beyond the "Patch and Mend" Culture

The DfE's Education Estates Strategy (February 2026) signaled a move away from reactive interventions toward a proactive model of "renewal before rebuild".<sup>19</sup> Level 4 schools are at the forefront of this shift, aligning their capital plans with new national ambitions such as the mandatory provision of "Inclusion Bases" for neurodiverse pupils.<sup>18</sup>

### Repurposing Surplus Space for Inclusion

Schools are increasingly encouraged to identify underused or "surplus" land and buildings.<sup>12</sup> In an advanced setting, this space is repurposed to create dedicated "Inclusion Bases", safe spaces for SEND pupils that bridge the gap between mainstream and specialist provision.<sup>18</sup> In practice, this involves a strategic review of the estate's utilisation data to identify classrooms that are consistently under-occupied.

The transformation of such spaces must meet new digital and environmental standards coming into effect in 2026, including specific requirements for:

- **Acoustics:** Reducing reverberation to support students with sensory sensitivities.<sup>18</sup>
- **Lighting:** Using adaptive lighting systems to create calming environments.<sup>18</sup>
- **Accessibility:** Ensuring that these hubs are fully accessible, moving beyond basic DDA compliance to inclusive design.<sup>18</sup>

### Lifecycle Renewal and the 2028 Funding Shift

The analysis indicates that by Autumn 2028, the competitive Condition Improvement Fund (CIF) will be replaced by a formulaic model based on granular and timely data provided by the schools themselves.<sup>18</sup> Schools that achieve Level 4 today are positioning themselves for this future. By maintaining high-quality

digital evidence of their building condition, such as roof cores, boiler efficiency logs, and window frame assessments, they ensure they will not be overlooked by the new allocation formula.<sup>18</sup>

This proactive approach involves a "spend to save" philosophy. By funding a total roof replacement (extending building life by 40 years) rather than a series of temporary patches, the Level 4 school prevents emergency closures and reduces the long-term revenue pressure on the trust.<sup>18</sup> This strategy is backed by the government's commitment to invest £38 billion in education capital over five years, emphasising full renewals over minor maintenance.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion: The Resilient and Future-Ready School Estate

The journey to DfE Estate Management Level 4 is one of organisational transformation. It requires a school to move beyond the mindset of the estate as a liability and to embrace it as a dynamic platform for educational and social impact.<sup>3</sup> In practice, this maturity is visible in the robust synchronisation of the estate vision with the multi-year budget, the sophisticated use of data to drive value for money, and the empowerment of students to lead environmental change through the National Education Nature Park.<sup>1</sup>

As the DfE transitions to a more regulated and digital model through the "Manage Your Education Estate" service and the 2026 annual returns, the advanced standards provide a clear roadmap for institutional resilience.<sup>12</sup> By integrating governance, financial intelligence, and sustainability into a cohesive strategy, schools can ensure their physical infrastructure not only meets the safety and compliance needs of today but is fully equipped to meet the pedagogical and environmental challenges of the next decade.<sup>3</sup> The ultimate outcome of Level 4 practice is a school estate that is safe, warm, and weatherproof, but also inclusive, sustainable, and financially optimised for the success of every learner.<sup>2</sup>

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*If you feel you need help with working through the Estate Management Standards, or just to achieve Level 1 foundations of statutory compliance, please get in touch for a free consultation.*

Contact Trilborne on:

0118 230 1005 / 07944 657 309 / [charles.ainslie@trilborne.co.uk](mailto:charles.ainslie@trilborne.co.uk)

The logo for Trilborne, consisting of a solid blue square with the word "Trilborne" written in white, serif font in the center.

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