A decade of renewal needs a new generation to deliver it

Education Estates® 2026 is opening the doors of the education estate to the next generation, with a new Career Conversations stand and an expanded Future Leaders Programme designed to connect people at the start of their careers with the employers shaping the sector.

Education Estates® is the UK's leading event for education infrastructure, returning to Manchester Central on 20–21 October 2026. Delivered in partnership with the Department for Education, it brings together the organisations that fund, design, build and manage schools, colleges and universities across the UK, from local authorities and academy trusts to contractors, architects, consultants and suppliers. This year, alongside its usual conference and exhibition, the event is turning some of that gathering power toward the people who will be shaping the future of learning environments: those at the very start of their careers.

Contractors, consultants and public sector bodies across the education estate report real difficulty recruiting into estates, facilities and capital delivery roles, at a moment when the Department for Education's Education Estates Strategy: a decade of national renewal sets out a long-term programme of school and college infrastructure work. A strategy spanning a decade needs a workforce that will still be there at the end of it, and Education Estates®, as the event built specifically around this sector, is one of the few places positioned to do something about it directly, in one room, over two days.

"Young people can't aspire to careers they don't know exist," says Jenny Kitchen from Constructive Futures, one of the organisations behind the event's new Career Conversations stand. "Our industry offers an extraordinary range of opportunities, but many of those roles remain unseen when young people are making decisions about their futures." Careers fairs and open days have existed for years; what has been missing is a route in that treats early-career people as more than an audience for a pitch, and a platform large enough to make that route worth building.

The Future Leaders Programme, formerly known as Developing Future Talent, is open to students, pupils and graduates, and to anyone within the first 24 months of their career, including recent leavers from education or the Armed Forces. This year the programme offers 300 free delegate passes, each giving access to sessions across every conference stage as well as the full exhibition. Alongside the conference programme, delegates can meet and network with the organisations that design, modernise and maintain the education estate, putting people at the very start of their careers in the same room as those already

shaping the sector's next decade. The Career Conversations stand, new for 2026, gives that ambition a fixed point on the exhibition floor.

"Every young person should have access to the networks, experiences and opportunities that help them understand what is possible for their future," says Jenni Anderson, CEO of The Talent Foundry. "We're delighted to be part of the Career Conversations stand at Education Estates® 2026 and to support the Future Leaders Programme, giving students, graduates and early-career starters the opportunity to meet industry leaders and explore careers in the education infrastructure and property sector. It's a great example of how opening doors and creating connections can help build the next generation of talent."

The stand is delivered by a group of organisations already working on this problem, each from a different angle, and each choosing Education Estates® as the place to bring that work together. Alongside Constructive Futures sit Class of Your Own, which embeds real construction projects into the school and college curriculum; Construction for Women, focused on widening access for women and girls into the sector; The Talent Foundry, an education charity closing the gap between talent and opportunity for young people in underserved schools; and Common Ground, which is working at the point where education, community and the built environment meet. Between them, they bring years of experience helping young people find their way into this sector and progress within it. Many of the event's exhibitors already work with these organisations, which makes the stand a fitting addition to the exhibition floor.

"Designing spaces isn't just about bricks, mortar and land strategy. It's about ensuring the teams creating those environments actually reflect the diverse communities who use them," says Lara Newman, CEO of Common Ground. "As a proud community partner for this year's Education Estates®, we are eager to connect with future leaders at our Career Conversations stand and dive into practical solutions during our workshop. Transforming the future starts with investing in the next generation of talent and giving them the tools to build sustainable, inclusive spaces."

On the stand itself, each of the participating organisations will host an EduFringe session during the conference breaks. These range from informal conversations with the people behind the projects to mentoring sessions and young people sharing their own stories of finding a way into the sector. Representatives will be there across both days to offer guidance and practical routes in. Young people can put their questions to people already working in the sector, meet employers face to face and talk openly about the barriers and expectations that shape their career choices. Conversations like these only work with the right audience in the room, from the young people the stand is built for to the employers and organisations who could one day bring them into the sector.

That audience is what Education Estates® has built over the years: more than 5,000 attendees, over 220 exhibitors and seven conference stages expected across the two days. It is exactly the kind of room where a stand like Career Conversations can do real work, putting the breadth of this sector in front of people at the very start of their careers.

"There's never been a more important time to focus on the future of the built environment and where better than at Education Estates®, where government, industry and schools are together to have serious conversations about our children's futures!" says Alison Watson MBE, Founder and Chief Executive of Class of Your Own.

Future Leaders delegates will also be hosted for lunch on both days, by Arcadis on day one and Morgan Sindall on day two. Both work regularly with the organisations on the Career Conversations stand.

The Community Partners will also close the conference programme. Their session will explore how the young people who will learn in tomorrow's schools, colleges and universities can also have the opportunity to help shape and deliver them.

The same commitment runs through the People's Awards, which recognise the individuals and organisations building the sector's future workforce. This year's categories include Emerging Talent, Apprentice of the Year, Developing Future Talent for companies investing in early-career people, and Women in Construction, sponsored by Construction for Women.

"We're delighted to build on our positive relationship with Education Estates® and once again support the Women in Construction Award," says Renée Preston, Founder and CEO of Construction for Women. "It's an opportunity to recognise women whose achievements are moving our industry forward and show the next generation what they can achieve. Together, we're helping more young women connect with the industry, meet potential employers and get practical advice from people who understand the opportunities and challenges ahead. We want them to leave feeling that construction has a place for them, with the confidence and connections to take their next step."

Registration for the Future Leaders Programme, and for the wider Education Estates® conference and exhibition, is available at www.educationestates.com.

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