



Balancing Budget & Fire Safety

For Schools

What your school is actually paying for - and how to compare fire safety quotations without making the wrong saving.

Fire alarms | Emergency lighting | Fire extinguishers | Maintenance



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The real question

How does a school control cost without making a poor fire safety decision?

Fire safety work competes with every other pressure on a school budget. Wanting to question the cost, ask what is genuinely necessary and find a proportionate way forward is not cutting corners. It is good management, and it is part of your duty of care to pupils, staff and visitors.

The aim is not to pick the cheapest quotation, and not to assume the dearest must be best. It is to understand three things: what your buildings actually require, what each quotation has and has not included, and what evidence sits behind the work being proposed.

Get those three straight and the decision becomes far easier to make - and far easier to explain later, if anyone ever asks you why you chose what you chose.

The one principle to take away

Start with the outcome you need. Then compare the ways of achieving it.

Do not compare the totals until you know whether the quotations cover the same work. A lower number for less work is not a saving.

What this guide does

- explains what usually moves the price up or down;
- separates work you need now from improvements and optional extras;
- gives you a checklist to compare quotations like for like;
- shows where saving is sensible, and where an omission quietly adds risk;
- helps you check whether a company is certified for the exact work you are buying;
- leaves you with a one-page record of your decision.

Who it is for

Head teachers, school business managers, operations and site managers, bursars, governors, trustees, and anyone comparing quotations for fire alarm, emergency lighting or fire extinguisher work in school premises in England.

Who is responsible

Fire safety law places duties on the Responsible Person, and there can be more than one where different organisations or people control parts of the premises. In most schools, the employer is a Responsible Person. The employer is normally the local authority for community, community special, maintained nursery and voluntary-controlled schools; the governing body for foundation, foundation special and voluntary-aided schools; and the academy trust for academies and free schools. Head teachers, business managers and site managers often handle day-to-day fire safety arrangements on behalf of the organisation that holds the legal duty. This guide is written for the people making and comparing purchasing decisions, whatever their formal role.

A note before you start

This guide is general information. It is not legal advice, it is not a Fire Risk Assessment, and it is not a system design. Your buildings, the people in them, how they are used and the risks identified in your own assessment decide what is suitable. Boarding accommodation and any residential parts of a school carry additional duties this guide does not cover.

A note on what Blake's does: we survey premises and design, install and maintain fire safety systems against the recommendations of your Fire Risk Assessment. We do not carry out the Fire Risk Assessment itself - that is a separate piece of work, and this guide assumes you already have one.

Start with what the building needs

The Fire Risk Assessment is your decision document

Your Fire Risk Assessment is a key starting point for fire safety spending decisions. A good one identifies the hazards, the people at risk, what is already in place and what is missing. The right answer to a finding might be new equipment. It might equally be a repair, a maintenance change, some training or simply better records.

A quotation is easier to judge when you can see how the work relates to the findings in your Fire Risk Assessment - and to the standards and building conditions that shape what those findings require. If you cannot see why an item is there, ask.

Three kinds of work - and why the difference matters

Most quotations mix three types of work together. Separating them is the single most useful thing you can do to control cost, because it tells you what has to happen now and what can wait.

Type of work	What it means
Essential	Work presented as necessary to address an identified deficiency, a required outcome, or a real loss of protection.
Recommended	Work that would improve reliability, resilience or usability - but where the urgency and the reason should be explained, not assumed.
Optional	A feature or upgrade that may be worth having but is not necessary to meet the current requirement.

These are not official categories, and no inspector will ask which bucket you used. They are simply a way to read a quotation. The buyer's question becomes: *which parts of this are essential now, which are recommended, and which are optional?*

On phasing

Some work can be planned or phased to spread the cost. That is legitimate - but it is not a free pass, and it should never be assumed. Any sequence has to be led by the risk, not by the budget, with temporary measures where needed and a recorded date to review it.

Whether work can safely be phased or delayed depends on the risk and the circumstances. When deciding what enforcement action is appropriate, enforcing authorities consider the seriousness of any breach, the risk it creates, and the efforts the Responsible Person has made to comply. A budget constraint on its own does not make a delay acceptable.

Blake's Guidance

Start with the risk and the outcome you need, then compare ways of getting there.

What does not work is starting with a product list and trying to make the risk fit the budget. That is how schools end up buying the wrong system, and then buying the right one afterwards.

Why two quotations rarely match

Two quotations can look like they describe the same job while allowing for completely different work. A gap in the price is not, on its own, proof that anyone is wrong. Usually it means the quotations are not describing the same thing.

Here is where the differences hide:

The design basis. The Fire Risk Assessment, the fire strategy, the system category, the coverage - two companies may have read the requirement differently, and priced different jobs as a result.

Existing equipment and wiring. One quotation assumes your current kit stays. Another has allowed to test it, or replace it, or has flagged that its condition is unknown. Same building, very different price.

Access and disruption. Ceiling access, occupied rooms, working at height, permits, out-of-hours working, temporary cover and making good afterwards all cost money - and are easy to leave out of a headline figure.

Interfaces and associated work. Links to doors, lifts, ventilation, monitoring, power supplies, containment. Included in one quotation, "by others" in the next, unmentioned in a third.

Testing and commissioning. The checks that prove the finished system actually works. Sometimes in the price. Sometimes not.

Documents and handover. Drawings, certificates, records, logbook, staff training. Clear in one quotation, vague in another.

Ongoing maintenance. Service visits, monitoring, batteries, consumables, call-outs, replacement cycles. This is whole-life cost, and over the life of a system it can add substantially to the original installation price.

The fair comparison

Give every company the same information, and ask each one to spell out its assumptions, its exclusions, and anything still to be confirmed. Then you are comparing like with like - and the totals finally mean something.

The quotation-comparison checklist

Work down this list for each quotation before you compare prices. Only tick a box when the point is clear in writing - not implied, not "we'll sort that on the day".

Compare	What to establish	Clear?
Basis	What survey, Fire Risk Assessment or information was the quote built on?	☐
Outcome	Which finding or requirement does the work address?	☐
Priority	What is essential, recommended, or optional?	☐
Specification	What category, coverage or performance is proposed?	☐
Existing system	What is retained, tested, repaired, replaced - or uncertain?	☐
Responsibilities	Who does design, installation, commissioning and maintenance?	☐
Site conditions	What access, disruption and working hours are allowed for?	☐
Associated work	Are containment, power, interfaces and making good included?	☐
Handover	What certificates, drawings, records and training will you get?	☐
Maintenance	What future servicing, consumables and replacement should you expect?	☐
Exclusions	What is not included?	☐
Assumptions	What could change the scope or price after you have signed?	☐
Variations	How is extra work priced and agreed?	☐
Programme	How long will it take, and what could delay it?	☐

Do not compare the totals until you have compared the scope.

Where saving is sensible, and where it bites

Careful cost control is not the same as cutting corners. Most real savings come from defining the work clearly, reducing avoidable disruption and understanding what can genuinely be kept or planned.

Clarify the outcome before you ask for prices. A shared written brief means fewer duplicated surveys, fewer clashing assumptions and fewer late changes.

Separate essential work from optional extras. It lets you point the budget at what needs attention first.

Keep suitable existing equipment - where that has been properly checked. Sometimes kit or wiring can stay. The saving is only real if someone competent has confirmed its condition and suitability, not just assumed it.

Coordinate access-heavy work. School holidays and planned closures are the natural window for disruptive work. Combining fire safety work with a refurbishment, a holiday period or other planned works can cut mobilisation and disruption costs, and keeps noisy or intrusive work away from teaching time.

Reduce avoidable out-of-hours work. Some work has to happen when pupils are not on site, and that is a genuine cost. But not all of it does - where work can safely be done during normal hours or in a way that does not need evening or weekend attendance, it usually costs less. Ask which parts genuinely need out-of-hours access and which do not.

Group work that genuinely belongs together. Shared access, testing or commissioning can reduce repeat costs.

Resolve assumptions before you approve. A question answered up front is cheaper than a variation halfway through.

Look at whole-life cost, not just the install. Maintenance, monitoring, batteries, consumables, call-outs and replacement all count.

A sensible saving

A saving holds up when the outcome you need is still delivered, the evidence is still there, and you have not made future maintenance harder or more expensive. Good planning reduces cost without reducing protection.

And where the same instinct bites back

A lower price can be perfectly reasonable. The danger is not the price - it is when necessary work, evidence, or future cost has quietly dropped out of view.

Removing an item without knowing what it was for. The saving may have removed part of the outcome you needed.

Comparing device counts instead of scope. The same number of detectors or extinguishers does not mean the same category, coverage or design.

Accepting vague exclusions and assumptions. Unclear items have a habit of coming back as delays, variations, or "that's by others".

Reusing equipment with no clear basis. Condition, compatibility and remaining life may never have been established.

Treating commissioning as an optional extra. Installing a system is not the same as proving it works.

Thinning out documentation and handover. Missing records make future maintenance, fault-finding and your next decision harder.

Judging on install price alone. A low starting figure can be swallowed by monitoring, servicing, consumables and early replacement.

Assuming a logo covers every service. Certification is often limited to particular systems, activities or modules - the subject of the next page.

Two short lessons from Essex

Neither of these is about being cheap. Both are about someone competent working outside the thing they were competent at - the trap that is harder to spot than a low price.

A North Essex school set out to save on emergency lighting. A fireman offered to fit a system for around £7,000, against the roughly £14,000 we had quoted - an apparent saving from someone who clearly knew about fire. When our engineers saw the finished installation, they identified problems with the emergency lighting work and the system was subsequently replaced. He was no cowboy; he knew fire, but the work was applied outside the specific discipline it needed. The school did not buy cheap. It bought competence in the wrong subject.

At an Essex site, our engineers found fire extinguishers over ten years old with no evidence of maintenance. All had to be replaced in one costly hit. Regular servicing would have kept track of their condition and let replacements be identified and budgeted for over time, rather than arriving as one unexpected bill for equipment whose serviceability had never been properly evidenced.

Same moral, and it is not "spend more". Check that the provider has been assessed for the exact work you need - and that someone is maintaining what you already have.

The false-economy test

Does this saving keep the outcome, keep the evidence, and keep the system maintainable? Or does it mostly push cost and uncertainty into next year?

One more thing a school has to balance

Fire safety does not sit on its own in a school. It shares the same doors, corridors and systems as two other duties: **security and lockdown**, and **safeguarding**. These are separate legal regimes - fire safety under the Fire Safety Order, lockdown and site security under the Department for Education's "School and college security" guidance and health and safety law, and safeguarding under Keeping Children Safe in Education - and they can pull against each other.

A fire evacuation moves everyone out of the building as fast as possible. A lockdown, in response to an intruder or external threat, does the opposite: it keeps people in and secures the doors. A decision that is right for one can be wrong for the other. Fire exit routes have to release freely for escape, while safeguarding and security may want the same doors controlled. Emergency lighting, door hardware, access control and alarm systems all sit on this fault line.

One practical point worth knowing when you buy: a lockdown or evacuation warning needs to be clearly understood and should not be confused with the fire alarm - because the two ask people to do opposite things, get out versus stay in and secure. How the warning is given is worth considering as part of your emergency planning, alongside your evacuation procedures and existing alarm systems, so that staff and pupils always know which signal means what.

You do not need to solve all of this at once, and it is not all fire work. But when you are specifying or replacing a system, it is worth asking how it fits alongside your lockdown and safeguarding arrangements, rather than treating each in isolation. These risks overlap in the way a school manages its estate, so it helps to consider them together rather than in silos.

Blake's Guidance

The cheapest fix for one duty can quietly create a problem for another. A door that is perfect for fire escape may be the one safeguarding wants controlled; a signal that saves money by reusing the fire alarm may be the one that sends people the wrong way in a lockdown.

You do not have to get everything in one go. You do have to make sure the pieces do not fight each other. If you are unsure how a fire safety decision affects your security or safeguarding arrangements, say so when you ask for advice - a good provider will think about the whole picture, not just their own box.

Competence, certification and the question worth asking

This is where a little knowledge saves the most money - because it is where the biggest misunderstandings live.

Fire alarms and emergency lighting both involve electrical work, but general electrical competence does not automatically show competence in every fire safety activity. Design, installation, commissioning and maintenance are distinct responsibilities. The people and organisations carrying them out should each have evidence relevant to their particular role.

A course certificate and a company certification are not the same thing

A course or qualification certificate is evidence about one person - what they were taught and assessed on. Its value depends on what it covered and whether it is relevant to that person's role on your job. It does not, by itself, say anything about the company behind them.

Third-party certification gives you independent evidence that an *organisation* has been assessed against a defined scheme, and is re-audited over time. The scope is the point: certification may cover only particular systems or particular activities.

Neither, on its own, is the whole answer. You are looking for a combination: the right company scope, suitable people in each role, a sound proposal, and clear responsibility for who does what.

Company certification tells you that the organisation has been assessed against a scheme that includes requirements around competence, management and delivery. It does not mean that every individual is automatically suitable for every task. The company's certified scope and the suitability of the people assigned to your particular work are therefore both worth understanding.

One certification does not cover every kind of fire work

Being a capable electrician does not automatically mean a company has been independently assessed for the specific fire alarm or emergency lighting work you are buying. They are different disciplines, with different standards behind them.

Emergency lighting is where this catches people most often. An electrician works to BS 7671, the wiring regulations - but electrical safety is only part of the picture. Emergency lighting also needs to be considered against the emergency lighting standards, including BS 5266-1 and BS EN 1838. BS 5266-1 governs how the system is designed and planned around your escape routes; BS EN 1838 sets the actual light that has to reach the floor of the route. So an installer can wire an emergency lighting circuit that is perfectly sound electrically, and still leave you with a system that fails as emergency lighting - wrong levels, wrong positions, gaps on the escape route - because "is the wiring safe?" and "will this get a stranger out of the building in the dark?" are answered by different standards. This is why it matters that whoever quotes for emergency lighting works to the emergency lighting standards, not only the electrical ones - and can show third-party certification for that work.

Blake's Guidance

A quick rule-of-thumb test: if you turn the lights off, can a first-time visitor get out safely? If not, something needs addressing - and whether a system that passes that test is actually adequate is a question for proper design against the standards, not the naked eye.

Simon Blake, Emergency Lighting Manager

BAFE runs separate schemes for exactly this reason:

- **SP203-1** - fire detection and fire alarm systems in non-domestic premises, within the scope of BS 5839-1.
- **SP203-4** - emergency lighting systems.

Both are *modular* - the part people miss. A company may be certified for design and installation but not commissioning or maintenance, or the other way round. "BAFE registered" is not one badge that covers everything; it covers the specific activities a company has been assessed for. Check that a provider's current scope covers the work in your quotation.

Commercial and domestic are not the same

The standards for fire alarms in non-domestic buildings (BS 5839-1) and in dwellings (BS 5839-6) are different, and - depending on the type of system - the relevant certification differs too. A school's teaching and general areas are non-domestic. If your school includes boarding accommodation, a caretaker's house or other living quarters, those parts may fall under different requirements, so that is worth clarifying with a provider before you choose.

The better question

Instead of "Are you accredited?", ask: **"Which current scheme and activities cover this exact work, who is responsible for each part, and where can I verify the scope?"**

A suitable provider can explain its current scope clearly and show you where to check it.

How to check us - or anyone

The registers are public. Check your shortlist on them - us included.

- **NSI** - [nsi.org.uk/company-finder](https://www.nsi.org.uk/company-finder) (search "Blake Fire & Security Systems", using an ampersand rather than the word "and"). Our listed schemes include Fire Detection & Alarm Systems SP203-1 Fire Gold, Emergency Lighting SP203-4 Fire Gold, and Portable Fire Extinguishers SP101 Fire Gold.
- **BAFE** register - registration number 300159.
- **SSAIB** register - supplier.ssaib.org/security-provider/6681/ (our security certification - relevant if you also buy intruder alarms or CCTV from the same contractor).

On the NSI and BAFE registers we are listed as Blake Fire & Security Systems. The SSAIB register shows the same business under our registered company name, Blake Contractors Ltd (company number 04269457), with Blake Fire & Security Systems as the trading name - so whichever register you check, it is the same company.

Questions to ask before you approve the work

#	Question
1	What information did you use to define the work?
2	What finding or required outcome does each main item address?
3	Which items are essential, recommended, or optional?
4	What category, coverage or specification are you proposing?
5	What have you assumed about the existing equipment and wiring?
6	What is excluded, or expected to be done by others?
7	What access, disruption and working hours have you allowed for?
8	Who is responsible for design, installation, commissioning and maintenance?
9	Who will actually carry out the work on site?
10	What relevant experience, qualifications or other competence evidence applies to their role on this work?
11	How do you make sure the person on site is competent for this particular job?
12	What documents, certificates, records and training will we receive?
13	Does your certification cover this system and these activities?
14	What ongoing maintenance, monitoring or replacement should we expect?
15	Could suitable work be phased, and what would need to happen first?
16	What could change the scope, programme or price?

A simple way to set priorities

A number score cannot tell you what your buildings need. Three headings can hold the reasoning:

Priority	Use this for
Address first	An immediate deficiency, a loss of protection, or a clearly identified priority that needs prompt attention.
Plan next	Important work that can be programmed once the highest-priority matters, and any temporary measures, are settled.
Consider later	Optional improvements not currently presented as essential.

For each item, record: what it addresses | the evidence | the effect of delay | any temporary measure | who agreed it | the review date.

Your decision record

One page. It makes the decision easier to explain now, and easier to revisit later.

Field	Your answer
Premises / project	
Responsible Person(s)	
Fire Risk Assessment date	
Finding or outcome being addressed	
Essential work	
Recommended improvements	
Optional upgrades	
Chosen provider and scope	
Certification and modules checked	
Reasons for the decision	
Temporary measures, if any	
Target completion date	
Evidence to be received	
Review date	

A calm next step

If you would like help understanding a quotation or working out what the job actually needs, Blake's can review your premises information, talk through the basis of the proposed work, and explain the scope in plain English. We will separate what is required from what is recommended and what is optional, so the decision is yours to make with clear eyes - and we are used to working around the school calendar, so disruptive work can be planned into holidays and quieter periods where possible.

We are a family firm with roots in Southend going back to 1979, working from our Southend HQ, third-party certified by NSI for fire alarms, emergency lighting and portable fire extinguishers. If we are not qualified to provide a service, we do not offer it - and our certifications are held by the company and checkable on the public registers, exactly as this guide suggests you check anyone.

We do not carry out Fire Risk Assessments. What we do is survey your premises against the recommendations in your existing Fire Risk Assessment, and tell you what fire alarm, emergency lighting or extinguisher installation would meet them - so you can compare quotations knowing what the work should include.

Arrange a free, no-obligation site survey

Telephone: 01702 447800

Email: info@blakefire-security.co.uk

Web: www.blakefire-security.co.uk

Blake Fire & Security Systems, 403 Sutton Road, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, SS2 5PQ

Disclaimer

This guide provides general information for fire safety purchasing decisions in schools in England. It is a guide only. The checklists, questions and examples in it are illustrative, not exhaustive - your premises may raise matters not covered here.

It is not legal advice, not a Fire Risk Assessment, not a compliance audit, not a technical specification, and not a substitute for advice based on inspection of your premises. It does not assess the risks in any particular building. Your legal duties, fire safety arrangements and system requirements depend on your specific premises, use, occupancy, risk profile and the findings of a suitable and sufficient Fire Risk Assessment.

You should not rely on this guide alone as the basis for taking action, delaying action, or deciding not to act. Legal duties, British Standards and certification schemes change over time - confirm the current position, and take competent advice on your own premises, before work is specified or approved.

Sources

The legal duties referred to here sit under:

- The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, as amended - legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2005/1541 - the central legislation for the Responsible Person duties described here
- GOV.UK - Fire safety in the workplace

For schools specifically, two further sources are relevant. The GOV.UK guidance "Fire safety risk assessment: educational premises" is aimed at the day-to-day fire safety management of a school, and explicitly covers schools, academies, head teachers and governors. Building Bulletin 100 (BB100), "Design for fire safety in schools", remains published DfE guidance and is still a useful reference, particularly for projects outside the DfE funding framework. For DfE-funded school building projects, the DfE Technical Manual (published January 2026, forming part of the Employer's Requirements) now sets the fire safety design requirements. BB100 has not been withdrawn; DfE has previously consulted on a revised version, so check GOV.UK for the current position before relying on either. Neither replaces a suitable and sufficient Fire Risk Assessment of your own premises.

On the security, lockdown and safeguarding duties that intersect with fire safety, the relevant sources are the DfE guidance "School and college security", the health and safety duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, and the statutory safeguarding guidance "Keeping Children Safe in Education" (reissued annually - check the edition currently in force). These are separate from fire safety law and are referenced here only to note where the duties meet; this guide does not cover them.

The Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022 impose additional requirements for certain buildings containing domestic premises, which may be relevant to boarding accommodation. Those additional duties fall outside the main scope of this guide.

The British Standards referred to are:

- BS 5839-1:2025 - fire detection and fire alarm systems in non-domestic premises
- BS 5266-1:2025 - emergency lighting of premises
- BS 5306-8:2023 - selection and positioning of portable fire extinguishers
- BS 5306-3:2017 - commissioning and maintenance of portable fire extinguishers
- BS 5839-6 - fire detection and fire alarm systems in domestic premises (referenced only to distinguish domestic work, such as boarding accommodation, from the non-domestic scope of this guide)

BAFE operates the competency schemes referred to here (SP203-1 fire alarms; SP203-4 emergency lighting; SP101 portable fire extinguishers) and maintains the Fire Safety Register. Companies are assessed against those schemes by independent UKAS-accredited certification bodies, such as NSI and SSAIB. Scheme scopes are held on the BAFE register and the certification bodies' own registers.

Standards and scheme scopes change. This guide was checked in August 2026. Confirm current editions and certification scope before relying on it.