The School Safety People

ESTATES BULLETIN

DfE school estate standards and the November return

2 November 2026



Illustrative school estate

RETURN DEADLINE

6pm Monday 23 November 2026

School business managers, headteachers and trust leaders in England have an immediate estates task: check who is preparing your responsible body's first School estate management standards annual return. The deadline is 6pm on Monday 23 November 2026. Use the next three weeks to check the information behind the answers and agree priorities for any gaps. [1]

What has changed

DfE published the School estate management standards on 23 April 2025. They describe effective estate-management practices through four levels: Baseline, Transitioning, Fully effective and Advanced. The standards help leaders identify gaps and plan improvements; they are distinct from the competency framework covering estates staff skills. [2]

The Education Estates Strategy: a decade of national renewal, published on 11 February 2026, announced annual reporting from autumn 2026 alongside a shift towards proactive maintenance and longer-term planning. That reporting is now under way: the first return opened on 22 September 2026. [3] [1]

Who submits the return

DfE asks responsible bodies eligible for annual DfE capital funding to respond, including local authorities, academy trusts, dioceses and sixth-form colleges. Individual schools do not submit separately; single-academy trusts do. [1]

A senior estates lead submits through Manage your education estate using DfE Sign-in. The questions are multiple choice, with no supporting-document uploads. DfE expects progress towards level 3, not that everyone has reached it. The return will not affect DfE funding, and there is no penalty for not meeting the standards. [1]

The standards at a glance

1	2	3	4
Baseline	**Transitioning**	**Fully effective**	**Advanced**

[2]

What schools should do now

Treat the return as a discussion between estates, finance, school leadership and governance. Answers should reflect arrangements that work across the estate, rather than policies that exist only on paper. Individual schools can contribute accurate local information and escalate unresolved concerns to their responsible body.

This is a management self-assessment, not a site safety certificate. Some baseline standards reflect existing legislation. Submitting the return, or working towards a higher level, does not replace ongoing safety and compliance duties. [2]

Practical preparation

Keep preparation proportionate. Start with the records you already hold, check when they were last reviewed and distinguish completed work from planned improvements. Where an answer depends on several schools, agree how the central team will check consistency. Record uncertainty openly, with an owner for resolving it, rather than turning an incomplete picture into an optimistic assurance.

Five actions before 23 November

Our suggested preparation steps, informed by the DfE return questions. [4]

1. **Confirm ownership.** Agree who coordinates, checks local information and submits. Test access and give colleagues a clear internal deadline.
2. **Check the key plans.** Review the estate vision, three-to-five-year strategy and asset-management plan. Make sure responsibilities and governance are clear.
3. **Review the evidence.** Check condition information, statutory inspection records and outstanding actions. Identify missing or outdated records rather than assuming everything is in order.
4. **Look beyond repairs.** Review planned maintenance, business continuity, climate resilience, sustainability leadership and digital infrastructure alongside immediate defects.
5. **Turn gaps into actions.** Prioritise by risk, assign owners and realistic dates, and agree how governors or trustees will review progress. Address urgent hazards without waiting for the return.

Practical support from TSSP

> If this review highlights gaps in your health and safety arrangements, The School Safety People can discuss practical support. Book a Teams call to talk through your priorities and the support you need. Any work is scoped and agreed before it begins.

Sources

[1] DfE annual return guidance
[2] DfE School estate management standards
[3] DfE Education Estates Strategy
[4] DfE return questions

Official guidance checked on 2 November 2026.