

INSIGHT

Recruiting Estates Leaders



Introduction

Estates leaders make decisions that outlast them. A capital programme approved this year, a building sold, a backlog item deferred for another cycle: each shapes what the organisation can do for a decade or more. The wrong appointment is expensive in ways that rarely show up in year one.

Most failed estates appointments are not sourcing failures. The organisation found candidates with the right titles and the right sector names on their CVs. The failure came later, in judgement: how the person weighed risk, spent capital, handled a board or dealt with a compliance gap they inherited.

This guide is for employers recruiting Heads of Estates, Estates Directors and similar leaders in higher and further education, the NHS, schools and multi-academy trusts, local authorities, housing and corporate real estate. It covers:

- How estates leadership differs from FM, and how it varies by sector
- How to write a brief that attracts the right people
- How to assess capability, context and motivation, with evidence
- How to test capital and compliance judgement
- Common failure modes, pay, process and onboarding

We have recruited FM, estates and workplace leaders since 2006. What follows is the practical approach we use with clients.

What an Estates Leader Actually Does

Facilities management keeps buildings working today. Estates leadership decides which buildings the organisation should have, what condition they need to be in and how to pay for them. The two overlap, but the centre of gravity is different.

A Head of FM is judged on service: maintenance response, cleaning, security, contractor performance and user satisfaction. An estates leader is judged on the asset base and the long-term plan. The typical remit covers:

- **Estates strategy.** A plan that links the estate to organisational strategy, student numbers, clinical models or service changes.
- **Capital programmes.** Business cases, design teams, procurement, contractor management and handover of new build and refurbishment.
- **Backlog maintenance.** Condition surveys, risk-ranked investment plans and the case for funding.
- **Compliance.** Statutory and regulatory assurance across fire, water, asbestos, gas, electrical, lifts and building safety.
- **Space and property.** Utilisation, acquisitions, disposals, leases and rationalisation.
- **Sustainability and net zero.** Decarbonisation plans, energy and the capital needed to deliver them.

The difference shows up in the decisions. An FM leader asks how to keep a plant room running. An estates leader asks whether the building it serves should still exist in ten years, and what happens to the risk profile if its replacement is deferred.

This matters for recruitment because titles are unreliable. Some Heads of Estates run what is essentially an FM service. Some Facilities Directors carry full capital and strategy responsibility. Read the remit, not the job title, both in your own brief and on the candidate's CV.



Recruitment

Executive search for the built environment



Estates Leadership Across Sectors

The core disciplines are the same everywhere. The funding model, regulation and stakeholders are not, and they decide whether a candidate transfers well.

Higher and Further Education

University and college estates leaders manage mixed portfolios of teaching, research, residential and public space, usually with constrained capital. The National Audit Office found that £5.6 billion would be needed to return all university-owned research infrastructure in England to a fully operational condition. Expect scrutiny from governing bodies, finance committees and academic leaders who all have views on space.

NHS

NHS estates work sits inside a heavily regulated clinical environment, where Health Technical Memoranda, premises assurance and infection control shape every decision. According to NHS England Digital, the estimated cost to eradicate backlog maintenance across the NHS estate in England reached £15.9 billion in 2024/25. Clinical risk is the lens through which that backlog is prioritised.

Schools and Multi-Academy Trusts

The National Audit Office reported that the Department for Education estimated the condition need of the whole school estate in England at £11.4 billion. Trust estates leaders often oversee many sites with a small central team, bid for condition funding and report to boards with limited estates expertise.

Local Authorities and Housing

Council estates leaders manage operational buildings, investment property and sometimes schools, under political scrutiny and tight revenue budgets. Housing providers add resident safety duties, including those under the Building Safety Act for higher-risk buildings.

Corporate Real Estate

Corporate roles focus on portfolio strategy, lease events, workplace change and occupancy cost. Decisions move faster, and boards expect a clear commercial case.



Recruitment

Leadership
under
pressure
defines
organisations



Writing the Brief

A weak estates brief lists every responsibility the organisation can think of and leaves out the decisions the person will actually face. Strong candidates read that as a sign the role is not yet understood internally.

Before drafting, agree answers to these questions with everyone on the hiring panel:

- What are the three estates decisions this person must get right in their first two years?
- What is the size and shape of the capital programme, and who approves it?
- What is the current backlog position, and how reliable is the condition data?
- Which compliance areas are known to be weak or poorly evidenced?
- Does the role own FM delivery, or sit alongside a separate FM lead?
- Who does the role report to, and what authority does it hold over budgets and procurement?
- What is the net zero commitment, and is it funded?

Then separate essentials from preferences. Sector experience is often listed as essential when the real requirement is experience of a comparable regulatory regime or governance structure. Professional qualifications may matter for board credibility, or may simply filter out good people.

Be honest about the state of the estate. Candidates will find out at interview or in their first month. A brief that names the problems attracts people who want to fix them. A brief that hides them attracts people who later leave.

Finally, write down what success looks like at twelve months. If the panel cannot agree on that, it is not ready to shortlist.



Recruitment

Strong
workplaces
are built by
strong
operational
leaders



Capability, Context and Motivation

We assess every senior appointment on three dimensions, and we ask for evidence on each. A candidate who is strong on capability but wrong on context or motivation is a risk, however good the CV looks.

Capability

Can the person do the work at the level required? For estates leaders, test their record in:

- Writing and defending an estates strategy linked to organisational goals
- Delivering capital projects, including honest accounts of those that overran
- Building a risk-ranked backlog plan from condition data
- Running compliance assurance, rather than simply contracting it out
- Leading a team through restructure or service change

Context

Has the person done it somewhere similar enough? Context covers regulation, governance, funding model, scale, pace and culture. A strong corporate real estate director may struggle with committee cycles in a university. Ask about the conditions in which they succeeded, not only the result.

Motivation

Why this role, and why now? Estates programmes run for years, and a leader who leaves halfway through can do real damage. Explore what the candidate wants to build, what would make them walk away and whether your role offers it.

Evidence

Each claim should be backed by something specific: a programme, a decision, a figure they can explain, a referee who saw it happen. Where evidence is thin, record it as a gap rather than giving the benefit of the doubt.

Governance and Stakeholder Demands

Estates leaders spend much of their time persuading people who control money but do not manage buildings. That is the job, not a distraction from it.

Typical stakeholders include:

- Boards, governing bodies, trustees or elected members who approve strategy and capital
- Finance directors and committees who test business cases and affordability
- Clinical, academic or operational leaders who want more space and less disruption
- Regulators, auditors and insurers who expect evidence of compliance

The strongest estates leaders translate technical risk into organisational risk. They can explain to a finance committee why deferring a roof replacement moves a risk from the maintenance budget to the service continuity register. They do not overstate risk to win funding, because that costs them trust the next time they ask.

At interview, look for:

- Papers they have written for a board or committee, and what happened next
- A capital bid that was rejected, and how they responded
- A senior stakeholder who wanted something the estate could not support
- How they report compliance: dashboards, exceptions and levels of assurance

Warning signs include describing governance as bureaucracy, or blaming previous boards for underinvestment without explaining how they made the case.



Strong
leadership
creates
stability



Assessing Capital and Compliance Judgement

Interviews tend to reward candidates who describe projects well. Judgement is better tested by asking candidates to make decisions, with incomplete information, in front of the panel.

Capital Judgement

Ask each candidate to walk through a programme they led from business case to handover. Probe:

- How the preferred option was chosen, and which alternatives were rejected
- How cost and programme risks were identified and held
- What went wrong, what it cost and who knew when
- How they managed the design team, the contractor and changes from their own side
- What they would do differently

A candidate who has never had a project overrun has either been lucky or is not telling you. What matters is how early they saw the problem and how honestly they reported it.

Compliance Judgement

Strong estates leaders know that compliance rests on evidence, not contracts. Ask how they would establish the true compliance position in their first month. Good answers go beyond certificates to records: remedial actions closed out, asbestos registers used in practice, water hygiene logs checked, fire risk assessment actions tracked to completion.

A Practical Exercise

Give shortlisted candidates a short scenario based on your own estate: a list of backlog items, a fixed capital budget and a compliance finding. Ask them to prioritise and present to a panel that includes a finance lead. Assess the reasoning and how they respond to challenge, not whether they reach your preferred answer.

Common Failure Modes in Estates Appointments

When an estates appointment goes wrong, the cause is usually visible in the hiring process with hindsight. These are the patterns we see most often.

- 1. Hiring an FM operator for an estates strategy role.** Services run well, but the capital case never gets made and strategy stalls.
- 2. Hiring a strategist with no operational grip.** The plans look good, but compliance and service delivery drift because nobody checks the detail.
- 3. Over-weighting sector labels.** The panel prefers a candidate from the same sector over one with stronger judgement from a comparable regime.
- 4. Ignoring governance fit.** A leader used to fast commercial decisions is frustrated by committee cycles, or a public sector leader cannot keep pace in a corporate setting.
- 5. Unclear authority.** The role is described as strategic, but budgets, procurement and reporting lines keep it operational. Good people leave within a year.
- 6. Hidden estate problems.** The new leader finds a compliance or backlog position far worse than presented, and trust breaks down early.
- 7. Assessing presentation, not decisions.** The panel appoints the most fluent interviewee rather than the person whose decisions hold up under scrutiny.

Each of these is a judgement failure in the hiring process, not a shortage of candidates. Most are prevented by a clearer brief, an honest account of the estate and an assessment that tests decisions.

Before the final interview, ask the panel which of these risks applies to each shortlisted candidate. If nobody can answer, the assessment is not finished.



Recruitment

Better
leaders
build
better
workplaces



Pay Context for Estates Leaders

There is no single market rate for estates leadership. Titles vary widely by sector and scope, and pay depends on the size of the capital programme, the reporting line and whether the role carries FM delivery as well as strategy.

Our own advertising data gives a reference point. For 35 Head of Facilities, Estates and similar roles Maxwell Stephens advertised from 2023 to 2026, the median top-of-range salary was £70,000. For 12 permanent director-level FM and estates roles we advertised over the same period, the median top-of-range salary was £93,000.

Use these figures as context, not as a benchmark for a specific role, estate or sector.

Practical points when setting pay:

- Price the remit, not the title. A Head of Estates with a large capital programme and board reporting is a director-level job in all but name.
- Check internal relativities early, especially against finance and operations peers.
- In the public sector, confirm what flexibility the pay framework allows before going to market.
- Consider the whole package: pension, flexibility, professional development and the chance to deliver a significant programme.

If the budget does not match the remit, change one of them before advertising, not after the first shortlist has been seen.



Recruitment

Exceptional
FM talent,
carefully
found



Running the Process and Timescales

Senior estates candidates are usually employed, often mid-programme and cautious about moving. A slow or disorganised process loses them, and tells them how decisions get made in your organisation.

Hiring is taking longer across the market. According to Totaljobs, the average time to hire in the UK climbed to 12 weeks in spring 2026, up from 10 weeks in autumn 2025. Senior estates appointments often take longer still, because notice periods are long and governance approvals take time.

A well-run process usually follows these stages:

1. Agree the brief, success measures and pay with all decision-makers before going to market.
2. Fix interview dates and panel members in advance, including any board or committee involvement.
3. Run a targeted search, as the best estates leaders are rarely active applicants.
4. Hold a first-stage interview focused on capability and motivation.
5. Hold a final stage with the practical exercise, stakeholder meetings and a site visit.
6. Take detailed references that test specific claims, not general character.
7. Make a clear offer quickly, then manage the notice period actively.

Keep candidates informed at every stage. At senior level, silence of more than a week is usually read as lack of interest. If the panel needs more time, say so and give a date.

If a capital project or compliance issue cannot wait for the notice period, consider interim cover.



Recruitment

Operational
excellence
is often built
through
consistency
rather than
visibility



Onboarding an Estates Leader

An estates leader's first months set the direction for years. Onboarding should give them the information and access to form an accurate view quickly, and the room to say what they find.

Before day one, prepare:

- The current estates strategy, capital programme and approved budgets
- Condition survey data and the backlog register, with a note on its reliability
- The compliance position, including known gaps and open actions
- Key contracts, frameworks and supplier performance information
- The governance calendar, recent committee papers and board decisions on the estate

In the first three months, the new leader should:

- Meet each board or committee member with an interest in the estate
- Visit every significant site and meet the people who run it
- Test the compliance position through their own review of the evidence
- Agree a short list of priorities with their line manager

Agree in advance how the new leader will report what they find. If the estate is in worse condition than presented, they need to be able to say so without it becoming a question of blame. Organisations that punish the first honest report rarely get a second.

Review progress formally at the end of each of the first three months, and again at six months. That is where misunderstandings about authority or priorities get resolved before they become reasons to leave.

Final Thoughts

Estates leaders carry decisions that affect safety, finances and services long after they are made. Recruiting one well is less about finding candidates and more about knowing what judgement you need and testing for it properly.

The cost of getting it wrong is rarely a single bad year. It is a capital programme steered in the wrong direction, a compliance gap left unexamined or a board that stops trusting estates advice.

The organisations that hire well for these roles tend to do the same things:

- They define the remit and authority before writing the advert
- They are honest about the condition of the estate
- They assess capability, context and motivation, and ask for evidence
- They test decisions, not presentation
- They move quickly and communicate clearly
- They support the new leader through the first months

Maxwell Stephens has specialised in FM, estates and workplace recruitment since 2006, with more than 450 client engagements and 95% of placed candidates still in role after 12 months. If you are planning an estates leadership appointment, contact us at info@maxwellstephens.com or on 0207 118 4848.

What the Data Says

What UK data shows about the estates that new estates leaders are being hired to manage, and how long it takes to hire them.

- The estimated cost to eradicate backlog maintenance across the NHS estate in England reached £15.9 billion in 2024/25.
Source: [NHS England Digital, Estates Returns Information Collection \(ERIC\) 2024/25, 2025](#)
- The Department for Education estimated the condition need of the whole school estate in England at £11.4 billion, the National Audit Office reported.
Source: [National Audit Office, Condition of school buildings, 2023](#)
- £5.6 billion would be needed to return all university-owned research infrastructure in England to a fully operational condition, the National Audit Office found.
Source: [National Audit Office, UK research infrastructure better reflects national priorities, but university maintenance lags, 2026](#)
- The average time to hire in the UK climbed to 12 weeks in spring 2026, up from 10 weeks in autumn 2025.
Source: [Totaljobs Hiring Trends Update, 2026](#)
- For 12 permanent director-level FM and estates roles Maxwell Stephens advertised from 2023 to 2026, the median top-of-range salary was £93,000.
Source: [Maxwell Stephens analysis of 497 advertised vacancies, May 2023 – September 2026](#)

Sources were checked in September 2026. Select a source to open the original research. Maxwell Stephens figures are drawn from our own published vacancies and placement records.

See It in Practice

Assistant Director of Estates, Operations for the University of East London

The University of East London appointed Maxwell Stephens to recruit an Assistant Director of Estates, Operations, a senior role combining strategic estates leadership, operational facilities management, service transformation, regulatory compliance, sustainability and people leadership. The successful candidate also needed to reflect the university's commitment to equality, diversity, inclusion and positive organisational change. We ran a targeted search and focused the assessment on what candidates had actually done, including how they had handled a service review that affected colleagues. Treating inclusive leadership as a core selection criterion produced a shortlist UEL could choose from on fit rather than on paper credentials alone.

It shows how assessing evidence of past decisions, rather than technical credentials alone, decides a senior estates appointment.

[Read the full case study at maxwellstephens.com/case-studies/university-of-east-london](https://maxwellstephens.com/case-studies/university-of-east-london)

Related Reading

- **Head of Estates: The Role, Pay and What Employers Look For**
maxwellstephens.com/blog/head-of-estates-role-pay-and-what-employers-look-for
- **Recruiting Estates Leaders in Education**
maxwellstephens.com/blog/recruiting-estates-leaders-in-education
- **The Building Safety Act: What It Means for FM and Estates Leaders**
maxwellstephens.com/blog/building-safety-act-what-it-means-for-fm-and-estates-leaders

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