

SME Public Sector Procurement Guidance

Understanding how to
engage with Public Sector
Tenders

February 2025

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Introduction

Essex County Council (ECC) is committed to delivering it's Everyone's Essex Strategy and the Levelling up Agenda. Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are key to growing our local economy, supporting local employment, and delivering many more benefits that make Essex a great place to live and work. Through this document we aim to offer guidance to SMEs looking to expand their reach into the public sector and take advantage of the opportunities to help grow their business.

Tendering

Where to Find Opportunities

Central Digital Platform (CDP) / Enhanced Find a Tender Service (FTS)

[Find a Tender \(find-tender.service.gov.uk\)](https://find-tender.service.gov.uk)

What is the Central Digital Platform (CDP) and Find a Tender Service? The CDP is where suppliers can find out about tender opportunities – it is essentially an enhanced “Find a Tender” system. Public sector organisations across the UK are required to freely advertise all procurement needs, over a specific value, online. The specific value differs depending on which type of organisation is procuring, and what they are procuring.

Find a Tender Service (FTS) is the home of higher-value, public contract opportunities (tenders) within the UK. You can use the Find a Tender service to search and apply for high value contracts in the UK's public and utilities sectors (currently starting at £118,000*).

Note if you registered prior to 24th February 2025 you may need to re-register and/or validate your details again.

Contracts Finder

[Contracts Finder - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

What is Contracts Finder? Contracts Finder lets you search for information about contracts within the government and its agencies, including those whose value sits under the FTS threshold. Typically, this includes lower value contracts starting at £10,000, but this threshold may be higher for certain organisations.

You can use Contracts Finder to:

- search for contract opportunities in different sectors
- find out what's coming up in the future

- look up details of previous tenders and contracts
- You can create an account to get email updates and save your searches. (You can still search and apply for contracts without an account)

Essex County Council Website

[Supply the council: Find and bid on a contract - Essex County Council](#)

Essex County Council publishes all its current opportunities to supply the council over £100k on its website.

Where to start?

Register for Free Public Sector Tender Alerts: Our partner, Oxygen Finance have created a free public sector tender alerts tool designed to notify you of upcoming public sector tenders, including those from Essex County Council. By signing up, you will be able to receive timely, free email alerts about tenders that are relevant to your business, which will help you to plan and prepare your bids effectively.

To register for this free tool, simply visit <https://i.oxygen-finance.co/essex-free-tender-alerts> and follow the instructions. You can tailor your alerts to the sectors you operate in and choose how often you receive them, reducing the likelihood of you missing the opportunity to bid for a public sector contract.

Search for Preliminary Market Engagement Notices (PME): PME Notices are published because a buyer wants to talk to the supply market before going out to tender or to gather market intelligence. They can also be used as a way of alerting bidders to an upcoming tender. PME Notices are published by organisations on the CDP/Find a Tender. You can create an account and set notifications for PME Notices released relating to certain purchasing categories.

Look out for smaller lots within a larger tender: Tenders are often broken down into smaller component parts called “Lots”. Tender opportunities that may seem too large for your organisation at first glance may have smaller Lots within them that could be a great fit for the services you deliver. Search for Lots that suit the size and capabilities of your organisation as well as whole contracts, this may open up more opportunities for you to bid.

Join Frameworks and / or Dynamic Purchasing Systems (DPS) and / or Dynamic Markets: Some organisations operate a buying system called a Framework, DPS or Dynamic Market. These systems allow government organisations to buy services in a compliant manner. Securing a spot on a Framework may make it easier for larger organisations to buy from you. Research Frameworks or check if local organisations operate a DPS or that supply the services you offer and find out if there is a way to join the appropriate Lots.

Explore being a subcontractor for an existing supplier: Some organisations are awarded large contracts, covering a variety of requirements that may not all be self-delivered by the main contractor. You can make enquiries about becoming a sub-contractor to the main contractor. For ECC opportunities more information can be found here [Supply the council: Find and bid on a contract - Essex County Council](#).

Consider forming a consortium: For larger contracts, forming a consortium maybe an option. By working together with other partners, it can bring together relevant, skills, experience, and expertise to be able to offer a full solution to the buying organisation.

Register for online tender portals: When you find a tender notice you are interested in, you are likely to have to submit your initial interest via an online tender portal. It is common for the whole tender process to be managed via the portal. Any communication regarding the tender and your bid will need to be submitted to the buyer via the portal.

There are a wide range of different portals that are used, buying organisations will typically say on their websites which one they use and how to register. Bidders will need to set up an account with the appropriate portals in order access tender opportunities, accounts are usually free to create.

For ECC specifically you can register [Supply the council: Find and bid on a contract - Essex County Council](#).

Dos and Don'ts When Tendering

When you have identified tender opportunities there are a few dos and don'ts you should consider:

Do make sure your details are up to date on the Central Digital Platform: The CDP is an enhanced version of the Find a Tender Service. (<https://www.gov.uk/find-tender>). Suppliers will be able to find opportunities but will also be able to input and share their commonly used information to help save you time when bidding. Please make sure this information is maintained.

Do read the tender pack carefully: Ensure you have read and understood the tender pack that has been released. This will contain all the information regarding the services being tendered for, terms and conditions and clear instructions on how you should submit your bids.

Do seek clarification: Where you have questions related to the tender or associated process, do submit a clarification request. Online tender portals have a message function that allows you to communicate with the buyer. Be aware the answers to your clarifications will be made available to all bidders unless they are considered commercially sensitive. If you consider your question commercially sensitive, you should make this known at the time of asking by being clear in your message.

Do make sure you read the questions and the marking criteria: Buyers will normally ask a series of questions as part of the tender to ensure they are achieving best value in both quality and price. Do read the question carefully and ensure you answer it fully. Look at the published evaluation criteria alongside the questions, this will clearly explain how your response will be scored. Take note of page / word limits, requested formats and any other instructions.

Don't assume anything: When responding to questions never assume a buyer knows something about your business. A buyer can only mark what has been provided by you at the point of tender response, they may know that you operate a specific system, but they cannot

award you the marks unless you have made it clear in your tender response. The buyer can also only mark based on the information provided within an individual question response and cannot cross reference across questions. Therefore, always provide the full information in your question response, even if it means some repetition. Likewise, if the tender is unclear in any way, do not assume you know the meaning, always use the clarification tool to clear up any ambiguity.

Don't break the rules: The documents provided as part of the tender will provide a clear expectation of how you should bid and the timelines you should meet. Going over the page limit may result in a large part of important information being discounted from your bid when evaluated. Late submissions will not be accepted, and your bid may not be scored at all. Tenders take a lot of time and effort to prepare, ensure you follow the rules of the tender to make sure that work counts!

Do remember every tender is different: Each organisation will have its own way of producing tender packs and evaluating responses. Make sure you follow the dos and don'ts for every tender. Ensuring your responses are bespoke to the tender and satisfy its requirements fully will ensure you have the best chance of having the winning bid.

Common Asks

Each organisation has its own way of producing tender packs and evaluating responses, but there is still a lot of core information that will usually be requested from you across organisations. It can be helpful to make sure you have this up to date and to hand, particularly for larger tenders.

Common asks include:

- Information about any sub-contractors you may use
- Health and Safety policies
- Insurances
 - Public Liability
 - Professional Indemnity
- Modern Slavery Statements (if your annual turnover exceeds £36m)
- Social Value (see below)
- Carbon Reduction Plan (see below)

Contract Management at ECC

The Authority actively manages larger contracts to ensure they continue to deliver best value throughout the life of the agreement. This is also an opportunity for the Authority to work collaboratively with its suppliers to drive value, pursue innovative approaches or manage upcoming market risks. Activities you can expect to undertake with your ECC contract manager can include the following:

- Quarterly Contract performance reviews
- Completing and maintaining a joint risk register
- Business continuity and exit planning

- Evidence of ongoing contract compliance i.e., up to date insurance certificates, business continuity planning.

Benefitting the wider community

Social Value

Social Value became part of public procurement through the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 which came into force in January 2013. It requires all public sector organisations (and their suppliers) to look beyond the financial cost of a contract and take into consideration how the services they commission and procure might improve the economic, social, and environmental well-being of an area*.

In practice it means considering how your business delivers the service, goods or works that also positively impacts on local jobs, businesses, communities, and the environment. It could for example include, reducing car miles driven, employing an apprentice or care leaver, offering work experience placements etc.

If you wish to win public sector contracts, increasingly you will need to score well in questions about your 'social value' during the tender stage and then be able to deliver your commitments along the life of the contract.

For more information see supplementary guidance document - "SME Public Sector Procurement Guidance – A Focus on Social Value".

Carbon and Climate Action

Carbon reduction and climate action is a priority topic for public sector organisations. The majority of ECC's Scope 3 emissions (all the emissions the organisation is indirectly responsible for) come from the supply chains, so it's not unreasonable that as a potential supplier you're asked to demonstrate what your organisation is doing to reduce your carbon footprint and contribute to positive climate action.

Central Government introduced Carbon Reduction Plans (CRPs) into their tender processes in 2021 and you may find a number of other public sector organisations are now asking for these in their tenders. The good news is that you only need one for your organisation – not one for every tender.

You can find out more about CRPs here:

[Procurement Policy Note 06/21: Taking account of Carbon Reduction Plans in the procurement of major government contracts - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/policy-notes/2021/06/06-21-taking-account-of-carbon-reduction-plans-in-the-procurement-of-major-government-contracts)

* [Social value – achieving community benefits | Local Government Association.](https://www.local.gov.uk/social-value)

You can find a CRP template link here:

[PPN-0621-Carbon-Reduction-Plan-Template-Jan22.odt \(live.com\)](#)

If you want more information, tips and ideas to help your business thrive whilst keeping its impact on the environment low visit the [Essex Business Advice Pack | Essex Climate Commission](#), developed by the Essex Climate Action Commission.

Further help and advice

- [How to do business with local government - selling to councils](#)
- <https://www.ukbidwriter.com/2016/09/what-is-social-value-and-how-can-it-give-smaller-companies-the-edge-when-tendering/>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/small-and-medium-enterprises-home-office-actions-and-case-studies>
- [How to bid for government contracts as an SME effectively - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- [SME Tender Support Guide - Connected Places Catapult](#)
- [SME Guide \(tussell.com\)](#)
- [SMALL BUSINESS USER GUIDE: Guidance on how to measure and report your greenhouse gas emissions \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

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