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VOLUME #7 ISSUE #6 - NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2025



THE MANY HEADS OF A PROCUREMENT PROFESSIONAL





THE MANY HEADS OF A PROCUREMENT PROFESSIONAL



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As a Procurement Professional have you ever taken the time to stop and think about the many heads that you have to wear daily within your workplace? I started working in procurement some 24 years ago and the changes I have seen throughout that time are significant.

The role of a procurement professional has changed beyond recognition, and we have to wear so many different heads now, compared to at the start of my career, that it can feel daunting at times.

However, we should all be extremely proud of being able to work in a profession where we can put to good use our chameleon like ability to change as circumstances dictate. I can't think of many careers where you change your head constantly throughout the working day to ensure that you are a well-rounded procurement professional that is giving your best to those you work alongside.

In my opinion some of the essential heads for an effective procurement professional to use are as follows:

- **Strategic Thinker**– Buying goods, services and works is no longer enough. You also need to ensure that your procurement strategies align with the broader objectives of the business you work for. Within Wales in particular, we must consider the objectives of the Welsh Procurement Policy Statement, The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) 2015, the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Act 2023 and of



course the Procurement Act 2023 and the Wales Procurement Regulations 2024. This is no mean feat and involves thinking strategically at all times. You also have to look ahead and ensure that you plan for the future by taking a bigger picture view and predicting changes that may occur throughout the life of a contract.

- **Risk Manager** – Risks abound in the procurement world, many of which are external and which you have no control over, for example geopolitical conditions, inflation etc. The art is in thinking ahead and trying to anticipate risks before

they happen and ensuring that you have a plan B in place should those risks eventually occur. However, you should not allow risk to stifle processes as I have seen happening time and time again. Instead, you should evaluate the risks, put mitigations in place and proceed with your plan B in place should the worst happen.

- **Innovator** – Procurement is the ideal area where innovation can be sought and delivered by working closely with your suppliers and understanding your markets. Most suppliers will

share their innovative ideas with you if you have a good working relationship and may even give you the first opportunity to try something out before releasing it to the wider market. It is better to have tried and failed than to never try something new, as long as it is in a controlled environment which is cost neutral.

- **Leader** – Procurement professionals should lead by example and ensure that they mentor and coach their team members so that they can be developed to their full potential. As a procurement leader you should be flying the flag for your organisation and inspiring others.
- **Communicator** – A good procurement professional will identify their customer's requirements and communicate well with them to ensure that the best method of filling their requirements is used. Communication is key to building good relationships which are based on trust, honesty, innovation and mutual benefits, both internally and externally.
- **Peacemaker** – I will be perfectly honest and say that procurement isn't always harmonious. There can be misunderstandings, frustration and disputes with internal and external stakeholders, and this is where you need to step in as the peacemaker to build relationships and resolve any issues as they arise.
- **Financial Caretaker** – Procurement Professionals may not be managers of the budgets being spent, but it is key that we act responsibly with other people's money to ensure that they and the organisation get best value from every penny spent. However, it is very important to note that cost savings are not the be all and end all of procurement as you may well end up sacrificing the quality of goods, services and works being procured by forcing suppliers to cut costs to a level that is not realistic and deliverable. There is more to being a financial caretaker than buying at the cheapest cost – look more at how you can add value to your organisation without increasing costs significantly.
- **Strategic Powerbroker** – This is a frequent requirement for procurement professionals as you can often get entangled in fractured relationships between internal and external stakeholders. This is your opportunity to mediate and influence working relationships between all parties to regain harmony. Everyone should be working together towards the same aims but that doesn't



always happen, and any tension must therefore be eliminated as soon as possible.

- **Relationship Manager** – In procurement, building and managing relationships is an essential skill. From managing relationships with your internal stakeholders to managing relationships with your external stakeholders, including your suppliers and collaborators, your relationship manager head will get used every single day of your working life at some point.

Do you have those internal stakeholders that come to you wanting to buy something urgently, but with no real justification for the rush, and wanting to use a specific supplier but without any procurement exercise being undertaken? Or do you have those who want to buy something off contract just because it's a few pounds cheaper elsewhere? Or what about those who come to you wanting to terminate a contract early due to a supplier's poor performance, but with no audit trail documenting the poor performance and no evidence of having tried to work with the supplier to help them improve their performance. Instances such as this cause significant stress within procurement teams and this is definitely a case of having to manage relationships robustly in order to soothe tensions and try and explain the many benefits of doing things right.

Similarly, relationships can become fraught between internal teams and external suppliers and collaborators. This again is where the procurement team often have to step in and act as mediator.

Good relationships are key to the success of contracts from whatever angle the stakeholder is coming. There is a need to build and maintain strong relationships which are mutually beneficial as opposed to being one-sided.

- **Resilience Provider** – When procuring anything, there always needs to be resilience within contracts. That is where you come in. Things can often go wrong, and on those occasions, you may well be called on to



“ A good procurement professional has to change their heads many times during a working day to suit the situation they are in. ”

intervene. That is why you need to build resilience in contracts from the outset.

- **Technologist and Data Analyst** – The modern procurement professional will need to be proficient in using a variety of digital tools including those that can be used for analysing data in order to inform decision-making, improve efficiency and manage spend robustly, as well as AI which can be used to replace the more mundane tasks and allow space for staff to concentrate on more strategic issues. Your analyst head will be at its best if you take decisions backed by numbers and trends, whilst also taking into account the softer signs that may be apparent. Technology is advancing at a rapid pace which will necessitate continuous learning and embracing the implementation of new systems and tools such as AI and automation. However, it is important to note that technology doesn't replace valuable human expertise.
- **Negotiator** – You will need excellent negotiation skills to negotiate terms and conditions and



get the best value from your supply chain. You will need to review contracts carefully and negotiate prices and terms and conditions, whilst ensuring that you are fair to your suppliers as well as to the organisation you work for. Negotiation will only be successful if there is a give and take attitude where there are mutual benefits for both parties as opposed to a take, take, take attitude where everything is in the favour of one party. However, you may well need to use your negotiator head with your internal stakeholders also as they can often be on a different wavelength to the procurement team. And don't forget that when collaborating you will often need to negotiate with your partner negotiations as no one can get absolutely everything they want when undertaking a collaborative procurement and one or more party may have to compromise. In this instance the best negotiator may often get the best outcome. That doesn't necessarily mean getting the final word, it is more about knowing when it is the right moment to stop to ensure mutual benefits for all parties.

- **Collaborator** – This is an essential for any procurement professional. Collaboration is something that we live and breathe, whether it is collaborating with internal departments, external suppliers or other organisations that you collaborate with on procurement activities.
- **Sustainability Champion** – As a procurement professional you should be an advocate for sustainability.





“ Strong, mutually beneficial relationships are key to contract success from every angle. There is a need to build and maintain relationships that are balanced, fair, and built on trust, rather than being one-sided or transactional.

”

This includes the ethos of making vs buying, do you really need it, ethical sourcing, promoting supplier diversity and managing the environmental impacts of what you are buying. There has to be a proportional and reasonable approach however as the reality is that there is never an unlimited budget for what you are buying.

- **Wellbeing / Social Value Advocate**

– Look at each tender individually and identify opportunities for wellbeing or social value where appropriate in order to ensure that procurement exercises bring benefits to your local communities wherever possible. This is where added value can be introduced within a contract.

- **Master Juggler** – This is for when you have to manage competing priorities such as cost, quality, sustainability, wellbeing and supplier performance, as well as managing conflicting workloads.

- **Market Expert** – The procurement arena is very volatile and faces a number of external pressures such as geopolitical tensions, supply chain disruptions and inflation to mention just a few. It is essential therefore that you know your markets well and that you are aware of things that could be affected e.g. increased costs, longer lead times, supply shortages etc.

- **Problem Solver** – A procurement professional has to get involved with

a wide variety of problems including supplier performance issues, pricing issues, delivery delays, suppliers going into administration, internal relationship issues, budget issues, geo-political aspects etc. These aspects can all be very challenging so you will need to be someone who can identify any potential problems and analyse the best ways to resolve them.

- **Delegator** – Don't be afraid to delegate as everyone within your team needs to be given opportunities to develop themselves. Think of the skills that other members of your team have and provide them with opportunities that match those skills so that they can apply them in a practical environment. My mantra is “knowledge is not power, knowledge is for sharing!”

- **Researcher** – Before any procurement exercise commences you will need to undertake market research within the area that you will be procuring for. A good way to do this is to undertake pre-market engagement events where suppliers will share their knowledge with you and you can share information with them in terms of what you are looking for and how you propose the tender process will run. This can be done physically or online. You can also learn a lot from other

organisations who have already bought what you want to buy. You will be able to identify pitfalls and lessons learned so that you can avoid making the same mistakes.

- **Process Champion** – This is where you will be able to streamline processes and policies to create efficiency without stifling agility and flexibility. Never undertake a process unless you know why you're doing it and always look to streamline processes wherever possible to make it easier for your internal departments and external suppliers.

- **Compliance Manager** – In the public sector procurement is legislated so you will need to ensure that you comply with that legislation. However, that doesn't mean you have to be overly bureaucratic, you just need to be bold and look at simpler processes that are still compliant but which will be less onerous for your colleagues and suppliers, particularly the smaller suppliers who do not have the luxury of tendering teams behind them.

- **Do More With Less Expert** – This is what procurement professionals have to face every single day, so we have to think of alternative methods of working so that processes are streamlined. We also have to consider this within tender specifications, where requirements are often hard for suppliers to achieve without adding cost to the contract. It's time to think outside the box and manage more effectively to ensure that we are making the most of every pound that we spend.

- **Business Partner** – It is very beneficial to wear your business partner head as you will gain the trust and respect of your stakeholders and suppliers and will be able to ensure that relationships don't end up clouding commercial decisions as you will all be working towards a common goal in a partnership approach.

- **Attractive Client** – When drafting a tender, it is important to put your attractive client head on and view yourself from the supplier's perspective.

What sort of customer would you be seen as by a supplier? This will depend on a lot of things e.g. what value is your custom worth to them, is it something they would consider bidding for, would you be a good client for them, is your specification written in such a way that it puts them off etc.

Suppliers always seek out clients that are reliable, fair and that are likely to add value to their business. As we all know, suppliers will focus on keeping their most attractive clients happy and being a non-attractive client can impact on the quality of customer service you receive so make sure you make your organisation as attractive as possible to the supply market. This doesn't always mean the clients who have the highest value contracts as it can often be down to the way you interact with your suppliers and whether they see you as a reliable and trustworthy client who adds value to their business.

- **Empathetic Listener** – Always be a good listener and show empathy as this will allow you to connect with others. Lending an empathetic ear will pay dividends and will more often than not result in strengthened relationships between stakeholders.
- **Motivator** – I won't lie, procurement is not the easiest of careers as it requires such a diverse range of skills and involves a lot of stakeholders and external factors. However, if you put your positivity head on it will get you through those difficult times. There is no point worrying about something which you cannot change, instead try to look at the positive outcomes that could be delivered to motivate your stakeholders as opposed to focussing on the doom and gloom that can arise.
- **Enabler** – It is inevitable that procurement has to say no to a procurement on occasion, particularly when it is clear to the procurement team that it will not deliver the required outcomes. However, it is how you handle these situations that make you an enabler. Rather than say no without giving a contextual explanation, walk the stakeholder through the process so that they can see for themselves that there are flaws in terms of what they want to do. That will help them understand your viewpoint and you can then work together to try and get them the best possible outcome. Disgruntled stakeholders who finally understand the process can often turn into procurement advocates and help you get through to others who may not appreciate the complexities of the procurement process.
- **Agent of Change** – This will help you deal with all the changes that lie ahead within the procurement arena. Be proactive and meet with



other heads of departments to understand what their current priorities and challenges are and demonstrate how your team will be able to help them. Be ahead of the curve and embrace change so that when change happens you are prepared for all eventualities.

- **Commercial Manager** – A procurement professional needs to have a commercial acumen and should understand the procurement lifecycle so that they can identify problem areas and potential opportunities for negotiation.
- **Project Manager** – Running a procurement exercise is in itself a project and you will have to

manage timescales, multiple people and potentially multiple organisations if you are leading on a procurement. Never underestimate the power of project management in order to keep things on track.

As you can see therefore, a good procurement professional has to change their heads many times during a working day to suit the situation they are in. Not many careers would give you the opportunity to learn and use such a wide range of skills. One thing is certain, no one can ever say that the world of procurement is boring!

And the final words go to author Robert Greene "The future belongs to those who learn more skills and combine them in creative ways."



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WHY SMEs STRUGGLE TO WIN PUBLIC CONTRACTS

AND HOW TO CHANGE THAT



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range of measures which are reinforced by provisions within the Procurement Act 2023.

Start with a clear diagnostic: where are SMEs dropping out?

Public procurement should be one of the most powerful levers for economic growth, resilience and innovation. Yet despite policy commitments, the public sector continues to under-utilise small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Recent market analysis by the British Chambers of Commerce and Tussell showed that only around 20% of direct public procurement spend flowed to SMEs in 2023.

This represents a significant shortfall against government ambition and sends a clear signal that access problems remain systemic.

Procurement professionals can take practical steps to identify and remove the barriers that prevent SMEs from competing effectively. Using diagnostic checks to pinpoint where processes may be excluding smaller suppliers, procurement teams can implement a

First, let's think about why SMEs are dropping out, being excluded, or self-selecting not to participate. The root causes are often organisational (procurement design and buyer behaviour) rather than supplier capability. Consider taking a brief diagnostic to find the friction points, for example:



“ The root causes of SME exclusion in public procurement are usually organisational, not capability-based – the market rules set by buyers are the real gate ”

consider what risks you are passing to the bidders. Do have onerous prior experience requirements that could not easily be responded to by new entrants? Do you require difficult to obtain references? Can your requirements only realistically be served by organisations who have direct experience of your industry? Are you asking bidders to take on an unreasonable level of risk for an SME?

- Turnover / insurance thresholds: contract-required minimum turnover and insurance levels compared with contract value. If these exceed what a sensible SME could hold, they're exclusionary. Also, what risk are you really asking them to carry? Will they really have to fund or insure significant expenditure that requires a significant liquidity? A short term contract without significant outlay is unlikely to require any specific turnover, but could be a lifeline to an SME without increasing your risk.
- Lot size: median contract value / lot size. Large, single-lot procurements push SMEs out. Guidance explicitly recommends lotting as a tool to open up markets. Have you considered what is the best supplier type for your needs, or have you restricted the marketplace by simply bundling services together for ease of administration, or to simply take a couple of tenders out of your workload?
- Payment profile: average time to pay invoices for suppliers and whether retention/bond practice creates cashflow risk (e.g., requirement to wait months for retention). The Procurement Act introduces statutory prompt-payment protections that support supply-chain liquidity. SMEs, and in particular micro-SMEs, are largely dependent on

the liquidity of prompt payment, particularly in their early years following establishment.

- Tender complexity: word count of tender docs, number of evaluation criteria, number of clarifications during the process. Long, bespoke documents penalise SMEs with limited bid teams. Is your specification optimised, or are you relying on the supply chain to 'fill in the blanks' when you are running against a deadline?
- Past contract winners: proportion of awards going to the same tier-1 firms repeatedly. Concentration often indicates insufficient market creation or over-reliance on large frameworks.

Measure these, then prioritise the highest-impact gaps to address first.

Three Common Causes of SME Access Problems

When diagnosing why small and medium-sized enterprises struggle to win public contracts, three root causes consistently emerge: capacity, finance, and complexity. Each presents in predictable ways, and each can be addressed through practical, proportionate action by the buying organisation.

Capacity Constraints:

One of the most frequent challenges is capacity. Many SMEs have the expertise but not the scale, resources, or formal accreditations that larger competitors possess. This becomes evident when expression of interest or registration rates are high but the number of submitted bids remains low. SMEs may also rely heavily on subcontracting disclaimers, signalling that contract sizes or qualification criteria are simply beyond their reach.

Quick organisational diagnostics (red flags)

- SME spend metric: % of total direct spend to SMEs (by value and by contract count). If this is below your organisation's targets or national benchmarks, investigate further.
- Bid funnel attrition: number of registrants, number invited, number who submit, number awarded. High drop-off between invite and submit usually signals design issues, complexity or bid cost problems.
- Pre-qualification ask burden: number of mandatory documents, volume of questions and ease of response to questions asked at selection stage. High duplication is typically a barrier, but also

To test whether this is an issue, buyers can engage SMEs early to discuss approaches to scaling-up during market engagement sessions. This helps assess whether smaller firms could realistically grow, partner, or subcontract to meet delivery requirements if the opportunity were structured differently. Similarly, buyers should review whether the certifications being requested (such as ISO standards or specialist accreditations) are genuinely proportionate to the stage and value of the contract.

The fixes are practical. Large, single-lot contracts can be split into smaller lots or phased stages, allowing SMEs to compete for manageable portions of the work and build capability over time. The new procurement regime explicitly highlights lotting as an effective way to increase competition. Buyers can also use staged contracts, starting with a pilot or early-works phase to de-risk delivery and give SMEs an opportunity to demonstrate capacity before full roll-out.

Another solution is to reward collaboration:

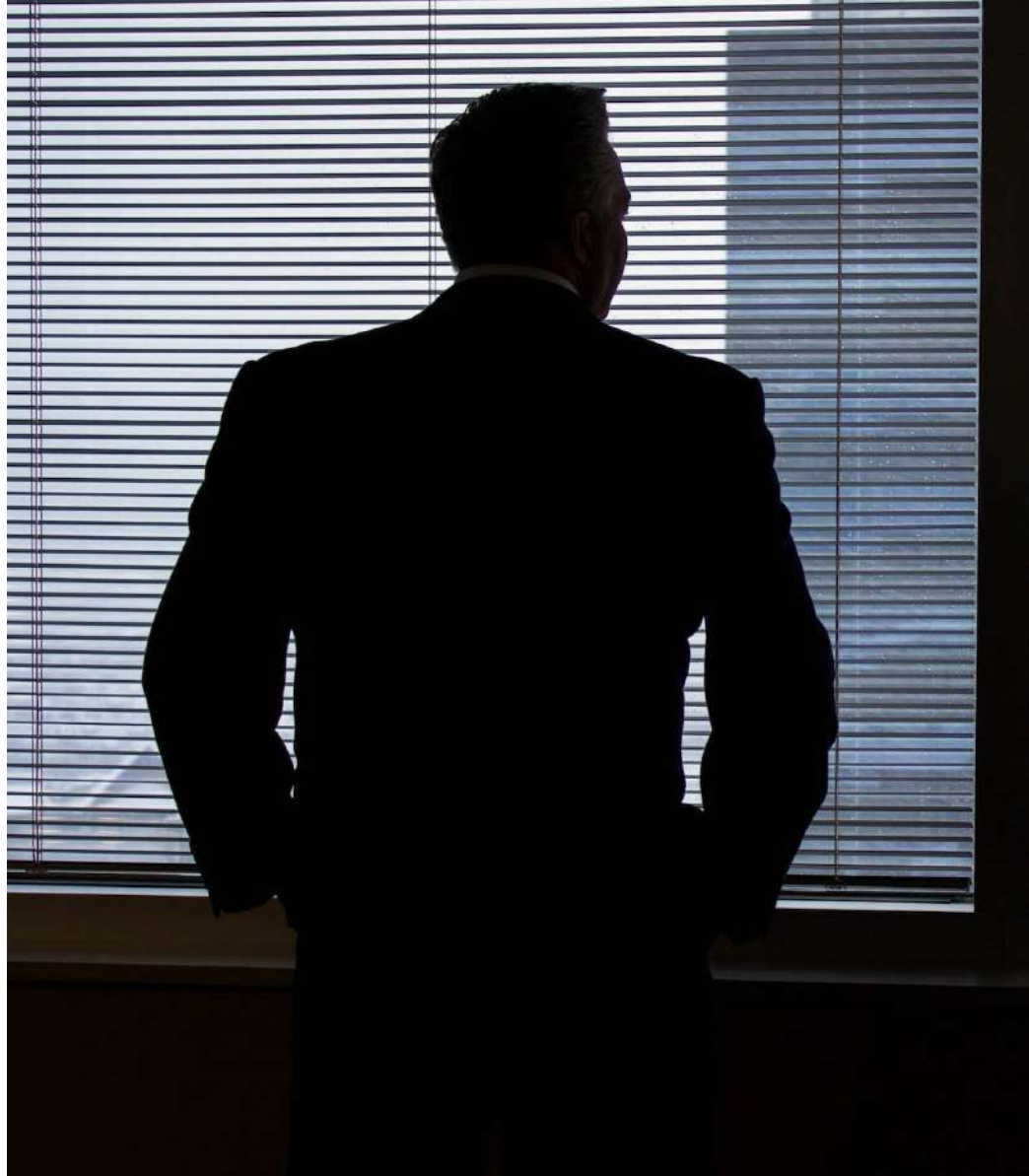
include evaluation criteria that give weight to credible SME supply chains or require prime contractors to demonstrate how they will engage and integrate smaller partners. Finally, contracting authorities can include a limited onboarding support allowance within the contract to help new SME suppliers cover training, system access, or transition costs.

Financial constraints:

Even where SMEs have the skills and appetite to deliver, financial barriers often stand in the way. Tight cashflow, high insurance requirements, and long payment cycles are among the most persistent deterrents. When SMEs decline to bid or withdraw mid-process, it is often because they cannot sustain the high, and often unnecessary, working capital demands of the contract. In my own experience running an SME consultancy, I am often baffled by the high liquidity demands imposed by Authorities, where there is no need for any working capital requirement for the contract, but nevertheless there is a high bar to jump to be considered for a contract that we would otherwise be perfect for.

Procurement teams can test for this by calculating the working capital required under their existing payment terms, retentions, and bonding policies for a typical contract size. If this figure is unrealistic for smaller firms, the structure is likely excluding them. Surveying past bidders about whether cashflow or financing challenges were a deciding factor provides further insight (e.g., inability to fund payroll / sub-contracts until invoice paid).

To remedy these issues, buyers should make full use of the Procurement Act's enhanced payment provisions, which demand



“ Large, single-lot procurements, disproportionate financial thresholds, and overly complex tender documents remain some of the most persistent and avoidable barriers preventing SMEs from competing. ”

30-day payment terms throughout the supply chain. These terms should be clearly referenced in contract documentation and actively monitored in contract management. Requirements for bonds and insurance should also be reviewed and scaled to contract value, imposed only where demonstrably necessary, and replaced where possible with less burdensome alternatives that match the actual risk profile of the contract.

Where working capital demands are required, other practical measures include providing mobilisation payments or modest advance payments to ease early cashflow, and encouraging SMEs to form consortia or joint bids with clear rules on payment flows and subcontracting. Buyers can also help by considering supplier finance arrangements (invoice discounting / supply chain finance) or signpost suppliers to finance support schemes or



supply chain finance options, while ensuring such mechanisms are easy to access and do not impose additional administrative hurdles.

Complexity:

The third barrier is procedural complexity. Even highly capable SMEs often abandon opportunities because of convoluted, repetitive, or overly legalistic tender processes. Low submission rates, excessive clarification questions, and complaints about the time and cost of applying are all tell-tale signs. As an example, I was recently invited to tender for an 'opportunity'. The total estimated contract value for the successful bidder was £2,500, but that did not deter the Authority from sending an 80-page tender (excluding T&Cs) with 12 quality questions, a total response word count of over 8000 words, and a requirement for two signed case study from a previous client. I politely declined the opportunity.

To assess for procedural complexity, buyers can perform a simple "time-trial", asking a non-procurement SME or colleague to complete a draft tender and report on the effort required. They can also count how often information is duplicated across tender documentation.

The solution lies in simplification.

Evidence requirements must be proportionate to contract size and risk. Tenders themselves should be concise, written in plain English, and accompanied by clear guidance, word limits, and template structures for method statements. Not only does this help SMEs to bid, it also streamlines evaluation and appointment.

Open and transparent Q&A processes also make a difference, allowing bidders to learn from one another's queries through shared clarification logs. I have lost count of the number of tenders where the responses to questions read as though written by a surly teenager, with half answers or outright refusal to answer, and passing the risk back to the bidders. Finally, when seeking innovation, buyers should remove technical barriers that prevent smaller or newer firms from competing — for example, by using challenge briefs or procurement procedures that focus on creative solutions rather than past turnover or size.

Practical, tested interventions

There are measures that can be implemented to improve SME participation that are practical,

“ SME access must be treated as a strategic outcome, not an aspiration – measured, designed for, and embedded into sourcing decisions and buyer performance.”

low-cost, and fully aligned with the direction of the new procurement regime. They can be grouped under four key themes: Design & Strategy, Process & Systems, Commercial & Contracting, and Capability & Market Development.

Design & Strategy

SME inclusion begins at the design stage. One of the most effective strategies is to make lotting the default approach. By splitting larger contracts into smaller, more manageable lots, authorities can dramatically widen access for SMEs. The lotting strategy should be made explicit in project initiation and market engagement documents, with clear justification required if a single-lot approach is used instead. Another option is to reserve a proportion of contracts for SMEs where permitted by policy or legal frameworks. This can be achieved through proportionate social value criteria and local economic development levers. Finally, procurement teams should streamline their procurement procedures to design tailored question sets that are scaled to the contract, and review turnover and insurance thresholds to ensure they are proportionate.

Process & Systems

Procurement packs can also be simplified, removing administrative duplication and procedural complexity wherever possible. Providing a short, modular "SME starter pack", with templates for onboarding, invoicing, and key contact points, helps smaller suppliers understand requirements quickly and engage with confidence.

Transparency is another simple enabler. Publishing forward procurement pipelines covering the next 12 to 18 months, with indicative



lot sizes and timelines that are not only for those large contracts where Authorities have such an obligation, allows SMEs to plan resources, partnerships, and financing in advance. This single step often leads to a measurable increase in SME engagement.

Commercial & Contracting

Commercial practices can either encourage or deter SME participation. One of the most important actions buyers can take is to embed 30-day payment terms as an implied contractual condition, extending protection through the supply chain. Under the Procurement Act, prompt payment is a statutory requirement, and authorities should carry out periodic checks to ensure subcontractors are being paid on time.

Other contractual provisions can be adjusted to reduce financial strain. Retentions should be limited and replaced with performance bonds only where demonstrably necessary. Where appropriate, staged payments tied to clear milestones can provide both control for the buyer and healthy cashflow for the supplier.

Authorities should also ensure that every bidder receives a meaningful debrief. Structured, concise feedback helps SMEs understand how to improve future submissions and encourages repeat participation. Providing a standard debrief template ensures consistency and

reduces administrative effort for procurement teams, however ensure that any feedback is actually helpful to unsuccessful bidders.

A generic template response is not only unhelpful, but can dissuade future participation if the bidders don't know what changes could be made to their proposals to bring them into contention in the future. SMEs have, by their nature, more limited resources and are unlikely to persist with bidding for a specific Authority if they are unable to tell what they need to do to improve their future odds. It's a better option to invest their time elsewhere.

Capability & Market Development

Beyond process reform, long-term improvement depends on building both buyer and supplier capability.

Procurement professionals should receive training on SME engagement and proportionality, helping teams to avoid over-specifying requirements or "gold-plating" standards that unintentionally shut out smaller firms. On the supply side, supplier development programmes, such as short accelerators, bid-writing workshops, or onboarding sessions, can make a major difference. Even an annual "how to bid" session for a key category can lead to a noticeable rise in participation and bid quality.

Regular supplier engagement activities, such as challenge briefs, supplier days, or "meet the buyer" sessions (including virtual events), help to humanise the process and build trust.

The cultural fix

Policy levers and contract terms only take you so far. The cultural change required is at buyer level: treat SME inclusion as a strategic objective which is visible in performance reviews, embedded in sourcing strategy, and backed by resource. Make SME access a line-of-sight KPI for senior buyers: require a documented SME access assessment for each sourcing decision where one-supplier or oversized lots are proposed.

Finally, don't assume the barrier is "SMEs aren't good enough". In most cases, the market rules designed by buyers are the gate. The mix of regulatory changes gives procurement teams practical instruments to re-shape markets. Use them, measure the effect, and treat SME access as an outcome, not an aspiration.

About the Author: Iain C. Steel is an award-winning procurement professional and trainer with over 30 years in the procurement and business transformation sector. He is passionate about improving procurement processes, and helps organisations create positive, productive environments for procurement professionals, suppliers and stakeholders alike. Iain is the author of 'The Soft Skills Portfolio', covering 'Conflict Management', and the new volume 'Problem Solving', available now on Amazon in paperback, hardback and Kindle.



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