

Why CIF Projects Must Move Fast Once Funding is Announced

3 hours ago



As schools wait for CIF funding announcements in May, they are being advised to be ready to move fast to meet tight delivery deadlines.

Schools are entering the final years of the Condition Improvement Fund (CIF), with the Department for Education planning to replace the programme with a new capital maintenance funding model by autumn 2028.

That means the 2027-28 round is expected to be the final opportunity for many academy trusts and sixth-form colleges to secure funding through CIF.

Hundreds of school estates teams across England are waiting to hear whether their 2026-27 CIF applications have been successful, with funding decisions expected from the Department for Education in May.

Awards will trigger an immediate delivery race. Estates managers, technical advisers and contractors will have only a limited period to mobilise projects and complete works during the school summer holidays.

In many cases CIF funding only covers part of the required works, meaning schools and trusts must prioritise carefully, manage tight capital budgets and sometimes phase projects across multiple funding rounds.

Will Hunnam, managing director of Forza Doors, said: "CIF funding is essentially a delivery programme with a very tight timetable. Once awards are confirmed, schools need to move quickly to finalise scope, appoint contractors and prepare sites for summer works.

“For many condition improvement projects, particularly those involving fire safety and compliance upgrades, the ability to move quickly from award to delivery will determine whether the project succeeds.

“In our experience, the projects that succeed are the ones where delivery partners understand the pace required and can mobilise at speed.”

The critical delivery window

The CIF programme assumes that many intrusive works will be completed during the summer holiday period, when school buildings are empty and sites are more accessible.

However, this also creates a compressed delivery window for projects that may involve safety-critical upgrades such as fire protection works, building envelope repairs or mechanical and electrical replacements.

For estates teams and consultants supporting CIF projects, early clarity around scope, procurement and programme can significantly reduce delivery risk.

CIF delivery also takes place within strict governance structures. Academy trusts and local authorities must ensure projects follow approved procurement frameworks, maintain clear audit trails and receive appropriate board or governing body oversight while safeguarding requirements are maintained throughout delivery.

Here are three priorities for reducing delivery risk and keeping projects on programme.

1. Lock down the project scope early

Successful projects typically begin with a clearly defined scope that matches the original CIF application.

Any deviation from the approved works can create delays or require further approvals. Ensuring surveys are up to date, product specifications are signed off, and potential risks such as asbestos, access constraints or building services issues are understood early can help projects move rapidly once funding is confirmed.

2. Secure delivery partners ahead of time

Procurement and contractor appointment often represent the biggest cause of programme delays.

Projects that progress smoothly usually have a compliant procurement route identified in advance, whether through existing frameworks, local authority arrangements or trusted approved suppliers. This allows delivery partners to mobilise quickly once funding is confirmed, which is particularly important where works must be completed during the summer holiday window.

3. Plan and sequence summer delivery carefully

Many CIF projects rely on uninterrupted access during the summer break to complete intrusive works safely and efficiently. Mapping out site availability in advance, including exams, safeguarding requirements and any holiday activities, is the essential first step.

From there, sequencing becomes critical. Delivery schedules should be planned well in advance, with clear contractor access windows established and all supply chain partners confirmed on the programme. The ability of suppliers and manufacturers to commit to and meet specific delivery dates often determines whether a project completes on time.

Delivering safety-critical upgrades at pace

Projects addressing health and safety issues, including fire protection, remain a priority within the CIF programme.

For products such as certified fire doors, schools and contractors must balance strict compliance requirements with the realities of tight project timelines.

Manufacturers which combine technical expertise with fast production and delivery can help keep projects on track.

Hunnam added: “Many CIF projects involve fire safety and compliance works where specification is tightly controlled and timelines are short.

“Schools and contractors need manufacturing partners who can demonstrate full certification, consistent product quality and the ability to deliver within very tight lead times.

“If products can’t be manufactured and supplied quickly once funding is confirmed, even well-planned projects can struggle to stay within the summer delivery window.”

Understanding the pressures of education environments

Delivering successful projects on education sites requires careful coordination between estates teams, consultants, contractors and specialist suppliers.

Partners who understand the operational constraints of school environments, including safeguarding, programme pressures and compliance requirements, can help ensure projects are completed safely and on time.

As CIF projects move from award to delivery this spring, the focus will shift quickly from funding applications to the practical challenge of delivering improvements within a very limited window.

For further information regarding Forza Doors please visit: <https://www.forza-doors.com/>

For further guidance regarding CIF please

visit: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/condition-improvement-fund-guidance-for-schools>