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The UK Tender Playbook for Small Suppliers

Find the right tenders, get bid-ready and write answers that score under the Procurement Act 2023.

By Matt Briars

Founder of Tutors Green and co-founder of OneTender

oneTender

About this playbook

Matt Briars and the OneTender team wrote this playbook for small and medium-sized suppliers who bid for UK public sector work: councils, the NHS, schools, housing and central government. Each chapter is a guide from our site, edited for print, and every source is listed at the back.

Read it in order the first time. After that, run through the bid checklist at the back before every tender, and go straight to the chapter you need.

The rules are as they stood on the date on the cover. Most procurements in England, Wales and Northern Ireland now run under the Procurement Act 2023, in force since 24 February 2025. Devolved Scottish buyers follow Scotland's own rules.

About the author



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Founder of Tutors Green and co-founder of OneTender

Matt Briars founded Tutors Green and grew it to over a thousand tutors and teachers working with schools and local authorities across the UK.

For ten years he did its public sector bidding himself: portal after portal, each with its own login, its own steps and its own paperwork. He started OneTender with Kyrylo Kozak so suppliers can win more public sector contracts with less portal admin.

This playbook is general information, not legal advice. Check the buyer's documents and the official guidance for your procurement.

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PART 1

Find the right work

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CHAPTER 1 · ALL SECTORS

Find a Tender vs Contracts Finder vs ProContract: where you bid

Find a Tender tells you a contract exists. ProContract and other portals are where you bid. What changed for Contracts Finder in 2025 and 2026.

By OneTender team · 1 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- Find a Tender, now the central digital platform, is where every Procurement Act notice is published first, including advertised lower-value ones from £12,000 or £30,000.
- Since 24 February 2025, Contracts Finder duties have applied only to procurements under the 2015 rules, and from 1 October 2026 even those move to the central digital platform.
- ProContract is not a notice board. It is an e-tendering portal, a Proactis product, where you register interest, get the documents and submit.
- Devolved Scottish bodies follow Scotland's own rules and advertise lower-value work on Public Contracts Scotland. Welsh notices go through Sell2Wales and reach Find a Tender.

Short answer: Find a Tender and Contracts Finder are notice boards. They tell you a public contract exists. ProContract is an e-tendering portal, which is where many buyers run the tender itself: you register interest, download the documents, ask questions and submit. Since the Procurement Act 2023 came into force on 24 February 2025, every notice for a new procurement under the Act goes on Find a Tender first, including many lower-value ones. Devolved Scottish bodies are the main exception, as they follow Scotland's own rules. Contracts Finder now matters mainly for history. So search on Find a Tender, then bid wherever the notice sends you.

Two layers: where tenders are published and where you bid

A notice gives you the buyer, a description, an estimated value, the deadlines and a link to the procurement documents. That link usually points to an e-tendering portal the buyer has chosen, such as ProContract, In-Tend, Delta eSourcing, Atamis or Jaggaer. The documents, the clarification questions and your submission all live there. An alert from a notice board is the start of the work, not the bid.

Service	What it is	What you do there
Find a Tender (Central Digital Platform)	The UK government's notice board for every Procurement Act notice	Search notices, save searches, set email alerts, register your organisation
Contracts Finder	The older notice board for England, for procurements started under the 2015 rules	Look up past notices and awards
Public Contracts Scotland	Scotland's notice board, under Scotland's own rules	Search Scottish opportunities and register, both free
Sell2Wales	The Welsh digital platform	Search Welsh opportunities. Devolved Welsh authorities' notices pass through it to Find a Tender
eTendersNI	Northern Ireland's tendering site for government departments, agencies and arm's-length bodies	Register as a supplier to respond to tenders
ProContract	An e-tendering portal, a Proactis product, used by the buyers that choose it	Register interest, get documents, ask questions, submit

Find a Tender: where every notice lands first

Find a Tender is now the Central Digital Platform. Cabinet Office guidance is clear about the order: notices 'must first be published on the central digital platform, before being posted elsewhere' (Central Digital Platform guidance, paragraph 30). From 24 February 2025 it carries above and below threshold notices for new UK procurements, except below threshold work in Scotland (Find a Tender).

Lower-value work is there too. A buyer can invite quotes from a closed group of pre-selected suppliers without advertising at all. But if it advertises a notifiable below-threshold contract, it must publish a below-threshold tender notice on the platform first. Notifiable means **£12,000 or more including VAT** for central government (other than devolved Welsh bodies) and **£30,000 or more** for other authorities such as councils (Procurement Act 2023, section 87, below-threshold guidance).

Searching is free: the government says 'there are no charges' (supplier short guide). Sign in with a GOV.UK One Login to save searches, get email alerts and register your organisation (Find a Tender). Do the registration early. In a competitive tendering procedure, the buyer must have confirmation by the end of the tendering period that you have registered and shared your core supplier information (Central Digital Platform guidance, paragraph 66). From 1 April 2026, if you win a notifiable below-threshold contract, the buyer must also get your confirmation that you have registered, plus your unique identifier, before it publishes the contract details notice (Procurement Regulations 2024, regulation 36A).

Contracts Finder: useful for history, not for new work

Contracts Finder was where buyers in England posted lower-value opportunities under the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. Under the Act, below-threshold tender notices and contract details notices go on the central digital platform instead. The government's guidance says this 'replaces the requirement to publish a contract notice and contract award notice only on Contracts Finder' (below-threshold guidance).

Contracts Finder duties carried on only for procurements under the 2015 rules, such as awards under older frameworks. PPN 019 notes that 'no new procurements will be conducted under the PCRs after 24 February 2025'. From 1 October 2026, the Procurement (Amendment) Regulations 2026 discontinue publication on Contracts Finder, or replace it with publication on the central digital platform.

The site is still live and searchable, and it is good for research: past awards show who won, at what value and roughly when contracts end. But if your alerts only run on Contracts Finder, you are watching the wrong board. Move them to Find a Tender.

Thresholds: why gov.uk pages look out of date

The Contracts Finder start page and the Find a Tender start page on gov.uk still give £139,688 including VAT as the usual mark for high value contracts. That figure applied to procurements started from 1 January 2024 (PPN 11/23) until the end of 2025. For procurements started on or after 1 January 2026, PPN 023 sets lower figures, and the thresholds guidance applies them until 31 December 2027. They include VAT.

Contract type	Started 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2025	Started on or after 1 January 2026
Central government goods and services	£139,688	£135,018
Other authorities, such as councils	£214,904	£207,720
Works	£5,372,609	£5,193,000
Light touch contracts	£663,540	£663,540 (unchanged)
Utilities goods and services	£429,809	£415,440

Thresholds decide which rules apply, not whether you will find the notice. Below them, advertised notifiable contracts still go on Find a Tender, except for devolved Scottish bodies.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

- **Scotland.** Devolved Scottish authorities are generally outside the Act (devolved authorities guidance). Their lower-value notices are on Public Contracts Scotland, which is free to search and join, not on Find a Tender (Find a Tender). UK-wide bodies, which the guidance calls reserved authorities, follow the Act in Scotland too.
- **Wales.** Devolved Welsh authorities are covered by the Act, with some Welsh rules. They submit notices through the Welsh digital platform, which is Sell2Wales, and the duty is met once the notice reaches the central digital platform (Procurement (Wales) Regulations 2024, regulation 5 and its explanatory note). So Welsh notices should show on both.

- **Northern Ireland.** Northern Ireland's transferred authorities are covered by the Act (devolved authorities guidance). eTendersNI advertises work for Northern Ireland government departments, agencies and arm's-length bodies, and you must register there as a supplier organisation to respond.

Following the link: a ProContract example

Say a notice links to ProContract. Opportunities there carry a reference that starts with DN, and you can browse the list without logging in. Based on ProContract's registration page and its supplier help, bidding looks like this:

1. Register your organisation. It is free, and Proactis says the ProContract team reviews each registration. Set your interest areas and locations to get overnight email alerts.
2. Open the opportunity and register interest. You then get the documents, and an email when the buyer publishes the tender.
3. Ask clarification questions through the portal's messages. The buyer can reply to you alone or to every supplier, and other suppliers are not told who asked.
4. Complete the response: questionnaires, any pricing breakdown and attachments. Some parts can be mandatory, and a submission checklist shows what is missing.
5. Submit before the deadline. ProContract's help says you can create a new version until then, and the buyer sees only the version number.

The help pages date from 2015, so screen labels may have changed. Proactis says registration makes your profile available to over 30,000 buyers from over 400 organisations. That is its own figure. Other portals follow the same broad pattern with different screens, and each needs its own account, so register on the ones your target buyers use well before a deadline.

Spot work before the tender notice

- **Pipeline notices (UK1).** Authorities spending more than £100 million a year publish a pipeline of contracts worth more than £2 million for the next 18 months (UK1 short guide).
- **Planned procurement notices.** Optional for the buyer, but worth watching. One published at least 40 days and no more than 12 months before the tender notice can cut the minimum tendering period to 10 days (time periods guidance).
- **Contract details notices.** These show who won, the value and the dates, so you can note when an incumbent's contract ends.
- **Contracts registers.** ProContract's public Contracts register lists awarded contracts with the supplier, buyer, start date and end date. Useful for spotting renewals.

Your setup checklist

- [ ] Sign in to Find a Tender with a GOV.UK One Login, register your organisation and keep its core supplier information current.
- [ ] Save searches on Find a Tender for your services and regions, with email alerts on.
- [ ] Add Public Contracts Scotland, Sell2Wales or eTendersNI if you sell there.
- [ ] Register free on ProContract and on any other portal your target buyers use.
- [ ] Note the end dates of contracts you could bid for next time.
- [ ] Keep Contracts Finder for research, not as your only alert.



CHAPTER 2 · ALL SECTORS

Find a Tender registration and share codes: what SMEs need

Where your Find a Tender unique identifier and share code come from, which contracts need each, and how to keep your supplier information current.

By OneTender team · 1 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- A unique identifier comes from a free organisation registration on Find a Tender that government guidance says takes five minutes. A share code comes from completing and declaring your full supplier information.
- Since 1 April 2026, if you win a notifiable below-threshold contract, the buyer must get your unique identifier before publishing the contract details notice. Notifiable means £12,000 or more for central government, £30,000 or more for other authorities, including VAT.
- To bid for a contract above the thresholds, you share your supplier information through the platform, by entering a share code in the buyer's e-tendering system or sending a downloaded file.
- When your information changes, update the record and create a new share code to share the new information.

If a buyer has asked for your 'unique identifier' or your 'share code', both come from the same free service: Find a Tender, the government's central digital platform. The unique identifier comes from a basic organisation registration that government guidance calls 'a short five minute registration process'. The share code comes later: you complete your full supplier information once, declare it accurate, and the

platform gives you a code to enter in the buyer's tendering system. For a below-threshold contract, the platform rules only ask for the identifier, and only once you win a notifiable one. To bid for a contract above the thresholds, you also need to share your full supplier information, usually with a share code.

	Unique identifier	Share code
What it is	Your organisation's ID on the platform, published on notices	A code that gives a buyer your declared supplier information
What you complete	Name, addresses, email, registry number, SME or VCSE status	Six sections of supplier information, plus a declaration
When you need it	Winning a notifiable below-threshold contract, or bidding above threshold	Bidding for public contracts above the thresholds
How often	Once. It stays the same	Each time your information changes

Find a Tender is now the central digital platform

Since the Procurement Act 2023 came into force on 24 February 2025, Find a Tender has published both above and below-threshold notices for new UK procurements, except below-threshold notices in Scotland. The government's Central Digital Platform factsheet says 'Find a Tender is free to use for everyone' and that suppliers 'only need to register at the point that they want to bid for a contract'. If you registered on the old Find a Tender service, you need to register again. Use the same email address and your saved searches come across.

> **Bidding in Scotland**
> Devolved Scottish authorities generally sit outside the Act. They follow Scottish procurement rules and advertise on Public Contracts Scotland, and their below-threshold notices don't appear on Find a Tender. The steps below apply to buyers working under the Procurement Act 2023.

Step 1: register and find your unique identifier

1. **Pick your administrator.** The registration guide says one person should set up the organisation. They become the Administrator, who adds and approves other users.
2. **Create a GOV.UK One Login** with that person's own work email. You confirm a six-digit code, choose a password, then pick text message or an authenticator app for future security codes.
3. **Finish the platform registration.** Accept the Central Digital Platform privacy policy and enter your name.
4. **Register the organisation.** Select **Register an organisation**, then **Supplier**. Have your Companies House number, or an equivalent such as a Charity Commission number, and your registered address to hand. A Companies House number fills in your name and address. Select your SME status if it applies.
5. **Use a shared email** for the organisation, so the account doesn't depend on one inbox.
6. **Save and view.** Check your answers and save. Select **View** on the organisation: your unique identifier is shown there, as the identifier guide illustrates.

If you have no Companies House or other registry number, the platform generates one for you. The government's guidance on new legislative requirements calls this a Public Procurement Organisation Number (PPON). You register once, and the same identifier is used 'in respect of all future procurements', above or below threshold.

Why small contracts now need it

Since 1 April 2026, regulation 36A of the Procurement Regulations 2024 says that before a buyer publishes the contract details notice for a notifiable below-threshold contract, it must get your confirmation that you have registered and submitted your basic details, plus your unique identifier. Under section 87 of the Act, notifiable means an estimated value of at least £12,000 for central government buyers, or £30,000 for other authorities such as councils, both including VAT.

So if you win a £40,000 council contract, expect a request for your identifier before the buyer publishes the contract details notice. Registering before you bid saves a scramble after award. Government guidance says the April 2026 rule doesn't apply to procurement regulated by the Welsh Ministers, because the Procurement (Wales) Regulations 2024 already require identifiers.

Step 2: complete your supplier information once

For a public contract above the thresholds, regulation 6 requires the buyer to get your confirmation that you have registered, submitted up-to-date core supplier information and shared it through the platform. In an open or competitive flexible procedure, that has to happen before the tendering period ends. The detailed walkthrough lists six sections:

Section	What to have ready
Basic information	Postal address, VAT number, website, organisation type, legal form, the law you're registered under and your registration date
Connected persons	Directors, persons with significant control, parent or subsidiary companies and anyone else with significant influence or control
Qualifications	Each relevant qualification, who awarded it and when
Trade assurances	The awarding body, a reference number if you have one, and the award date
Exclusions	Any mandatory or discretionary exclusion ground affecting you or a connected person, what happened and how it is managed
Financial information	Accounts for your most recent financial years, whether they were audited, and each year-end date

The Act's definition of connected persons in Schedule 6, paragraph 45 includes directors, so a new director is a change to record. Find a Tender doesn't check what you enter. The factsheet puts accuracy on the supplier and due diligence on the buyer, so have someone who knows the company's structure and accounts review it before you declare.

Step 3: declare and create a share code

Select **Share my information**, then **Create a share code**. You agree to the declaration, enter your name, job title, work email and the organisation's postal address, then select **Confirm and get share code**. The next screen shows the code, and you can download your supplier information as a file.

The tender notice or tender documents tell you how to use it. That might mean pasting the share code into the buyer's e-tendering system (the guidance calls these eSenders), or emailing or uploading the downloaded file. The factsheet says your information is only shared with the buyers you choose.

Check user roles before a deadline. An Administrator can do everything. An Editor can complete declarations and generate a share code. A Viewer can see the information and copy an existing share code into a tender form. Give your bid manager Editor access so a share code never waits for the one person who set up the account.

The guidance also says that if your supplier information changes, you update it and create a new share code to share the new information. The sharing page lists previous codes with the date each was created, so note in your bid records which code went to which buyer.

What buyers can't demand

Section 22 of the Act limits the conditions of participation a buyer can set for a public contract. It can't require audited annual accounts unless you are, or were, required to have them audited under the Companies Act 2006 or an overseas equivalent. It can't require insurance for the contract to be in place before award. It also can't insist on particular qualifications without accepting equivalents, or require you to have held a contract with a particular authority.

For most below-threshold contracts, section 85 goes further: buyers can't restrict who may tender by assessing your suitability, including your financial capacity or technical ability. Since 1 January 2026, the exception is works contracts worth at least £135,018 for central government buyers or £207,720 for others.

Keep it current: a refresh checklist

- [ ] A director, controlling shareholder or parent company changes: update Connected persons.
- [ ] New annual accounts are filed: upload them under Financial information with the year-end date.
- [ ] You gain, renew or lose a certification: update Qualifications or Trade assurances.
- [ ] Something happens that could be an exclusion ground, for you or a connected person: record it under Exclusions, with the steps you have taken.
- [ ] Your address, legal form or SME status changes: update Basic information.
- [ ] After any change, create a new share code and stop pasting the old one into new bids.
- [ ] If your information changes after you have shared it but before award, and you give the buyer the update, regulation 6 says it must go through the platform: update your record there and share the new version with that buyer.

> **If Find a Tender is down near a deadline**
>
> The factsheet says the Act and the Procurement Regulations 2024 allow contingency arrangements when a supplier can't access the platform. Contact the buyer straight away.



CHAPTER 3 · ALL SECTORS

Bid or no-bid: 10 checks before you start a public sector tender

A fast, defensible bid or no-bid check for UK public sector tenders: the gates, time, scoring, price, the incumbent, TUPE, evidence and capacity.

By OneTender team · 2 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- Check the gates first: if you can't meet a condition of participation, or an exclusion ground applies with no self-cleaning evidence, stop.
- Then check the working days left, how the marks are split, whether the price works and who holds the contract now.
- The Act sets no fixed turnover cap, and contract insurance can only be required from contract start.
- Score the 10 checks 0, 1 or 2: a failed gate is a no-bid, and a low total probably is too.

Before you spend days on a tender, check that you can pass its gates: the conditions of participation and the exclusion grounds. Then check the deadline, how it is scored, the price and the competition. If a gate fails, walk away. A clear no-bid saves days you can spend on a tender you can win. Here are 10 checks you can run in about five minutes, a way to score them, and how to say no without closing the door.

Why a fast no-bid pays

A bid costs staff time long before it earns anything: reading, asking questions, writing, pricing, checking, signing off and uploading. Put a number on it: list who works on a typical bid and for how many days, and multiply by their day rate. That is what each bid you can't win throws away.

The 10 checks

Run them in order, gates first. Most answers are in the tender notice: for an open procedure it must give the estimated value, the award criteria or a summary, the conditions of participation, any lots, the deadline and whether the buyer thinks the contract particularly suits small and medium-sized enterprises (regulation 18).

1. Fit: your service, your area, a size you can deliver

Read what the contract covers, where, for how long and for how much. Then look at the lots: a buyer must consider splitting the work into lots, and give its reasons if lots would work but it doesn't use them (section 18). One lot for your area or service can fit when the whole contract doesn't.

2. Gates: the conditions of participation

Conditions of participation test you, not your tender: your legal and financial capacity, or your technical ability, to perform the contract. They must be proportionate to its nature, complexity and cost (section 22), and failing one means you can't be awarded the contract (guidance on conditions of participation, paragraph 12). Check each against what you hold:

- **Certifications and experience.** A condition must allow equivalents to any qualification it names, and can ask for public sector experience but not experience with one particular authority (section 22(4); guidance paragraph 13).
- **Insurance.** Contract insurance can be required from the start of the contract, not before award (section 22(3)(b)), evidenced by a certificate or an insurer's letter (guidance paragraph 19). Cover the law already requires, such as employers' liability, can be a condition now (paragraph 20).
- **Financial standing.** Audited accounts can't be demanded from a supplier that isn't required to have them audited, but evidence a third party can verify, such as a credit rating, can be (section 22(3)(a) and (6); guidance paragraph 24).
- **Partners.** A consortium partner, a sub-contractor or a guarantor can help you meet a condition (section 22(8) and (9)).

> **No fixed turnover cap under the Act**
>
> The old rules capped minimum turnover requirements at twice the estimated contract value, except in justified cases (Public Contracts Regulations 2015, regulation 58). The Act sets no figure: a turnover test only has to be proportionate (section 22(5)). Central government's guidance on economic and financial standing rates turnover above twice the annual contract value as lower risk, and says buyers should normally not exclude on that ratio alone. Twice the annual value is a fair yardstick for your own check.

3. Exclusions: you, your connected persons and your sub-contractors

Mandatory exclusion grounds are in Schedule 6, such as convictions for fraud, bribery, tax or modern slavery offences. Discretionary grounds are in Schedule 7, such as labour market or environmental misconduct, insolvency, serious breach of contract or poor performance, and acting improperly in a procurement. A buyer must exclude an excluded supplier and may exclude an excludable one (guidance on exclusions, paragraph 12).

- **Who counts.** Connected persons, such as directors and parent companies, and the sub-contractors or partners you rely on to meet the conditions (paragraphs 33 to 42).
- **How far back.** Events more than 5 years old no longer put you at risk (paragraphs 27 and 28).
- **Sub-contractors.** The buyer must check intended sub-contractors against the debarment list, and give you a reasonable opportunity to replace one that is excluded or excludable (section 28).
- **Self-cleaning.** If a ground might apply, have evidence it won't recur, such as compensation paid or new procedures and training (paragraph 53).

4. Time: count the working days

Count the working days to the submission and clarification deadlines, leaving out weekends, bank holidays and days your team is busy elsewhere. Is that enough?

Section 54 sets minimum tendering periods in days, not working days, so weekends and bank holidays count. The guidance on time periods explains each (paragraph 20):

When	Minimum tendering period
Tenders submitted electronically, with all tender documents published with the notice	25 days
Electronic with documents published later, or not electronic with all documents published	30 days
Not electronic, and not all documents published with the notice	35 days
After a qualifying planned procurement notice (published 40 days to 12 months before), in urgency, or under a dynamic market	10 days
A buyer outside central government, or a utility, inviting only pre-selected suppliers	10 days, or none if the period is agreed with them
A light touch contract	No minimum

The notice says whether the buyer relied on a shorter period, such as urgency (regulation 18). Buyers must, where relevant, have regard to the need for site visits and sub-contracting when setting time limits (section 54(1)), so ask early if you need more time.

5. Scoring: where are the marks?

Find the award criteria and their weightings or ranking (section 23). If price carries most of the marks and you are rarely cheapest, or quality is scored on things you can't evidence, mark this down. In central government, PPN 002 requires, where relevant, at least 10% of the total score for social value in above-threshold procurements under the Act commenced from 1 October 2025.

6. Price: can you win it at a profit?

Compare the estimated value with your cost to deliver, including mobilisation, any TUPE costs and overheads. If you could only win at a loss, it is a no-bid. Don't go so low that the buyer doubts you: it may disregard an abnormally low tender, though only after telling you and giving you a reasonable opportunity to show you can perform the contract for that price (section 19(3)(c) and (4)). On cash flow, the Act implies a term that buyers pay valid, undisputed invoices within 30 days (section 68), except in concession contracts and contracts awarded by private utilities or schools.

7. Incumbent and history: who holds it now?

Search Find a Tender for the buyer and service: its contracts search covers awarded contracts under the Act, active and expired, and its notice search finds older notices. Note the current supplier, value and end date, and what you would offer that it doesn't. Pipeline notices (section 93), planned procurement notices and preliminary market engagement can show a tender coming; if this one surprised you, you have less time to prepare.

8. TUPE: will staff transfer to you?

If you take over a service from another contractor, its staff may transfer to you with their terms, conditions and continuity of employment (GOV.UK). That is a service provision change under the TUPE Regulations 2006 (regulation 3). Cost the headcount, pay, pensions and holiday from the TUPE information in the tender documents, and ask the buyer for anything missing.

9. Evidence: can you prove what you will claim?

Quality answers are scored on what you can show: case studies from similar contracts, client references, CVs, policies and certificates. Check you can produce each now, and don't write around a gap. Providing incomplete, inaccurate or misleading information is listed as a way of acting improperly in a procurement (Schedule 7, paragraph 13), a discretionary exclusion ground where it gives you an unfair advantage.

10. Capacity: can you write it and deliver it?

Who will write, price and review this bid, and what will they drop? Can you recruit and train for the start date? Have you agreed terms with any partner you need?

Score it in five minutes

Give each check 2 for yes, 0 for no and 1 for anything in between. It is a method, not a rule: adjust it, and write the scores down.

Check	Score 2 if	Score 0 if
1. Fit	Your core service, area and size	Not your service or area
2. Gates	You meet every condition, or will in time	You can't meet a condition
3. Exclusions	No ground applies	A ground applies, with no self-cleaning evidence
4. Time	Enough working days to do it well	Too few to write, review and sign off
5. Scoring	Weighted to your strengths	Weighted to your weaknesses
6. Price	Profitable at a competitive price	A loss at any price that could win
7. Incumbent	You know why it is re-let and have an edge	A strong incumbent and no edge
8. TUPE	No transfer, or one fully costed	A transfer you can't cost
9. Evidence	Case studies, references and CVs ready	Key evidence missing
10. Capacity	Team, mobilisation and partners ready	Nobody free to do it

- **Any 0 on check 2 or check 3 is a no-bid.** A failed gate can't be outscored.
- **Under 12 out of 20 is probably a no-bid.** Too much has to go right.

- **16 or more is a strong bid.** Commit the time.
- **12 to 15 is a judgement call.** Can you turn enough 1s into 2s before the deadline?

When to say no, and how to keep the door open

- **Decline politely.** If you registered interest, tell the buyer you won't bid this time.
- **Watch for the next notice.** A buyer expecting to pay more than £100 million under its contracts in a financial year must publish a pipeline notice of the contracts over £2 million it plans to procure in the 18 months from the start of that year (section 93), by 26 May each year (guidance on pipeline notices, paragraph 12).
- **Join market engagement.** A buyer may engage suppliers before the tender notice to shape its requirements (section 16), and a published notice inviting suppliers should be standard practice (guidance on preliminary market engagement, paragraph 22).
- **Ask about lots.** Suggest splitting the next contract by area or service.
- **Diary the end date.** Note it, with any extension options, from the award or contract details notice.

The five-minute no-bid check

Run this before anyone opens a blank response template.

- [ ] It is our service, in our area, at a size we can deliver
- [ ] We meet every condition of participation, or will by the date the buyer sets
- [ ] No exclusion ground applies to us or to anyone we rely on
- [ ] Enough working days remain to write, review and sign off the bid
- [ ] The weightings and the estimated value work for us at a profit
- [ ] We know who holds the contract now and why it is being re-let
- [ ] Any TUPE transfer is costed from the information the buyer has given
- [ ] Our evidence, bid time and mobilisation team are ready

PART 2

Get bid-ready

4. Which certifications do UK public sector tenders ask for?
5. Cyber Essentials for public sector contracts: when and how to certify
6. Carbon Reduction Plans, modern slavery and social value in tenders



CHAPTER 4 · ALL SECTORS

Which certifications do UK public sector tenders ask for?

ISO 9001, Cyber Essentials, SSIP schemes and insurance: which ones UK tenders treat as pass or fail gates, which only earn marks, and what to get first.

By OneTender team · 2 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- Most certificates are evidence, not law. Under the Procurement Act a buyer can make one a pass or fail condition only if it's proportionate, and must allow for equivalents.
- A few things are legal requirements: employer's liability insurance of at least £5 million, CQC registration for regulated care in England and a PSV operator licence to carry 9 or more passengers for hire or reward.
- ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 have 2026 editions. An in-date 2015 certificate still stands while your certification body moves you across.
- One SSIP health and safety assessment can get you recognised by other member schemes through Deem to Satisfy.
- Above the threshold, buyers can't make you hold the contract's insurance before award, only ask for evidence it will be in place when the contract starts.

Most UK public sector tenders want evidence that you can deliver safely and well, not a wall of badges. A few items are pass or fail gates, usually because the law requires them: employer's liability insurance, CQC registration for regulated care, a PSV operator licence. ISO 9001, Cyber Essentials or an SSIP scheme are

gates only where a tender sets them as a proportionate condition. Otherwise they earn marks only where a scored question asks for the evidence behind them. And under the Procurement Act 2023, buyers must allow for equivalents.

Gate or marks: how buyers use certifications

Under the Act, a condition of participation is something you must satisfy to win the contract (section 22(2)), and if you don't, the buyer may exclude you (section 22(7)). A buyer may set one only as a proportionate way to make sure suppliers have the legal and financial capacity or technical ability to perform the contract (section 22(1)), judged against its nature, complexity and cost (section 22(5)).

- **Equivalents count.** A condition can cover qualifications, experience or technical ability, but can't require particular qualifications without allowing for their equivalents (section 22(4)(c)), and must keep to the technical specification rules in section 56.
- **Evidence someone else can check.** A condition may ask for evidence a third party can verify (section 22(6)). The Cabinet Office's technical specifications guidance recommends accredited certification bodies, and names UKAS as the UK's sole national accreditation body (paragraph 25).
- **A partner can carry a condition.** If you bid as a consortium, or will have legally binding arrangements for another supplier to perform or guarantee part of the contract, their certificate can count towards a condition (section 22(8) and (9)).
- **Shortlists and timing.** In a competitive flexible procedure, conditions can be used to shortlist (conditions of participation guidance, paragraph 23). A buyer may also let a supplier still obtaining a standard progress, if it meets the condition before award (paragraph 15), so ask.
- **Two things buyers can't demand.** Audited accounts, unless the law requires yours to be audited, and insurance for the contract in place before award (section 22(3)).

Award criteria are different: they assess your tender, while conditions of participation assess you (guidance, paragraph 3). A certificate earns no marks on its own; it helps when a question asks how you manage quality, safety or data and it backs up your answer.

> **Below the threshold, the rules change**
>
> When a buyer invites tenders for a regulated below-threshold contract, section 85 stops it restricting who may tender by assessing suitability, so a certificate can't be a gate to tendering there. The exceptions are works contracts from £207,720, or £135,018 for central government, and call-offs under a framework. Expect suitability questions inside the tender instead. Our guide to small works below £207,720 covers this.

The certifications UK buyers ask for most

Two rows are legal requirements: CQC registration and the PSV operator licence. The NHS toolkit is mandatory if you'll access NHS patient data and systems. The rest are voluntary schemes a tender can choose to ask for.

Certification	What it shows	Who usually asks	Gate or marks	Renewal
ISO 9001	A certified quality management system	Any sector	Voluntary. Marks for quality answers, or a gate if a condition requires it	Your certification body's audit cycle
ISO 14001	A certified environmental management system	Any sector	Voluntary. Marks for environmental answers, or a gate if a condition requires it	Usually yearly surveillance audits and recertification every 3 years
ISO 45001	A certified occupational health and safety management system	Any sector	Voluntary. Marks for safety answers, or a gate if a condition requires it	Your certification body's audit cycle
Cyber Essentials and Cyber Essentials Plus	Five basic cyber controls are in place; Plus adds a technical audit	Central government and NHS buyers under PPN 014, and others that follow it	Voluntary, but a gate where PPN 014 applies, unless you show equivalent controls	Every 12 months
An SSIP scheme, such as CHAS Standard, SafeContractor or Achilles	Health and safety arrangements that meet the SSIP core criteria	Construction first, now many other industries	Voluntary, not a legal requirement. Often a stage 1 pre-qualification check	Yearly fees at CHAS and Constructionline
Common Assessment Standard	A fuller construction pre-qualification, at desktop or site-based level	Contractors and clients that accept it, listed by Build UK	Voluntary pre-qualification, where a works buyer or contractor asks for it	Certified once a year
Constructionline	Verified company information; paid levels include an SSIP, and Gold meets the Common Assessment Standard	Construction contractors and public sector buyers	Voluntary membership. If a tender names it, ask whether equivalents count	Annual membership
CQC registration	Permission to carry on regulated activity in England: a registration, not a certificate	Care and health buyers in England	Legal requirement: regulated activity without registration is an offence	Ongoing, with CQC monitoring; new activities or changed conditions need a further application
NHS Data Security and Protection Toolkit	A self-assessment against the National Data Guardian's 10 data security standards	NHS buyers	Mandatory if you'll access NHS patient data and systems	Yearly versions; 2026 to 2027 is current
PSV operator licence	Permission to operate vehicles for hire or reward that can carry 9 or more passengers	Councils and others buying passenger transport	Legal requirement: operating before the licence is issued is illegal	No expiry; details checked every 5 years

Sources for the table: ISO's pages for ISO 9001, ISO 14001 and ISO 45001; PPN 014; SSIP and its member list; Build UK; Constructionline; CQC; the NHS toolkit; and GOV.UK on PSV licences and applying for one.

ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 have new 2026 editions

ISO published ISO 9001:2026, the sixth edition of the quality management standard, in September 2026, and now marks ISO 9001:2015 as withdrawn. ISO 14001:2026 came out in April 2026, and its 2015 edition is withdrawn too. ISO 45001:2018, for health and safety, is still current but due to be revised.

Withdrawn doesn't mean your certificate stopped counting. ISO's FAQ says certified organisations move to the new edition within the timeframe set by their certification cycle, typically around three years for ISO 14001, and should ask their certification body. An in-date 2015 certificate still stands during the transition.

- **Quote the edition.** ISO asks for the full designation, such as certified to ISO 14001:2026. In a bid, say which edition your certificate covers and when you'll transition.
- **Show it's accredited.** UKAS CertCheck lets you search UKAS-accredited management system certificates by company name or certificate number. Not every certification body takes part fully, so if yours isn't listed, keep its accreditation details handy.
- **Certification is a choice.** ISO says organisations implementing ISO 9001 can choose whether to certify. A tender can still ask for certification, or let you show an equivalent.

Health and safety schemes: SSIP, CHAS, Constructionline and the Common Assessment Standard

SSIP, Safety Schemes in Procurement, is the umbrella for health and safety assessment schemes. Every member scheme works to the SSIP core criteria, which SSIP says HSE has approved, and the schemes recognise each other: with one certificate, Deem to Satisfy can get you registered with a buyer's preferred scheme without a full reassessment. SSIP says these assessments are not legally required. You don't join SSIP itself; a member scheme assesses and certifies you (Constructionline).

- **Who's in SSIP.** Its member list includes CHAS 2013 Ltd, Achilles, SafeContractor, Avetta, CQMS and Once For All as registered members. Constructionline is a supporter member, as are councils such as Cornwall and Durham.
- **CHAS.** Now Veriforce CHAS, it has three levels: Standard, a health and safety assessment including SSIP; Advanced, which also meets the former PAS 91 standard; and Elite, which meets the Common Assessment Standard. Prices start at £429 a year for Standard, £659 for Advanced and £949 for Elite, and scale with the size of your organisation.
- **Constructionline.** Its levels run from Associate, an entry level, through Bronze, Silver and Gold to Platinum. Paid levels include an SSIP from Once For All Health & Safety. Gold meets the Common Assessment Standard at desktop level, with Building Safety Act assessments; Platinum adds a one-day premises audit. Prices depend on turnover.
- **The Common Assessment Standard.** Build UK's industry-agreed question set certifies companies yearly, at desktop or site-based level, through seven Recognised Assessment Bodies: Achilles, Compliance Chain, Constructionline, CQMS, SCCS, Smas Worksafe and Veriforce CHAS. Micro-businesses are assessed proportionately. Version 6 is due on 1 November 2026.

Build UK points public sector bodies to PPN 03/24, the selection questionnaire note for the old Public Contracts Regulations 2015. Under the Act, the conditions of participation guidance lets works buyers keep using questionnaires such as the Common Assessment Standard if they meet the Act's requirements, such as proportionality (paragraph 36). A questionnaire that still asks for PAS 91 is out of date: BSI withdrew it on 21 April 2023, as our small works guide notes.

Before an SSIP assessment, gather what assessors most often send back. Once For All Health & Safety's most-rejected questions ask for your safety adviser's competence, an example of their advice put into practice, three years of accident, near-miss and RIDDOR figures, how you consult your workforce, and current training certificates or skills cards.

Insurance: which cover, how much and when

Employer's liability is the cover most firms must hold by law. GOV.UK says you need it as soon as you become an employer, from an authorised insurer, for at least £5 million, with narrow exemptions such as employing only family members. The minimum applies per occurrence, including costs (regulation 3). You can be fined £2,500 for every day you aren't properly insured, and you must display the certificate where employees can see it.

Public liability, professional indemnity and product liability levels are set by each tender, not by one national figure, so read the documents for every bid.

Timing matters too. For above-threshold contracts, a buyer can't make you hold the contract's insurance before award (section 22(3)(b)). The guidance asks buyers to check first that a level is necessary. If it is, the condition can be that you'll have the cover when the contract starts, with evidence: a certificate you hold, or an insurer's letter offering the cover plus your commitment to take it out (paragraphs 18 and 19). Cover the law already requires, such as employer's liability, can be a condition in its own right (paragraph 20).

Cyber Essentials in brief

PPN 014 applies to central government departments, their executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies, and NHS bodies (paragraph 3). Where a contract has the higher-risk features it lists, such as handling citizens' or government staff's personal data, they must require Cyber Essentials or Plus, or equivalent controls, with the certificate renewed every year of the contract (paragraphs 12 to 15). Other public bodies may follow it. Our Cyber Essentials guide covers when you need it and how to certify.

What to get first

- **Everyone.** Employer's liability insurance once you employ anyone, a broker who can evidence cover quickly, and Cyber Essentials if you'll handle personal data for central government or NHS buyers.
- **Construction.** One SSIP assessment through the scheme your target buyers prefer, such as CHAS Standard or Constructionline Bronze, then the Common Assessment Standard, through CHAS Elite or Constructionline Gold, when clients ask.
- **Care.** CQC registration for every regulated activity you bid for in England, and the NHS toolkit if you'll access NHS patient data and systems.
- **Transport.** A PSV operator licence before you run any vehicle that can carry 9 or more passengers for hire or reward: GOV.UK says a decision usually comes within 7 weeks, and a standard licence needs a

nominated transport manager. Our school transport guide covers driver checks.

- **Facilities management.** An SSIP assessment for maintenance and site work, then ISO 9001 or ISO 14001 when your buyers ask for them.

What to have ready before the next tender

- [ ] Employer's liability certificate in date, with at least £5 million of cover
- [ ] An insurer's letter, via your broker, for any cover a tender asks you to raise
- [ ] Every certificate's expiry date in one list, with reminders a month ahead
- [ ] ISO certificates quoted with their edition, 2015 or 2026, and checked on UKAS CertCheck
- [ ] One SSIP certificate, and the Deem to Satisfy route if a buyer prefers another scheme
- [ ] Cyber Essentials, or Plus, covering the whole organisation if you handle personal data
- [ ] CQC registration or PSV operator licence details ready to quote, if your sector needs them



CHAPTER 5 · ALL SECTORS

Cyber Essentials for public sector contracts: when and how to certify

When UK public sector tenders need Cyber Essentials or Plus, what it costs, what changed in April 2026 and how to pass the assessment first time.

By OneTender team · 2 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- Central government departments, their agencies and NDPBs, and NHS bodies must require Cyber Essentials, or equivalent controls, on higher-risk contracts, such as those handling personal data (PPN 014).
- Basic Cyber Essentials is a verified self-assessment costing £320 plus VAT for up to 9 staff. Cyber Essentials Plus adds a technical audit and is priced by quote.
- Certificates expire after 12 months, and PPN 014 says you must renew every year for the life of the contract.
- Assessments bought from 27 April 2026 use requirements v3.3 and the Danzell question set. Version 3.3 states outright that cloud services can't be left out of scope.
- Unsupported software in scope is an automatic fail. Check it, multi-factor authentication on cloud accounts and 14-day patching before you pay.

If a central government department, one of its agencies or non-departmental public bodies, or an NHS body is buying, and the contract involves handling personal data or OFFICIAL information, expect to need Cyber Essentials or verified equivalent controls: PPN 014 requires them for higher-risk contracts like these.

Councils and other buyers ask for it more and more too. Basic certification is a self-assessment marked by an independent assessor, costs £320 plus VAT for an organisation of up to 9 staff and lasts 12 months. Cyber Essentials Plus adds a technical audit and is priced by quote.

When a tender requires Cyber Essentials

PPN 014 applies to central government departments, their executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies, and NHS bodies (paragraph 3). Other public bodies may choose to follow it (paragraph 6), and IASME, the NCSC's delivery partner for the scheme, says it is required in an increasing number of local government contracts. In-scope buyers must make suppliers meet technical requirements when a contract has any of these characteristics (paragraph 12):

- You'll handle citizens' personal information, such as home addresses, bank details or payment information.
- You'll handle personal information about government employees, ministers or special advisers, such as payroll, travel booking or expenses.
- You'll supply ICT systems or services designed to store or process data at the OFFICIAL level of the Government Security Classifications Policy.
- The contract deals with information about the day-to-day business of government, service delivery or public finances, among other areas the note lists.

PPN 014 calls Cyber Essentials or Cyber Essentials Plus the quickest and most effective way to manage those risks, and says the certificate must be renewed every year for the life of the contract (paragraph 14). It doesn't make Plus the default: Annex B describes Plus as the more rigorous assessment, for contracts with a higher risk of cyber threats. Buyers must not take a blanket approach, and should avoid deterring small suppliers from bidding (paragraphs 20 and 21).

- **Timing.** Annex C says evidence is required before contract award, and paragraph 16 says it is essential at the point when data is passed to you. The requirement must be in the tender notice (Annex C, Q3). The Cabinet Office's technical specifications guidance lets a buyer accept self-certification during the tender and check the standard before award (paragraph 22), so if you're mid-assessment, ask.
- **Equivalents.** Without the certificate, you must be able to show equivalent controls by other means (paragraph 15). Annex C (Q10) says buyers must accept equivalents under section 56 of the Procurement Act, normally verified by a technically competent, independent third party, and always so for a Plus-level requirement.
- **ISO 27001 isn't a shortcut.** Its scope rarely includes all five Cyber Essentials controls, so Annex C (Q9) expects most ISO 27001 holders to need Cyber Essentials as well, or to show equivalent controls.
- **Scope.** By default a certificate covers the legal entity supplying the contract, and you can narrow it to part of that entity, so buyers are told to check what yours covers (Annex C, Q8).

Defence work runs differently. Under the MOD's Cyber Security Model, the buyer sets a Cyber Risk Profile from Level 0 to Level 3, usually stated in the invitation to tender. You self-assess against it in a Supplier Assurance Questionnaire, and submit a Cyber Improvement Plan if you fall short. The Defence Cyber Certification, with IASME as its certification authority, is a way to evidence compliance independently.

Cyber Essentials or Cyber Essentials Plus?

Both cover the same five technical controls. The difference is how they're checked and what they cost (NCSC, IASME FAQ).

Question	Cyber Essentials	Cyber Essentials Plus
How it's assessed	A verified self-assessment: you answer the question set online, a board member signs a declaration that the answers are true, and an assessor marks them. No vulnerability scan	The same self-assessment plus a technical audit: internal and external vulnerability scans, then tests on a random sample (typically around 10 per cent) of your user devices, internet gateways and servers open to the internet
Who assesses	An assessor at a certification body licensed by IASME, whether you apply yourself through IASME or pay a certification body to support you	A certification body you contact directly. Audits can be remote or in person
Cost	IASME's fixed fee by number of staff, from £320 plus VAT	Quoted on the size and complexity of your network. IASME's form gets you quotes from three certification bodies
When buyers ask for it	The baseline PPN 014 describes, with a basic level of assurance (paragraph 22)	Contracts with a higher risk of cyber threats (PPN 014, Annex B)
Order	Comes first: the verified self-assessment is a prerequisite for Plus	If your basic certificate is less than 3 months old, you don't repeat the self-assessment questions

Plus builds on the basic certificate rather than replacing it (IASME). Since PPN 014 asks buyers to keep requirements proportionate and not deter small suppliers, a clarification question is fair if a low-risk contract asks for Plus.

What changed in April 2026

Version 3.3 of the NCSC's Requirements for IT Infrastructure took effect on 27 April 2026, and IASME's matching question set is called Danzell. If you bought your assessment before that date, you can follow version 3.2 and the Willow question set instead (NCSC resources, IASME). The NCSC's list of what's new:

- **Cloud services can't be excluded from scope.** If your data or services are hosted in cloud services, such as Microsoft 365 or Google Workspace, they must be in scope, and v3.3 now says so outright.
- **A definition of cloud services:** an on-demand, scalable service on shared infrastructure, reached over the internet through an account, that stores or processes your data.
- **Passwordless sign-in.** The definition now includes FIDO2 authenticators, which v3.3 treats as passkeys and as multi-factor authentication.
- **Backups.** Backing up still isn't a technical requirement, but v3.3 stresses its importance and highly recommends it.
- **Smaller changes.** The scope criteria no longer mention untrusted connections, and the software development section now points to the Software Security Code of Practice.

Two rules didn't change, and they still trip people up: authentication to cloud services must always use multi-factor authentication, and high or critical risk updates must go on within 14 days of release. Both were already in version 3.2.

The five controls in plain English

Every requirement sits under one of five controls. Here is what each means for a 10-person firm, from version 3.3:

- **Firewalls.** Every device in scope sits behind a correctly configured firewall: your office router, plus the software firewall built into each laptop for home and public wifi. Change default admin passwords, block unauthenticated inbound connections, and get any inbound rule you open approved and documented.
- **Secure configuration.** Remove accounts and software you don't use, change default passwords, turn off auto-run, and lock devices with a PIN or password of at least 6 characters, or a fingerprint. Where you can set it, lock the device after no more than 10 wrong attempts, or slow retries to no more than 10 guesses in 5 minutes.
- **Security update management.** Use only licensed, supported software, switch on automatic updates and install high or critical risk fixes, and any update whose severity the vendor doesn't state, within 14 days. When a vendor stops supporting something, remove it, or cut it off from the internet in a separate sub-set.
- **User access control.** Give everyone their own account, remove leavers promptly, use multi-factor authentication wherever it's available and always on cloud services, and keep admin accounts for admin work only, never email or web browsing.
- **Malware protection.** On Windows and Mac computers, run anti-malware software that stays up to date and blocks malicious websites. On any device, you can instead allow only approved, code-signed applications to run.

How to certify, step by step

1. **Decide your scope.** The whole organisation gives the best protection, and you need it for the free insurance. A partial scope must be a separately managed sub-set that you justify to the assessor, and it can't leave out end-user devices or cloud services.
2. **Run the free Readiness Tool.** It walks through the requirements and gives you a tailored action plan. Finishing it doesn't mean you'll pass.
3. **Preview the question set.** IASME lets you download the Danzell questions as a PDF or spreadsheet, so you can draft answers before you pay.
4. **Fix the gaps.** Work through the requirements control by control. The NCSC offers small and medium-sized firms a free 30-minute consultation with an NCSC-assured Cyber Advisor, and its small organisations guide covers the basics.
5. **Buy the assessment.** Apply yourself through IASME, or pay a certification body to help you through it.
6. **Submit within 6 months.** You have 6 months from applying, after which your account may be closed and you'd pay again. A board member signs the declaration.
7. **Get your result.** Most assessors aim to mark within 3 days. If you fail, you get 2 working days to fix simple issues and resubmit at no extra charge.
8. **Check your listing.** IASME's certificate search shows certificates issued in the last 12 months, and buyers can use it to check yours.

9. **For Plus, book the audit.** Get quotes from certification bodies, and aim to certify to Plus within 3 months of your basic certificate so you don't repeat the questions.
10. **Diary the renewal.** Certificates expire after 12 months, and IASME emails a reminder about a month before. You answer every question again each year, so keep a copy of this year's answers.

Costs, timings and the free insurance

IASME sets the basic fee by headcount, using the government's size bands (IASME FAQ). Plus is quoted separately.

Organisation	Staff	Fee
Micro	0 to 9	£320 plus VAT
Small	10 to 49	£440 plus VAT
Medium	50 to 249	£500 plus VAT
Large	250 or more	£600 plus VAT
Cyber Essentials Plus	Any size	Quoted by a certification body

Time depends mostly on how ready you are. IASME says a prepared self-assessment might take about an hour to fill in, most assessors aim to return results within 3 days, and you have 6 months from applying to finish. Plus adds the audit, which you arrange with a certification body.

Free cyber insurance comes with basic certification if you are domiciled in the UK or Crown Dependencies, your turnover is under £20 million, you certify the whole organisation and you opt in (IASME). The limit is £25,000, with a 24-hour incident helpline and a £1,000 excess, and it doesn't cover money stolen by cyber fraud. IASME says that limit will be inadequate for a serious incident or more than one, so ask your broker whether you need more.

How to pass first time

> **Five gaps to fix first**
>
> IASME says any unsupported software in scope means automatic failure, and you need to comply on nearly every question. Each of these breaks a v3.3 requirement: an unsupported operating system or app still on a work device; a cloud account without multi-factor authentication; a high or critical update left longer than 14 days; an admin account used for email or browsing; and a default password left on a router or device.

Before you apply

- [ ] Scope agreed: whole organisation, including laptops, phones and cloud services
- [ ] No unsupported operating systems or apps on any device in scope
- [ ] Multi-factor authentication switched on for every cloud service account
- [ ] Automatic updates on, and high or critical fixes applied within 14 days
- [ ] Separate admin accounts, never used for email or web browsing
- [ ] Default passwords changed on routers, firewalls and every device
- [ ] Danzell questions answered in draft, with a board member ready to sign
- [ ] Renewal reminder set for a month before the certificate's 12 months run out



CHAPTER 6 · ALL SECTORS

Carbon Reduction Plans, modern slavery and social value in tenders

Which tender policy questions are legal duties, which are pass or fail and which are scored, from Carbon Reduction Plans to modern slavery and social value.

By OneTender team · 2 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- A Carbon Reduction Plan is pass or fail, never scored, and PPN 006 requires one only on central government contracts over £5 million a year.
- A modern slavery statement is a legal duty only from £36 million turnover, but any buyer can ask smaller firms about supply chain risk.
- Social value is scored: at least 10% in central government now, and 10% or 20% under PPN 026 from 1 January 2027. Councils set their own weightings.
- Each social value commitment becomes a contract term or KPI, so promise only what you can measure.
- Keep the everyday policies dated, signed, owned and reviewed every year.

Treat these three differently. A Carbon Reduction Plan is a pass or fail condition of participation, and PPN 006 requires one only on central government contracts worth more than £5 million a year. A modern slavery statement is a legal duty only from £36 million turnover, though any buyer can ask about slavery risk in your supply chain. Social value is scored: at least 10% of the total score in central government now (PPN 002), and 10% or 20% under the new model from 1 January 2027 (PPN 026).

Which policy questions are gates and which are scored

Under the Procurement Act 2023, a condition of participation is a gate you must satisfy to win the contract, while award criteria are scored. The same topic can be either, so check how each question is assessed.

Policy or document	Legal duty for you?	Who asks	Gate or scored	What to send
Carbon Reduction Plan	No, but PPN 006 makes it a condition of participation	Central government, over £5m a year; some frameworks lower	Gate: pass or fail, never scored	A link to your published plan and two yes or no answers
Modern slavery statement	Only from £36m turnover	Central government and NHS bodies (PPN 009), others by choice	Gate, where asked	A link to it, or a short explanation if you're under £36m
Modern slavery due diligence questions	No, but slavery offences are a mandatory exclusion ground	Buyers on medium or high-risk procurements	Gate, scored or both	Your policy, supplier checks, training and reporting route
Social value commitments	No	Central government (PPN 002, then PPN 026); councils by their own rules	Scored: at least 10% in central government	Measurable commitments for this contract
Health and safety policy	Yes: in writing if you have 5 or more employees	Any buyer	Gate, or scored when it asks how you'll apply it	The signed, dated policy and any risk assessments asked for
Equality and diversity policy	Not for most SMEs; the equality duty is the buyer's	Any public buyer	Usually a gate	A short signed policy and how you apply it
Data protection	Yes: the ICO data protection fee, unless you're exempt	Any buyer, more so with personal data	Gate	Proof the fee is paid, or why you're exempt
Environmental policy	No, and it can't replace a Carbon Reduction Plan	Any buyer	Gate, or scored as an award criterion	A short signed policy with targets you track

Carbon Reduction Plans (PPN 006)

PPN 006 covers central government departments, their executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies, on contracts worth more than £5 million a year including VAT, averaged over the term: a four-year contract worth £21 million is in scope even if year one is under £5 million. Frameworks and dynamic markets count only where a contract awarded under them is estimated at more than £5 million a year. Your plan is checked as a condition of participation, under technical ability.

It is a check, not a contest. The conditions of participation guidance gives buyers two pass or fail questions and a link to your plan, and treats your emissions figures as information only. The PPN 006 FAQ adds that plans aren't scored or compared: net zero by 2030 and by 2050 both pass, and rising emissions don't fail you. One plan, valid for 12 months, serves every tender, and subcontractors need one only when bidding in their own right.

What the plan must contain

- **A commitment** to net zero by 2050 at the latest for your UK operations.

- **Scope 1 and 2 emissions:** fuel you burn, such as in your vans, and the electricity and heat you buy.
- **Five Scope 3 categories:** upstream transport and distribution (4), waste (5), business travel (6), employee commuting (7) and downstream transport and distribution (9).
- **Tonnes of CO2e** for a baseline year and your latest year, to the GHG Protocol corporate standard with UK government conversion factors.
- **Targets and measures:** what you've done since the baseline, and what you'll apply on the contract.
- **A declaration** approved by the board and signed off by a director, with their name, job title and the date. No wet signature is needed.

The technical standard says to publish the plan on your UK website, linked prominently from the homepage, and update it within 6 months of your financial year-end. Without a website, give a copy to anyone who asks within 30 days. No footprint audit is required. Buyers check the plan was published since the tender notice or in the 12 months before, and that its reporting period ended no more than 18 months before the notice unless you explain why. A firm trading for under 12 months can confirm its commitment and publish a full plan as soon as possible.

The Government Commercial Agency (formerly Crown Commercial Service) has a step-by-step guide, the template and example plans, one of them for a small technology supplier. Its tips: use one 12-month period for every figure, give a reason instead of N/A or 0, and say if suppliers' data is still being collected.

The contract itself may include the optional carbon reduction schedule from PPN 016, with contract-specific emissions reporting and reduction targets. Councils may ask their own carbon questions: answer what they ask, using your plan as evidence. The National Procurement Policy Statement, which contracting authorities must have regard to, asks them to ensure suppliers are actively working to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Modern slavery: the statement, the questions and the exclusion ground

Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 requires a commercial organisation that supplies goods or services and has a total turnover of £36 million or more to prepare a slavery and human trafficking statement each financial year, approved by the board, signed by a director and linked prominently from its homepage. Below £36 million there is no duty, but the Home Office's practical guide encourages smaller businesses to publish one and notes that larger clients may ask for one. Any organisation can add its statement to the modern slavery statement registry.

PPN 009 covers central government departments, their agencies and non-departmental public bodies, and NHS bodies. Its guidance has buyers rate each procurement high, medium or low risk and stay proportionate so SMEs aren't shut out, helped by the optional Anti-slavery Risk Tiering Tool. Its high-risk industries include construction, cleaning, catering, security, logistics and transport, and healthcare and social care, and PPN 009 flags cotton, PPE and polysilicon. On a high-risk procurement you'll list your supply chain members, and failing to can itself lead to exclusion.

Since 17 May 2026, the NHS (Procurement, Slavery and Human Trafficking) Regulations 2025 have required public bodies buying for the health service in England to assess modern slavery risk before they advertise or award a contract, and take proportionate steps, such as contract terms that make you check your subcontractors and keep records tracing your supply chain.

Offences under sections 1, 2, 4 or 30 of the Modern Slavery Act are a mandatory exclusion ground under Schedule 6, paragraph 23 of the Procurement Act. The PPN 009 guidance explains that a conviction in the last five years, yours or a connected person's, means exclusion unless you show you have self-cleaned. Slavery and trafficking orders and labour market misconduct are discretionary grounds.

A proportionate answer for a firm of 10 to 50 people

The guidance says to ask firms under £36 million about section 54 only where proportionate, and a satisfactory explanation can pass, such as a start-up whose training will roll out within six months. A credible small-firm answer covers five things:

- **A short policy**, signed by a director, rejecting forced labour and telling staff what to do if they see signs of it.
- **A supplier code** that your main suppliers, subcontractors and labour agencies accept.
- **A risk check of your top suppliers:** what they supply, where it comes from and whether they rely on agency or subcontracted workers.
- **Training** for whoever recruits, buys or runs sites, with dates recorded, plus checks that agency workers haven't paid recruitment fees or handed over identity documents.
- **A way to report concerns**, including the Modern Slavery Helpline on 08000 121 700.

Social value: how it is scored now and from January 2027

PPN 002 applies to above-threshold central government procurements commenced under the Procurement Act on or after 1 October 2025. It sets a minimum social value weighting of 10% of the total score, and paragraph 11 says every commitment must go into the contract as a term, a KPI or a performance indicator. Jobs created for the contract must be advertised on the government's Find a Job website.

PPN 026, published on 5 August 2026, brings in a new Social Value Model for central government procurements of £1 million or more including VAT whose tender notice is published on or after 1 January 2027. The minimum weighting is 10% of the total score from £1 million to under £5 million, and 20% at £5 million or more. The model has two outcomes:

Outcome	Award criteria
Good jobs	Creating or keeping high-quality jobs; fair working conditions; fair pay above the statutory minimum
Skills	Training and retraining; in-work progression; a talent pipeline, such as apprenticeships and work placements

At £5 million or more, the buyer should set at least one social value KPI on top of the three or more KPIs the Act already requires, and report on it at least every 12 months. Poor performance against it can count when a buyer weighs excluding a supplier from future tenders. Guidance and a list of community programmes for bidders are due in autumn 2026.

These weightings are central government rules; councils, NHS trusts and others may adopt the model but set their own. Under the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, contracting authorities in England, councils included, must consider before buying services above the thresholds how the contract might improve their area's economic, social and environmental wellbeing. PPN 003 explains the duty. The Act sets no weighting, so read each tender's own.

Writing commitments that score and survive the contract

- **Tie each one to this contract:** the area, the roles and who you'll recruit or train, such as care leavers or local people out of work.
- **Give numbers and dates:** two apprenticeship starts in year one says more than a promise to support skills.
- **Say how you'll measure and report it**, because it will become a KPI.
- **Show what you already do,** such as current apprentices or training spend.
- **Cost it:** a commitment you can't afford becomes a performance problem.

> **Promise only what you can measure**
>
> Every social value commitment becomes a contract term or KPI (PPN 002, paragraph 11), and under PPN 026 poor performance against social value KPIs can count against you in future tenders. One commitment you deliver beats five you can't evidence.

The everyday policies buyers ask for

The rest are standard policies. Keep each one short, specific to your firm, signed and dated by a named owner, and reviewed at least once a year.

- **Health and safety.** Every business needs a policy, and HSE says that with five or more employees you must write it down and share it, a duty set by section 2(3) of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974.
- **Equality and diversity.** Public buyers have the public sector equality duty, so say how you recruit, train and handle complaints fairly.
- **Data protection.** If you use personal information, pay the ICO data protection fee unless you're exempt, and cover the contract's personal data in your policy.
- **Safeguarding.** Care and school transport tenders ask about it, and our home-to-school transport guide covers what those buyers check.
- **Business continuity.** How you'd keep delivering through staff absence, a vehicle breakdown, an IT failure or a failed supplier, and who decides.
- **Environmental.** A short policy with targets you track. It can't stand in for a Carbon Reduction Plan: the FAQ says policies and CSR statements aren't accepted instead.

Certifications such as ISO standards, Cyber Essentials and health and safety schemes have their own guide on this site.

Your policy pack

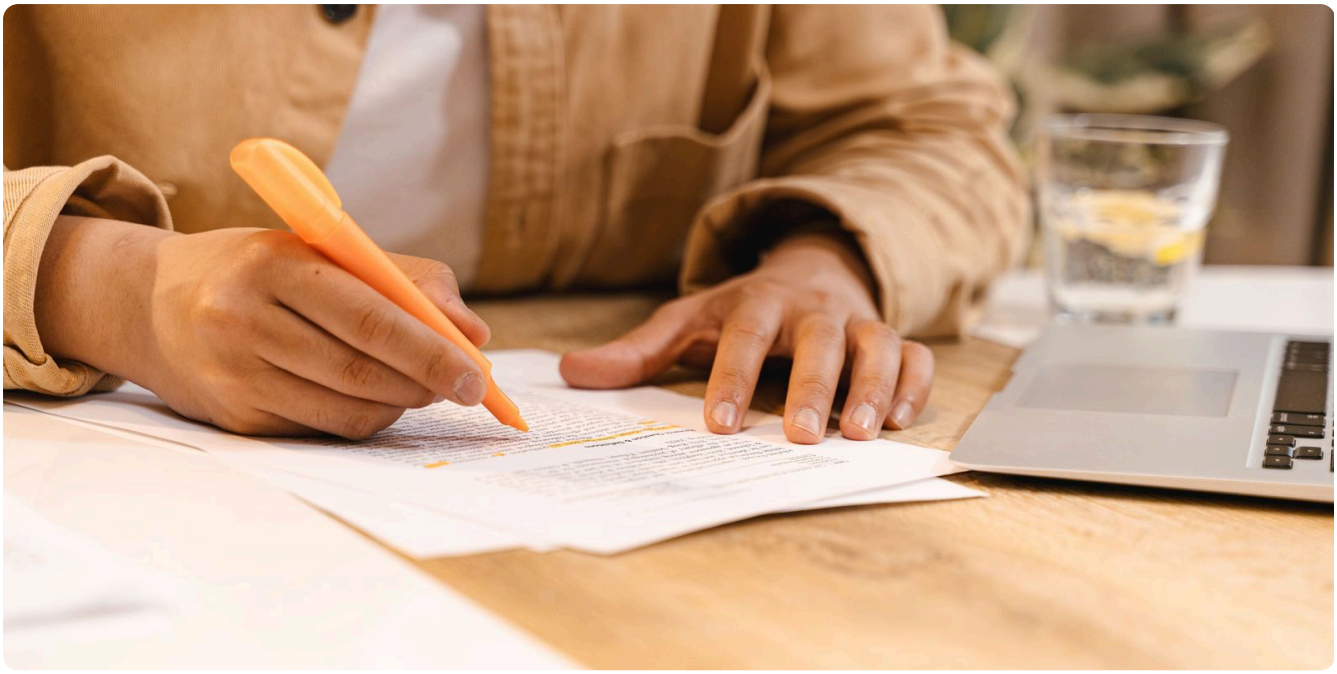
Keep the current version of each in one folder, ready for the day a tender lands.

- [ ] Carbon Reduction Plan on your website, signed by a director and updated within 6 months of year-end
- [ ] Modern slavery policy, supplier code and a risk check of your top suppliers, dated this year
- [ ] Health and safety policy, written down and shared with staff if you have five or more employees
- [ ] Equality and diversity policy, signed and dated, saying how you recruit and handle complaints
- [ ] ICO data protection fee paid, and a data protection policy that covers the contract's data
- [ ] A social value offer with numbers, dates and how you will report each commitment
- [ ] Business continuity plan and environmental policy, each with a named owner and a review date

PART 3

Write and submit

7. How to write tender responses that score: a practical UK guide
8. Can you use AI to write a tender? PPN 017 and how to do it safely
9. How to register on ProContract and submit a tender response (2026)



CHAPTER 7 · ALL SECTORS

How to write tender responses that score: a practical UK guide

How evaluators score tender answers under the Procurement Act 2023, and how to reach the top band: structure, evidence, social value and word limits.

By OneTender team · 2 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- Evaluators can only score against the award criteria, methodology and weightings the buyer published: those documents are your marking scheme.
- Answer every part of the question in order, prove each claim with evidence the buyer could check, and make it specific to this buyer and contract.
- In central government, social value commitments become contract terms or KPIs, so offer only what you can deliver and measure.
- A buyer may disregard a tender that breaks a procedural requirement, such as going over the word count or arriving late.
- Score each answer against the buyer's descriptors before you submit, then have a second reader do the same.

Evaluators can only score your answers against the award criteria and the assessment methodology the buyer published. So answer every part of the question, prove each claim with evidence, make the answer specific to this buyer and this contract, and stay inside the word limit. Under the Procurement Act 2023, a buyer may disregard a tender that breaches a procedural requirement in its documents, and the government's guidance gives a tender over the word count, or a late one, as examples. Here is how scoring works, and how to write to it.

How evaluators score your answers

When a buyer runs a competitive tendering procedure under the Act, it may award the contract to the supplier that submits the most advantageous tender: the one that meets its requirements and best satisfies the award criteria, judged by the assessment methodology and the relative importance of the criteria. Three things the buyer publishes decide your marks:

- **The award criteria.** What is assessed, such as quality, price and social value. Under section 23 they must relate to the subject-matter of the contract and be sufficiently clear, measurable and specific.
- **The assessment methodology.** How tenders are assessed against each criterion, including whether failing one disqualifies a tender. The government's guidance on assessing competitive tenders says this includes any scoring matrices evaluators will use (paragraph 11).
- **The relative importance of the criteria.** Weightings, a ranking or another description (paragraph 13). This tells you where the marks are.

The buyer must publish the criteria and the methodology, or a summary, in the tender notice, with the detail in the tender documents (paragraph 12), and it must base its assessment on them (paragraph 19). Conditions of participation, such as insurance or financial standing, are assessed separately: once you pass them, your tender is judged on the award criteria alone (paragraphs 16 and 17).

Neither the Act nor its guidance sets a standard scoring scale. The government's bid evaluation guidance note asks buyers to tailor scoring bands to each procurement, including whether fully meeting the requirement earns the top band or a higher band rewards exceeding it. Read this buyer's band descriptors closely: what separates the top band from the one below it is what your answer has to show.

In a competitive flexible procedure, the buyer may refine the award criteria before it invites final tenders, if the tender notice or documents provide for it (section 24). Read them again at every round.

Decode the question before you write

Before anyone writes, take the question apart: split it into parts, map each part to the criterion and the descriptors, list your evidence and share out the word limit. Here is an example worth 20% of the marks, with a 750-word limit: 'Describe how you will mobilise the service, recruit and train staff, and manage risks in the first 12 weeks.'

Question part	What the evaluator looks for	Your evidence
Mobilise the service	A dated plan from award to start, with named roles	Your mobilisation plan from a similar contract, and who will lead it
Recruit and train staff	Numbers, timescales and training before the start	Your recruitment pipeline, training matrix and induction
Manage risks	The main risks, each with a mitigation and an owner	A risk register extract, and a similar risk you handled
In the first 12 weeks	Milestones inside that window, not a generic timeline	A milestone table, if the buyer allows tables

Check each line against the buyer's own descriptors, then share out the words in proportion to the marks: the heaviest part gets the most. Use the buyer's words as signposts, so if the question says 'mobilise', say 'mobilise' at the start of that part.

A structure that works

A consistent structure makes each part easy to find and score. This order works for most quality questions:

1. **Answer first.** One or two sentences that answer the question and state your main commitment.
2. **Method.** Who does what, when and how: named roles, steps, timescales and tools.
3. **Evidence.** Proof the method works: results from a similar contract, KPIs you report today, accreditations and client references.
4. **This buyer's context.** Its service users, sites, volumes and priorities, from the specification.
5. **Risks and how you manage them.** The two or three that matter most, each with a mitigation and an owner.
6. **Added value.** Anything extra you commit to that is relevant to the contract and that you can measure.
7. **A closing line that mirrors the criteria.** One sentence that ties the answer back to the award criterion's own words.

> **Swap claims for specifics**
>
> A claim any bidder could make: 'We have extensive experience and a highly trained team.' A specific version, as a template: 'Our [role] will lead a [number]-week mobilisation, using the plan from our [service] contract with [client] in [year], where [number] staff were trained before the start date.' Use it only when every detail is true and you can prove it.

Evidence that convinces

Evaluators can only credit what you show them, so back every claim with evidence the buyer could check:

- **A case study from a similar contract.** The situation, what you did and measurable results you can prove, such as response times, satisfaction scores or staff retention. Name the client only with their permission.
- **Named roles and CVs.** Who will run the contract and what qualifies them, where the question allows it.
- **KPIs you already report.** Figures from current contracts, with the period they cover.
- **Accreditations.** Relevant, current certificates, with numbers or expiry dates if the buyer asks.
- **Client references.** People at comparable organisations who have agreed to speak for you.

Cut anything generic. 'We are committed to quality' is true of every bidder, so it earns nothing: replace it with a fact about you. And only cite evidence you can produce if asked, because a buyer can test doubtful claims with clarification questions or by asking for supporting documents.

Social value answers: specific, measurable and deliverable

Social value is often scored as a criterion of its own. PPN 002 requires central government departments, their executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies to give it, where relevant to the contract, a minimum weighting of 10% of the total score in above-threshold procurements under the Act commenced from 1 October 2025. Other public bodies may choose to follow it.

Treat each social value offer as a promise. PPN 002 says every commitment a supplier makes during the procurement must be reflected in the contract, as contract terms, key performance indicators or performance indicators (paragraph 11), and local jobs created for the contract must be advertised through the government's Find a Job service (paragraph 12).

Vague	Specific, measurable and deliverable
We will support the local community.	We will offer [number] work placements for [group] in [area] in year 1, reported quarterly.
We will create local jobs.	We will fill [number] of the [number] roles on this contract from [area], advertised through Find a Job, by [date].
We invest in our people.	Every new starter on this contract completes [qualification] within [number] months.

The model changes in 2027. PPN 026 brings in a new Social Value Model for central government procurements commenced from 1 January 2027, for contracts worth £1 million or more including VAT. Its two outcomes are Good jobs and Skills, and the minimum weighting is 10% for contracts from £1 million to under £5 million and 20% from £5 million. It also says poor performance against social value KPIs can be taken into account when considering grounds to exclude a supplier from future tenders (paragraph 18).

Format, limits and compliance

- **Word and page limits.** Count the way the buyer counts. If the documents don't say whether headings or tables count, ask.
- **Attachments.** Only what the question allows, in the format and with the file names the documents ask for.
- **Templates and order.** Use the buyer's response template and answer in the order the question asks.

Under section 19(3)(d), a buyer may disregard a tender that breaches a procedural requirement set out in the tender notice or documents. The guidance on assessing competitive tenders gives a late tender and one over the prescribed word count as examples (paragraph 33(d)), and the guidance on competitive tendering procedures asks buyers to highlight which requirements could lead to a tender being disregarded (paragraph 27(d)). Find that list in the instructions and follow it.

If your price is unusually low, be ready to explain it. Before disregarding a tender as abnormally low, a buyer must tell you and give you a reasonable opportunity to show you can perform the contract for that price. If you satisfy it, it can't disregard the tender on that ground (section 19(3)(c), (4) and (5)).

Ask clarification questions early, and read every answer the buyer publishes: an answer to another bidder's question can change what a full answer needs.

> **Submit a day early**
>
> Upload the final version the day before the deadline. A late tender may be disregarded under section 19(3)(d), and that is the buyer's call.

Review before you submit

Score every answer yourself against the buyer's descriptors, as an evaluator would: which mark does it earn now, and what is missing for the next one up? Then have a second reader who didn't write it do the same. Where your marks differ, the answer needs to be clearer.

Self-score each answer

- [ ] Every part of the question answered, in the order the question asks
- [ ] Each claim backed by evidence the buyer could check
- [ ] Specific to this buyer, its service users and this contract
- [ ] Self-scored against the top descriptor, with the gaps fixed
- [ ] Social value offers are measurable and you can deliver them
- [ ] Within the word or page limit, counted the way the buyer counts
- [ ] Attachments, file names and formats as the tender documents ask
- [ ] A second reader has scored it and agreed the final version

Learn from every result. The Act requires buyers to give bidders an assessment of their final tenders (the government's short guide for suppliers). For an above-threshold contract, that is the assessment summary each supplier with an assessed tender gets before the contract award notice is published (guidance on assessing competitive tenders, paragraph 35). Compare its scores with yours.

Using AI to draft? You still own every claim

Supplier use of AI is not prohibited: PPN 017 says so and compares it with using a bid writer. It also warns that content from large language models may include inaccurate or misleading statements. What you submit is your responsibility: providing incomplete, inaccurate or misleading information is listed as a way a supplier can act improperly in a procurement (Schedule 7, paragraph 13), and acting improperly in a way that gives you an unfair advantage is a discretionary exclusion ground. Draft from your own evidence, check every fact and have a named person approve each answer. Our guide to using AI for tender responses covers PPN 017 in detail.



CHAPTER 8 · ALL SECTORS

Can you use AI to write a tender? PPN 017 and how to do it safely

PPN 017 says supplier use of AI is not prohibited. What buyers can ask, why accuracy is the real risk, and a disclosure answer you can adapt.

By OneTender team · 1 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- PPN 017 says suppliers' use of AI 'is not prohibited'. It covers central government departments, their executive agencies and NDPBs, and other buyers may copy it.
- Its three example disclosure questions are optional, marked 'For Information Only (Not Scored)', and buyers should not discriminate against suppliers in how they use them or read the answers.
- The real risk is accuracy. You are responsible for every claim, and the Procurement Act lists providing inaccurate or misleading information as one way a supplier can act improperly.
- Draft only from your own evidence, check every fact, have a named person approve each answer, and keep buyer documents out of tools that train on what you type.

Yes, you can. The UK government's guidance on AI in procurement, PPN 017, says suppliers' use of AI 'is not prohibited during the commercial process'. Buyers may ask you to disclose it, using example questions that are for information only and not scored. What can hurt you is not the AI itself but what it gets wrong: an invented case study, the wrong accreditation, a figure nobody checked. The safe approach is simple. Draft from your own evidence, check every claim, have a person sign it off, and keep a disclosure answer ready.

What PPN 017 is and who it covers

PPN 017: Improving transparency of AI use in procurement is a Cabinet Office procurement policy note published on 17 February 2025. It updates the earlier AI note, PPN 02/24, to the terms of the Procurement Act 2023 and says the update 'does not constitute a change in policy'. The Act applies to procurements commenced on or after 24 February 2025. For procurements commenced before that date, PPN 017 points buyers to PPN 02/24. Both are listed in the government's procurement policy notes collection.

- **In scope:** central government departments, their executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies (paragraph 2).
- **Not bound, but may follow it:** councils, NHS trusts and other public buyers. Paragraph 3 says other contracting authorities 'may wish to apply the approach set out in this PPN'.
- **Scotland:** devolved Scottish authorities are generally excluded from the Procurement Act and follow Scotland's own procurement rules, so for their tenders go by what each tender's documents ask.

PPN 017's disclosure questions are optional, even for central government buyers. In practice you are most likely to see them in central government tenders, and in any other tender where the buyer has chosen to copy them. Check the instructions to tenderers for an AI section before you start drafting.

What it says about suppliers using AI

Paragraph 9 is the one to know. It accepts there are 'potential benefits to suppliers using AI to develop their bids, enabling them to bid for a greater number of public contracts'. It asks buyers to understand the risks 'as would be the case if a bid writer has been used by the supplier'. In other words, PPN 017 treats AI much like an outside bid writer: a risk for the buyer to understand, not misconduct. The paragraph suggests buyers may:

- ask suppliers to disclose their use of AI in the tender
- put proportionate controls in place so suppliers don't use confidential authority information as training data for AI systems
- carry out extra, proportionate due diligence, such as site visits, clarification questions or supplier presentations, to check you can deliver what you wrote

That last point matters most. If a tool wrote something your team couldn't stand behind in a clarification meeting, it shouldn't be in the bid.

The three disclosure questions buyers may ask

Annex B gives three example questions, each headed 'For Information Only (Not Scored)'. It says they 'should not be scored or taken into account when assessing a tender', and that it is important that buyers 'do not discriminate against particular suppliers in the use of these questions or in the interpretation of supplier responses'.

Question	Wording in Annex B	What you give
1	'Have you used AI or machine learning tools, including large language models, to assist in any part of your tender submission?'	Yes or No, details, and whether AI-assisted answers 'have been checked and verified for accuracy'
2	'Please detail any instances where AI or machine learning tools, including large language models have been used to generate written content, or support your tender submission.'	Details, plus the same accuracy confirmation
3	'Are AI or machine learning technologies used as part of the products/services you intend to provide to [Insert Contracting Authority Name]?'	Yes or No, and if Yes, how AI is built into the service

One caveat. Annex B also says buyers 'can however continue to ask and evaluate any further relevant questions about use of AI' as part of their award process, where those questions are specific to their requirements and compliant with procurement law. Whether and how such a question is scored should be set out in the tender notice or tender documents. So a question about AI in your service delivery could carry marks. Read the evaluation criteria, not just the disclosure form.

The real risk is accuracy, not disclosure

Paragraph 15 is blunt: content created with large language models 'may include inaccurate or misleading statements', where facts or references look plausible but are false. Buyers are told to take care in 'assessing returns that have used LLMs'. The responsibility for those statements sits with you, whoever or whatever typed them.

- **The Act.** Schedule 7, paragraph 13 of the Procurement Act 2023 lists 'providing information that is incomplete, inaccurate or misleading' as one way a supplier might act improperly in a procurement. If a buyer considers that a supplier acted improperly and so put itself at an unfair advantage in the award of a public contract, that is a discretionary exclusion ground.
- **Portal terms.** In ProContract's Supplier User Agreement, the supplier warrants that 'all information it provides will be accurate and complete and shall accurately represent the Supplier's capabilities'.
- **Buyer documents.** The same agreement says material issued through the system 'shall be used only for this procurement activity'. Pasting a tender pack into a tool that keeps or trains on your inputs sits badly with that, and with PPN 017's point about training data.

An answer that scores well but describes a service you don't run, or a case study you can't evidence, becomes a problem at clarification, at award and in delivery.

A safe way to use AI on a tender

1. **Build your evidence library first.** Current policies, accreditations, insurance certificates, CVs or role profiles, case studies with outcomes you can prove, and your best past answers. The AI should write

from these, not from general knowledge.

2. **Draft from your documents, not the model's imagination.** Give the tool the question, the evaluation criteria, the word limit and the relevant evidence. Tell it to use only that material and to flag gaps rather than fill them.
3. **Keep a source for every claim.** Each figure, accreditation, named client and timescale should trace back to a document you hold. If it can't, cut it or replace it with something you can show.
4. **Have a named person approve every answer.** Someone who knows the service reads it against the question and the scoring criteria, checks the facts, and edits out anything generic or overstated.
5. **Protect the buyer's documents.** Some AI tools can use what you type to improve their models, depending on the plan and settings. Check before any tender material goes in, use a tool that doesn't train on your inputs, and follow any AI rules in the tender documents.
6. **Log how AI was used.** A line per bid is enough: which tool, which answers it helped draft, and who reviewed them. That record writes your disclosure answer for you.

Before you submit

- [ ] Every answer responds to the question asked and the published evaluation criteria
- [ ] Every number, date, accreditation and client name checked against a source document
- [ ] No case study, policy or certificate mentioned that you can't produce on request
- [ ] Word and page limits met, in the format the buyer asked for
- [ ] Buyer documents used only for this tender, and kept out of tools that train on inputs
- [ ] AI disclosure question answered, if the tender includes one
- [ ] A named person has approved the final version

A disclosure answer you can adapt

Answer honestly and briefly. A clear 'yes, and this is how we checked it' reads better than a vague one. Adapt the wording below and keep only the sentences that are true for your bid.

> **Questions 1 and 2: AI use in this tender**
>
> Yes. We used [tool name] to help produce first drafts of some of our responses to the scored questions. Drafts were written from our own policies, case studies and previous bids. Every response was reviewed, edited and approved by [name, role], who checked all facts, figures and references against our records before submission. We did not use [authority name]'s tender documents to train any AI system. Checked and verified for accuracy: Yes.

> **Question 3: AI in the service you will deliver**
>
> If you don't: 'No. We do not use AI or machine learning in delivering this service.' If you do: 'Yes. We use [tool or feature] for [task, for example route planning or call transcription].' Then say what data it uses, where that data is held and who checks its outputs.



CHAPTER 9 · ALL SECTORS

How to register on ProContract and submit a tender response (2026)

A step-by-step ProContract guide for UK suppliers: free registration, registering interest, building your response and submitting before the deadline.

By OneTender team · 1 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- ProContract registration is free, and Proactis says one company profile reaches opportunities from over 400 buyer organisations.
- Your categories and regions of supply decide which opportunities you get emailed about, so choose them with care.
- Register interest, turn every traffic light green, then click Submit response twice before the deadline.
- You can change a submitted response until the deadline, but you must submit it again.
- For above-threshold Procurement Act tenders, also register on Find a Tender and share your core supplier information before the tendering period ends.

To bid on ProContract, register your organisation for free, wait for the ProContract team to review it, then find the opportunity and click **Register interest in this opportunity**. Build your response section by section until every traffic light is green, and click **Submit response** twice before the deadline. This guide walks through each step with the on-screen labels that ProContract's help and council supplier guides use, plus the small print that catches occasional users out.

> **Where these button labels come from**
>
> ProContract's own supplier help pages date from 2015, when Due North wrote them. The most recent walkthrough we found is Lincolnshire County Council's February 2022 supplier guide, written for its transport DPS. The labels below come from those and from a 2017 LGSS guide. If one has been renamed since, look for the nearest match.

What ProContract is

ProContract is an e-tendering portal from Proactis. Buyers use it to publish tender documents, answer clarification questions and receive responses. Its web address still carries the name of Due North, the company that originally developed it. ProContract's registration page says a registered supplier's company profile is available for opportunities managed by over 30,000 buyers from over 400 private, public and third sector organisations, so one account works across the buyers that use it.

There is no charge to register or respond. The same page says registration is free, and the Supplier User Agreement grants access 'free of charge' for responding to procurements.

Under the Procurement Act 2023, in force since 24 February 2025, buyers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland publish their tender notices on Find a Tender, the central digital platform. Devolved Scottish buyers follow Scottish rules, and below-threshold notices in Scotland go on Public Contracts Scotland instead. If a buyer runs the tender itself on ProContract, the notice or the buyer's email points you there.

Step 1: register your organisation

1. Go to the ProContract registration page and enter your organisation name and email address. Use an inbox someone checks every day, because registration emails and opportunity alerts go there.
2. Add your company details. Lincolnshire County Council's guide warns that the Company Registration and VAT numbers are marked optional, but you must fill them in or tick **Not applicable**.
3. Pick your categories. Type a few keywords, click **Find suggestions**, then expand the + boxes and tick every sub-category that fits.
4. Pick your regions of supply. These are the areas you can deliver to, not where your office is.
5. Submit. The registration page says the ProContract team reviews each registration and emails you the next steps.

Categories and regions decide which opportunities you get emailed about. Too narrow and you miss work, too broad and the alerts get ignored. If the system says your company is already registered, a colleague already holds the account, so ask the user with administration rights to set you up.

Give each colleague their own login

The Supplier User Agreement says a username and password are 'strictly personal to the Supplier User and non-transferable', so a shared office login goes against the terms. The first person from your company to register becomes its administrator and manages other users, so ask them to add each person. Workgroups let colleagues see the projects you are working on, and you can give each workgroup its own categories and regions, which helps if different offices supply different things.

Step 2: find the opportunity

- **By reference:** type the project reference from the notice or email (Lincolnshire's example is DN595556) into the search bar at the top right and click **Go**.
- **By title:** search for the tender title if the reference doesn't find it.
- **Coming back later:** open **My Activities** and check the **Last viewed activities** tab. If the project isn't there, open **Active activities**, tick the buyer in the **Narrow your results** pane and click **Update**.

Step 3: register interest

Open the project and click **Register interest in this opportunity**. ProContract's help says the page then confirms your expression of interest. In Lincolnshire's guide, the next page is a long one with a **Click here** link in the middle, which leads to the **Activity Summary** page. Your response and the messages for this tender both start there. When you come back later, open the project and click **Start** (or **Open**, after the first visit) on the events page to reach it again.

Step 4: build your response

1. Click **Start my response**. When you come back later, the same button reads **View draft response**.
2. Watch the traffic lights. Each item starts red, and every light must turn green before you can submit, apart from the last one, **Submit response**.
3. Click **Edit** on the question sets, then **Answer question** beside each one. Many questions have **Question Help** beside them, sometimes with links to more guidance, so read it before you answer.
4. Move on with **Save and next**, or use **Save and close** to stop for the day. Your answers are kept, so a long questionnaire can take several sittings.
5. Not ready to answer? Click **Flag question for review** and a blue star marks it in the list.
6. Add attachments where asked. The 2017 LGSS supplier guide hosted by Cambridge City Council says the response wizard page shows any guidance or attachment requirements, and ProContract's help notes that a mandatory attachment can stop you submitting until it is added.

Mandatory questions work the same way: the LGSS guide says you will not be able to submit until they are completed. Write to the scoring, not the question title. For contracts above the thresholds, the Act lets the buyer award the contract to the most advantageous tender, the one that best meets the award criteria it published, so the tender documents tell you where the marks are.

Step 5: submit, then change it if you need to

When every section is green, click **Submit response**. A confirmation message appears, and you click **Submit response** again. Don't close the page after the first click. If the button is greyed out, open the **Submission checklist**. ProContract's help says anything with a red box needs revisiting.

You can still change a submitted response before the deadline. ProContract's help calls the button **Create new version**, and Lincolnshire's 2022 guide calls it **Change Response**. Make your edits, then submit again, twice as before. The help says the buyer sees only the version number, not your earlier submissions, as long as they were returned on time. The Supplier User Agreement says the last response submitted before the deadline is the one the buyer considers.

> **Submit early, and resubmit after every change**
>
> A saved draft is not a submitted tender. Submit a complete version well before the deadline. If you reopen it to make changes, Lincolnshire's guide reminds suppliers not to forget to click **Submit response** again when they have finished.

Questions to the buyer

ProContract's help says all questions should be raised through the portal's messaging. In Lincolnshire's guide, the messages box sits on the Activity Summary page. Click **View**, then **Create new message**, and the **To** box fills in with **Project Team**, the buyer's procurement team. The help says the buyer can reply to you privately or to all suppliers, and the system never shows which supplier asked.

One trap: Lincolnshire's guide notes that the message list hides read messages and shows only the last 7 days by default. Change the filter and click **Update** before you assume nothing new has arrived, and check again just before you submit.

The small print worth knowing

Rule in the Supplier User Agreement	What to do
Your username and password are 'strictly personal' and 'non-transferable'.	Give each colleague their own user. No shared office login.
Proactis can deactivate a username after 60 days with no access.	If you bid a few times a year, log in before a tender lands, not on deadline day.
Responses stay valid for 90 days from the deadline, unless the tender sets another period.	Make sure your prices and capacity hold for that long.
Material issued through the system stays the buyer's property and is used only for that procurement.	Don't reuse a buyer's documents for another bid or share them outside the bid team.

Procurement Act checks

For an above-threshold tender run as an open or competitive flexible procedure under the Procurement Act, the buyer must get your confirmation, before the tendering period ends, that you have registered on the central digital platform, submitted your core supplier information and shared it through the platform (regulation 6). Since 1 April 2026, smaller contracts need registration too: before publishing the contract details notice for a below-threshold contract of £12,000 or more (most central government buyers) or £30,000 or more (other buyers), the buyer must get your registration confirmation and unique identifier (section 87, regulation 36A).

That is a separate registration on Find a Tender with a GOV.UK One Login, and the government's short guide for suppliers says it is free. Do it before your first Act tender, not on deadline day.

For an above-threshold contract awarded after a competitive tendering procedure, each supplier whose tender was assessed gets an assessment summary before the contract award notice is published (section 50). The buyer then cannot enter into the contract until a standstill of 8 working days, beginning with the day that notice is published, has ended (section 51). Light touch contracts, contracts awarded under a

framework or by reference to a dynamic market, and some direct awards have no mandatory standstill, though the buyer can set a voluntary one of at least 8 working days. Below-threshold contracts have neither an assessment summary nor a standstill under these sections.

Where the time goes

None of these steps is hard. The cost is doing them again for every tender, often a few times a year, after you have forgotten where things are. The repeat work looks like this:

- [ ] Read the alerts and open each notice
- [ ] Read the documents and decide bid or no-bid
- [ ] Register interest and find the Activity Summary
- [ ] Answer each question from your policies, case studies and past bids
- [ ] Find and upload the right certificates and documents
- [ ] Check messages for clarifications
- [ ] Submit, confirm, and resubmit after any change

PART 4

After you submit

10. After the award: assessment summaries, standstill and feedback



CHAPTER 10 · ALL SECTORS

After the award: assessment summaries, standstill and feedback

After a Procurement Act tender result: the assessment summary, the 8 working day standstill, how to query or challenge it, and how to score higher next time.

By OneTender team · 2 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- After an above-threshold competitive tendering procedure, every supplier with an assessed tender gets an assessment summary before the contract award notice.
- Unless the contract is light touch, that notice starts a standstill of at least 8 working days, and the buyer can't enter into the contract until it ends.
- A claim issued and notified during standstill suspends the contract automatically. Most claims must start within 30 days of when you knew, or ought to have known, the grounds.
- Framework call-offs and below-threshold contracts get neither an assessment summary nor a mandatory standstill.
- Win or lose, log every score and reason by question, and rewrite the answers that lost marks.

For an above-threshold contract awarded through a competitive tendering procedure, every supplier whose tender was assessed gets an assessment summary before the buyer publishes its contract award notice (section 50). Unless the contract is light touch, publishing that notice starts a standstill of at least 8 working days (section 51). If you issue a claim and notify the buyer during standstill, the buyer is automatically stopped from entering into the contract (section 101). Claims generally must start within 30 days of when you knew, or ought to have known, the grounds (section 106).

What happens between the decision and the contract

This is the sequence after an above-threshold competitive tendering procedure. Standstill counts working days; the other deadlines count calendar days.

Step	When	What it means for you
Assessment summaries	After the award decision, sent to every supplier with an assessed tender at the same time	Your scores and the reasons, plus the winning tender's scores if you lost
Contract award notice	Published on Find a Tender, often the same day the summaries go out	Names the supplier the buyer intends to contract with and the last day of standstill
Standstill	At least 8 working days, beginning with the day the notice is published	Your window to raise concerns, or to issue a claim that suspends the contract
Contract entered into	From working day 9 at the earliest, later if the standstill is longer or a claim suspends it	The buyer doesn't have to sign straight away
Contract details notice	Within 30 days of entering into the contract (120 days for light touch contracts)	Public confirmation that the contract exists
Copy of the contract	Within 90 days for contracts over £5 million (180 days for light touch contracts)	The contract itself, which may be redacted

Weekends and bank holidays in any part of the UK don't count as working days, and the day the notice is published is day one, however late it goes up. The standstill guidance works through a Christmas example: a notice published on Wednesday 19 December lets the buyer enter into the contract on Friday 4 January. The 30 and 90 day periods after signing are calendar days.

What an assessment summary must tell you

Summaries go to every supplier with an assessed tender at the same time and before the contract award notice, so you have the whole standstill to read yours. They can arrive by email or through the buyer's e-tendering system.

Regulation 31 of the Procurement Regulations 2024 sets out what each summary must contain, and the Assessment Summaries guidance explains it:

- **The award criteria**, in full or summarised with each criterion's title, weighting, assessment method and available scores, plus where to find the full version.
- **Your score for every criterion and sub-criterion**, with any sub-totals and your total.
- **Why you got each score, by reference to your own tender.** The guidance says a buyer can't just repeat the criterion and say the tender failed to demonstrate it, and calls explaining why a higher score wasn't reached best practice.
- **If you lost:** the winning tender's scores and explanations, and any further reason you weren't chosen, such as missing a minimum score.

There is no side-by-side comparison, but reading your scores next to the winner's shows the gap, and the guidance says buyers should name the winner where that isn't a significant burden. Buyers may withhold sensitive commercial details of the winning tender under section 94 only where there is an overriding public interest in doing so, and must tell you they have. The guidance still expects each of the winner's scores to be explained, and blanket confidentiality claims to be discouraged (paragraphs 28, 32 and 33).

Nothing in the Act requires a debrief meeting. The guidance says buyers may add general feedback to help with future tenders, which may be particularly useful for SMEs, though it isn't a legal requirement (paragraph 36). If your tender was knocked out before the final assessment stage, you get no summary, but buyers should tell you in writing as soon as reasonably possible (paragraph 11).

When there is no assessment summary or standstill

Not every award follows the full sequence. Annex A of the standstill guidance lists every case, and these are the common ones:

Type of award	Assessment summary?	Mandatory standstill?
Competitive tendering procedure above the threshold, including setting up a framework	Yes	Yes
Light touch contract after a competitive procedure	Yes	No
Call-off under a framework, with or without a mini-competition	No	No
Contract awarded under a dynamic market	Yes	No
Joining a dynamic market	No, as it isn't a contract	No
Direct award for extreme and unavoidable urgency	No	No
Most other direct awards	No	Yes
Below-threshold contract	No	No

Without a mandatory standstill, the buyer can still set a voluntary one of at least 8 working days, and a claim issued and notified during it still suspends the contract. For call-offs, the assessment summaries guidance says giving summaries anyway is best practice (paragraph 41).

Below the threshold, the remedies in Part 9 of the Act don't apply: the Remedies guidance says the below-threshold duties may instead be subject to judicial review (paragraph 15). Our guide to below-threshold works tenders covers how those procurements run.

Two routes sit outside these rules. Devolved Scottish authorities generally follow Scotland's own procurement law, not the Act. Health care services bought in England under the Provider Selection Regime follow its own rules: where an award has a standstill, you can make written representations to the buyer during it, as our Provider Selection Regime guide explains.

Reading your scores like an evaluator

Each reason should point to something in your tender, so the summary doubles as a marking guide. Start with the biggest gaps on the heaviest weightings.

What the summary says	What it usually means	What to change next time
Lacked evidence	Claims without proof	Add measurable outcomes, named roles and a case study from a similar contract
Did not address all parts of the question	A requirement or sub-question was missed	Answer in the question's own order, with a heading for each part
Generic, or not specific to this contract	It could suit any buyer	Use the buyer's sites, volumes, service users and risks
Limited detail on how	You said what, not how, who or when	Give the method, the responsible role and the timescale
Met the requirements	Compliant, but nothing more	Show what goes beyond the specification, and why it matters
Commitments not measurable	No numbers, dates or reporting	Give numbers, dates and how you'll report each one

If a reason doesn't match the tender's scoring guide, ask the buyer in writing which part of your tender the evaluator relied on.

Asking questions and challenging

Start with a written question to the buyer, sent quickly: name the criterion, quote the reason given and point to the part of your tender you think was missed. The Remedies guidance encourages buyers to engage with suppliers who raise concerns and to act in time, extending the standstill where needed rather than forcing a claim (paragraph 59). An extended standstill means a re-published contract award notice (paragraph 18).

The formal route is a claim for breach of statutory duty. These points matter most:

- **Automatic suspension:** start proceedings and notify the buyer during standstill, and it can't enter into the contract. After standstill, you would need to ask the court for an injunction.
- **30 days:** most claims must start within 30 calendar days, beginning with the day you first knew, or ought to have known, the grounds. The guidance says that is usually when you get information that lets you identify the breach (paragraph 47).
- **Extensions:** the court can extend the 30 days only for a good reason, and never beyond 3 months from that same day (paragraph 49).
- **Where:** the guidance notes that the Technology and Construction Court deals with public procurement claims (paragraph 50).
- **What a court can do:** before the contract is signed, set aside the decision, order a re-assessment or award damages; after it, award damages, and set the contract aside only in limited conditions (paragraphs 27 to 35).

For a review rather than a court case, the Public Procurement Review Service (PPRS) takes supplier concerns about a specific procurement through an online form. The issue must have happened within the last 2 years, it can be at any stage, and its recommendations are non-binding. A referral doesn't trigger the automatic suspension: only court proceedings issued and notified during standstill do.

> **Two clocks, two kinds of day**
> Standstill counts working days. The 30-day limit for most claims counts calendar days from when you knew, or ought to have known, the grounds. Write both dates down the day the result arrives.

If you won the contract

- **Contract details notice:** the buyer publishes it within 30 days of entering into the contract (120 for light touch contracts), and for contracts over £5 million publishes a copy of the contract within 90 days (section 53).
- **KPIs:** before entering into a contract over £5 million, the buyer must set at least three key performance indicators and publish them (section 52). It then assesses your performance against them at least once every 12 months and publishes the result (section 71). Frameworks and light touch contracts are exempt.
- **Breach and poor performance:** if a breach leads to termination, damages or a settlement, or you fail to improve after a proper opportunity, the buyer must publish that within 30 days (except on light touch contracts), and such a notice is a discretionary exclusion ground in future tenders (Schedule 7, paragraph 12).
- **Payment:** public contracts carry an implied term that valid, undisputed invoices are paid within 30 days, and the buyer must tell you without undue delay if it disputes one or thinks it invalid (section 68). A valid invoice needs at least your name, a description of what you supplied, the sum and a unique number.
- **Mobilisation:** plan staffing, insurance and KPI reporting during standstill, but avoid costs you can't recover if a claim suspends the contract.

Turn feedback into your next win

Win or lose, the summary is free marking. Use it the same week:

1. **Keep a score log by question:** the criterion, its weighting, your score, the winner's score and the reason. After a few tenders it shows where you keep losing marks.
2. **Update your answer library:** rewrite the answers that lost marks while the reasons are fresh, and keep the high scorers as starting points.
3. **Request a call:** ask for general feedback on your two or three weakest answers. It isn't required, but buyers may give it.
4. **Reuse what scored:** note the evidence and commitments the evaluators credited, and use them again where they fit.

When the result arrives

- [ ] Note the standstill end date and the 30-day claim deadline on the day the result arrives
- [ ] Check the summary gives a score and a reason for every criterion and sub-criterion
- [ ] Compare your scores with the winner's, criterion by criterion, to find the biggest gaps
- [ ] Send any question or concern to the buyer in writing before the standstill ends
- [ ] Log every score and reason in your score log, question by question
- [ ] Ask the buyer for a short feedback call on your two or three weakest answers
- [ ] Rewrite the answers that lost marks and file them in your answer library
- [ ] If you won, diary the KPIs, reporting dates and invoice requirements in the contract

PART 5

Sector notes

11. Small works under £207,720: why councils can't make you pass a PQQ
12. Provider Selection Regime vs Procurement Act: care tenders explained
13. Home-to-school transport tenders: how to win council routes in 2026



CHAPTER 11 · CONSTRUCTION

Small works under £207,720: why councils can't make you pass a PQQ

Section 85 of the Procurement Act stops buyers shortlisting on suitability for most small works. Where the £207,720 line sits and when a PQQ still applies.

By OneTender team · 1 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- Below the threshold, a buyer that invites tenders can't knock you out on suitability before you tender (section 85). It can still check suitability when it assesses tenders.
- For works, the ban stops at £207,720 for councils and most other buyers, or £135,018 for central government, including VAT. Framework call-offs are exempt.
- Before inviting tenders, buyers must consider the barriers SMEs face (section 86). Use it in clarification questions.
- Below-threshold notices under the Act go on Find a Tender, not Contracts Finder (Scotland has its own rules). Valid, undisputed invoices must be paid within 30 days.

If a council invites tenders for a works contract worth less than **£207,720 including VAT**, the Procurement Act 2023 doesn't let it shortlist bidders on suitability first. No separate pass or fail questionnaire, the thing most of us still call a PQQ, before you're allowed to price. For central government buyers the line is £135,018. That's section 85 of the Act. The buyer can still check your suitability when it assesses tenders, and there are carve-outs: larger works, call-offs from frameworks, schools and some buyers outside England. Here's where the lines sit and what to do about them.

The value bands, all including VAT

The Act has applied to new procurements since 24 February 2025. These figures apply to procurements started on or after 1 January 2026, as PPN 023 confirms, and the thresholds guidance lists them for the period to 31 December 2027. They include VAT, which catches people out: a £175,000 job with VAT at 20% comes to £210,000, which is over the council line.

What applies to a works contract	Central government buyer	Council or most other buyers
No notice needed. If the buyer invites tenders, still no suitability shortlist	Under £12,000	Under £30,000
Below-threshold tender notice if advertised. No suitability shortlist	£12,000 to £135,017	£30,000 to £207,719
Notice if advertised. The buyer may shortlist on suitability	£135,018 to £5,192,999	£207,720 to £5,192,999
Above threshold: full Act procedures and conditions of participation	£5,193,000 and over	£5,193,000 and over

What section 85 means in practice

Section 85(1) says that when a buyer invites tenders for a regulated below-threshold contract, it "may not restrict the submission of tenders by reference to an assessment of a supplier's suitability to perform the contract". Suitability includes legal and financial capacity and technical ability (s85(2)).

- **No gate before the tender.** A buyer can't ask you to pass a turnover test, an experience test or a certification check before it lets you bid.
- **Suitability can still count at award.** The below-threshold guidance says the rule "does not prevent a contracting authority assessing suitability at the award stage if it wishes". Expect health and safety, insurance and experience questions inside the tender itself.
- **There's no minimum value.** The Act defines a below-threshold contract only by being under the threshold (section 5), so a £20,000 repair counts if the buyer invites tenders.
- **Advertising is optional.** A notice is only needed for contracts of £30,000 or more (£12,000 for central government) that the buyer chooses to advertise, and not when it invites only chosen suppliers (section 87).

When you may still meet a suitability stage

- [ ] Works from £207,720 (council) or £135,018 (central government) up to just under £5,193,000. The buyer may run a separate suitability stage (s85(3)).
- [ ] Contracts awarded under a framework, including frameworks set up under the old rules. Section 85 doesn't apply to call-offs, although the guidance says buyers setting up a below-threshold framework are still bound by it.
- [ ] Devolved Welsh authorities (s85(5)), schools and transferred Northern Ireland authorities (section 84). Devolved Scottish authorities are generally outside the Act (devolved guidance), and Find a Tender doesn't carry below-threshold notices in Scotland, so look on Public Contracts Scotland.
- [ ] Housing associations that don't buy under the Act. Their own rules decide, so read the tender documents.

If a new small works tender comes with the Standard Selection Questionnaire from PPN 03/24, that's PCR 2015 paperwork for older above-threshold procurements, not the Act. Even the old rules banned a pre-qualification stage for most below-threshold contracts, as the below-threshold guidance notes, so it's fair to ask the buyer why it's there.

Use the SME duty in section 86

Before inviting tenders for a regulated below-threshold contract, the buyer must "have regard to the fact that small and medium-sized enterprises may face particular barriers in competing for a contract" and "consider whether such barriers can be removed or reduced" (section 86). It doesn't apply to framework call-offs. It's a duty to consider, not a promise of any outcome, but it gives you a reasonable basis for a clarification question.

> **A clarification question you can adapt**
>
> The tender asks for [requirement] at tender stage. Given the authority's duty under section 86 of the Procurement Act 2023 to consider barriers SMEs face, would you accept [alternative], for example written confirmation that the cover will be in place before the contract starts?

Audited accounts and insurance

For above-threshold contracts, section 22 says conditions of participation may not require audited annual accounts except from suppliers that are or were required to have them audited under the Companies Act 2006 (or an overseas equivalent), and may not require insurance for the contract to be in place before award. Small works sit below that threshold, so section 22 doesn't apply to them directly. Below the works line it matters less anyway: both are tests of legal and financial capacity, so a buyer can't make either one a gate to tendering.

Between £207,720 and £5,193,000 a council can run a suitability stage, and section 22 doesn't strictly bind it. It's still the standard Parliament set for larger contracts, so it's fair to quote alongside section 86. If you're asked for audited accounts and your company qualifies for the small companies exemption from audit (Companies Act 2006, section 477), say so and offer your filed accounts and current management accounts instead. If you're asked for insurance you don't hold yet, offer a broker's letter confirming cover can be in place before the contract starts.

Pre-qualification that still matters

Build UK's Common Assessment Standard is an industry-agreed question set for pre-qualifying construction suppliers. A Recognised Assessment Body certifies you once a year, at desktop or site-based level. Build UK lists seven: Achilles, Compliance Chain, Constructionline, CQMS, SCCS, Smas Worksafe and Veriforce CHAS.

- **Below the works line**, certification shouldn't be a condition of being allowed to tender. Your certified answers still give you ready evidence for health and safety and quality questions at award stage.
- **Above the line**, a buyer may use it to shortlist. Build UK says public sector bodies should use it "in accordance with PPN 03/24", which is the old-regime note. We found no Procurement Act policy note that requires it.

- **For subcontract work**, Build UK says a growing list of contractors and clients accept it without specifying a particular body.
- **PAS 91 is gone.** BSI withdrew it on 21 April 2023, so a questionnaire that still asks for it is out of date.

Where small works appear, and where you bid

1. **Register on Find a Tender.** It's the central digital platform, free to use, and you sign in with GOV.UK One Login. Below-threshold tender notices under the Act are published there, except in Scotland. Since 1 April 2026, before publishing a contract details notice for a notifiable below-threshold contract, the buyer must get your confirmation that you've registered, plus your unique identifier (regulation 36A).
2. **Don't rely on Contracts Finder.** Under the Act, the below-threshold guidance says below-threshold notices go on the central digital platform, and from 1 October 2026 even old-regime publication duties point there too (SI 2026/360).
3. **Check for reservations.** Below-threshold tender notices must now say whether the contract is reserved for SMEs, for voluntary, community and social enterprises (VCSEs), or both (SI 2026/360).
4. **Bid where the notice tells you.** The tender itself often runs on the buyer's own portal. On ProContract, supplier registration is free, Proactis says on its registration page. Sanctuary Housing Group, Platform Housing Group and Paradigm Housing Group appear among the organisations listed on its opportunities page.

Getting paid

- **30 days by law.** Section 88 implies a 30-day term into regulated below-threshold contracts: a valid, undisputed invoice must be paid within 30 days of the buyer receiving it, or of the date the sum falls due if later. The parties can agree faster payment, not slower.
- **Subcontractors too.** Section 88(8) implies the same terms into sub-contracts that are wholly or substantially for performing a regulated below-threshold contract. For sub-contracts under above-threshold public contracts, section 73 does the same.
- **Check how a buyer pays before you bid.** Buyers publish a payments compliance notice every six months on how they've met the 30-day term in their above-threshold contracts (section 69). Since 1 April 2026 they also publish, each quarter, payments over £30,000 under above-threshold contracts (section 70). Find a Tender's Payments Transparency Register lets you search them for contracts that started after 31 March 2026. Neither covers small contracts directly, but both show how a buyer pays.



CHAPTER 12 · CARE AND HEALTH

Provider Selection Regime vs Procurement Act: care tenders explained

NHS health care contracts in England follow the Provider Selection Regime. Council social care follows the Procurement Act's light touch rules. How to tell.

By OneTender team · 1 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- NHS bodies and councils buying health care services in England use the Provider Selection Regime (PSR), in force since 1 January 2024. The Procurement Act doesn't apply to those procurements.
- Council-bought social care, such as home care and supported living, falls under the Procurement Act, mostly as light touch contracts with a £663,540 threshold including VAT.
- Under the PSR a contract can go to the incumbent or a chosen provider without competition. Once a notice of intention is published, you have 8 working days to make written representations.
- Light touch tenders have no statutory minimum deadline and no mandatory standstill, so set alerts and read notices the day they appear.

If an NHS body or a council in England is buying health care services, such as community nursing, it follows the Health Care Services (Provider Selection Regime) Regulations 2023, the PSR, in force since 1 January 2024. If a council is buying social care, such as home care or supported living, it follows the Procurement Act 2023, usually as a **light touch contract**. Under the PSR a contract can be awarded without competition, and when a notice of intention is published you get 8 working days to object. Under light touch rules there is no statutory minimum deadline and no mandatory standstill. Work out which applies before you plan your response.

Two rulebooks, and how to tell which one you're under

The PSR applies when a relevant authority buys health care services listed by CPV code in Schedule 1 of the PSR "for the purposes of the health service in England" (regulation 3). Relevant authorities are NHS England, integrated care boards (ICBs), NHS trusts and foundation trusts, councils and combined authorities (regulation 2). For those procurements the Procurement Act is switched off: regulation 43 of the Procurement Regulations 2024 says the Act "does not apply in relation to regulated health procurement", as paragraphs 12 and 13 of the Cabinet Office light touch guidance explain.

The PSR's CPV list covers health services and none of the social work codes, so social care isn't on it. Under the Act, social work services and welfare services for the elderly are light touch services (Schedule 1 of the Procurement Regulations 2024), so council home care and supported living fall under the Act. The same council might run a PSR process for a public health service, such as rehabilitation to tackle substance misuse (listed in the PSR in those narrow terms), and a light touch tender for home care.

> **England only**
> The PSR applies in England only (regulation 1). Devolved Scottish authorities generally sit outside the Procurement Act and follow Scotland's own rules (devolved authorities guidance). Elsewhere, check which regime the notice names.

The two regimes side by side

What you face	PSR (health care)	Procurement Act light touch (social care)
Who buys	NHS England, ICBs, NHS trusts and foundation trusts, councils and combined authorities	Councils and other contracting authorities
Value threshold	None in regulation 3	£663,540 including VAT, unchanged on 1 January 2026
How the contract is awarded	Direct Award A, B or C, Most Suitable Provider, or Competitive Process	An open procedure, a competitive flexible procedure the buyer designs, or a direct award where a justification applies, such as user choice
Minimum time to respond	None set for offers	None set, but timescales must be reasonable
Window to challenge	8 working days for written representations after a notice of intention (Direct Award C, Most Suitable Provider, Competitive Process)	No mandatory standstill
Where notices appear	Find a Tender (the central digital platform)	Find a Tender (the central digital platform)
After award	Award notice within 30 days	Contract details notice within 120 days

Reading a PSR notice

The PSR has five ways to award a contract (regulation 6). The one chosen tells you whether you can still win the work.

- **Direct Award A.** Only the existing provider can deliver the service. No competition, no standstill, just an award notice within 30 days (regulation 7).

- **Direct Award B.** Patients choose the provider and every provider that meets the requirements is offered a contract. There is no standstill, just an award notice within 30 days (regulation 8). Your job is to express an interest and get on the list.
- **Direct Award C.** The contract is ending, the incumbent is performing well enough and the service isn't changing considerably. A notice of intention to award to the incumbent is followed by standstill (regulation 9).
- **Most Suitable Provider.** The authority thinks it can identify the most suitable provider without competition. It can't finish identifying potential providers until 14 days after it submits its notice of intention to follow this process (regulation 10). That is your window to make yourself known.
- **Competitive Process.** A notice invites offers (regulation 11). The award criteria must take account of the five key criteria in regulation 5. In short: quality and innovation, value, integration (with collaboration and service sustainability), access (with health inequalities and patient choice), and social value.

For the last three, standstill starts the day after the notice of intention is published (regulation 12). If you provide the services, are aggrieved by the decision and believe the PSR wasn't followed, send written representations before midnight at the end of the 8th working day after standstill begins. The authority must give you any further chance to explain them that it considers appropriate, review its decision and make a further decision. Once representations are made, standstill can't end until at least 5 working days after the authority tells providers its last decision. The PSR's explanatory memorandum also says DHSC and NHS England planned an independently chaired expert panel that an aggrieved provider can ask to review the decision after this stage. The panel makes recommendations, and the authority decides.

If you hold or want a health contract

- [ ] Set Find a Tender alerts for the health care services you deliver. A Direct Award C notice may be a challenger's only warning.
- [ ] Incumbents: keep performance reports, complaints data and your CQC rating ready, because Direct Award C depends on your current performance.
- [ ] Challengers: read a notice of intention the day it appears. Eight working days goes fast.
- [ ] Put representations in writing and name the regulation you think wasn't followed.

Light touch under the Act: what's flexible and what isn't

Light touch contracts cover services "provided directly to individuals or groups of people" (light touch guidance, paragraph 1). The threshold is **£663,540 including VAT** (thresholds guidance). It stayed the same when the thresholds were updated on 1 January 2026. Above it, the flexibilities are real:

- No statutory minimum participation or tendering period, though the council must keep timescales reasonable (paragraph 30).
- No mandatory standstill (paragraph 45). If the council offers a voluntary standstill, it must be at least 8 working days from the contract award notice (section 51).
- No duty to set and publish the three key performance indicators that other contracts worth more than £5 million need (paragraph 46), and the contract can be modified in any circumstances as long as the council has regard to the procurement objectives (paragraphs 47 and 48).

- The contract details notice can follow up to 120 days after the contract is entered into (paragraph 49).

There is also a direct award route for **user choice contracts** (Schedule 5, paragraphs 15 to 17). It applies where the law requires the council to have regard to the views of the person or their carer about who should supply the service (the guidance gives the Care Act 2014 as an example), the person or carer has expressed a preference for a supplier (or only one supplier can provide the service), and the council considers a competitive tender wouldn't be in the person's best interests. No transparency notice is needed (section 44). So make sure social workers and families know what you offer.

Below £663,540, a council's light touch contract is a regulated below-threshold contract (section 84). If the council advertises one worth £30,000 or more, it must first publish a below-threshold tender notice on Find a Tender (section 87). Whatever the value, when it invites tenders it can't restrict who may bid by assessing suitability, such as financial standing or technical ability (section 85). It can still assess suitability at the award stage (below-threshold guidance, paragraph 16).

Mixed health and social care contracts

Under regulation 3 of the PSR, a mixed contract can be bought under the PSR only if health care has the higher estimated lifetime value and the authority is of the view that the other goods or services couldn't reasonably be supplied under a separate contract. Under the Act, section 10(3) removes light touch status where part of the contract could reasonably be bought separately as a non-light-touch contract at or above its own threshold, such as facilities management worth £207,720 or more bundled into a supported living contract. If the notice doesn't make the regime clear, ask early. It decides your deadlines and your challenge rights.

Use the Care Act guidance in your answers

Councils commissioning care must have regard to the care and support statutory guidance. Three paragraphs are worth quoting back in price and quality answers.

- **Paragraph 4.30.** Councils should have evidence that providers pay staff at least the national minimum wage, including for time spent travelling between appointments.
- **Paragraph 4.31.** Fee levels should let providers pay at least the national minimum wage, train and develop staff effectively and retain them. Show how your hourly rate covers each.
- **Paragraph 4.101.** Home care visits of 15 minutes or less are not appropriate for people who need support with intimate care. If a specification does this, raise a clarification and cite the paragraph.

Don't assume a 10% social value weighting. That minimum (PPN 002) binds only central government departments, their executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies. Other buyers may choose to apply it, so check the weightings in each tender. Under the Social Value Act 2012, councils must consider social value before they procure services, and under the PSR it is a key criterion.

Get the basics in place

- [ ] Register on Find a Tender. It's free (supplier guide), uses GOV.UK One Login and gives you a unique identifier. In a competitive tender, buyers must have your confirmation that you've registered and shared your core supplier information by the end of the tendering period (central digital platform guidance).
- [ ] Since 1 April 2026, councils also need your registration confirmation and unique identifier before publishing the contract details notice for a below-threshold contract of £30,000 or more (regulation 36A).
- [ ] Keep CQC registration current for every regulated activity you bid for. Providing one in England without it is an offence (CQC).
- [ ] Join the council's dynamic purchasing system (DPS) or dynamic market. Contracts awarded under a DPS set up under the old rules stay under those rules, and that DPS must end by 23 February 2029 at the latest (transitional guidance). A dynamic market must admit any supplier that meets its membership conditions and isn't an excluded or excludable supplier (section 36).



CHAPTER 13 · TRANSPORT

Home-to-school transport tenders: how to win council routes in 2026

How councils buy school and SEND transport, the licences and DBS checks they ask for, the move from DPS to dynamic markets, and how to win route competitions.

By OneTender team · 1 October 2026 · Read online

IN SHORT

- Councils in England must arrange free travel to school for eligible children. Many buy taxi, minibus and coach routes through an approved list, then run short competitions for each route.
- Expect to show the right operator licence, enhanced DBS checks with a children's barred list check for drivers and passenger assistants, and safeguarding training.
- A DPS set up under the old rules must end by 23 February 2029 at the latest. Its replacement, a dynamic market, must accept applications at any time.
- Route competitions under a dynamic market usually have a 10-day minimum tendering period and no mandatory standstill, so have your documents ready before the notice lands.
- On contracts awarded under the Procurement Act 2023, councils must pay valid, undisputed invoices within 30 days (sections 68 and 88).

Many councils buy home-to-school and SEND transport in two stages. First, operators join an approved list: often a dynamic purchasing system (DPS) set up under the old Public Contracts Regulations 2015 or, for newer arrangements, a dynamic market under the Procurement Act 2023. Then the council runs short competitions for individual routes. Getting on the list takes the right operator licence, enhanced DBS checks and safeguarding training. Winning routes takes a workable price, the right vehicle and fast responses.

> **Where this applies**
>
> This guide covers England, where the DfE guidance applies. Scottish councils buy under Scotland's own rules, not the Procurement Act 2023. Welsh councils are covered by the Act with some differences (devolved authorities guidance) and have their own school travel rules.

How councils buy school and SEND transport

Under section 508B of the Education Act 1996, councils must arrange free travel to school for eligible children. The Department for Education's statutory guidance, updated on 26 May 2026, leaves the method to the council: a bus pass, a dedicated school bus or a taxi, for example.

SEND routes are often the hardest to plan. The guidance notes that a child may need to travel a long way to a school that meets their needs, and one vehicle may need to collect several children. Its general guide is a maximum journey time of 45 minutes each way for primary-age children and 75 minutes for secondary, with exceptions such as remote rural homes.

Councils buy routes through a DPS or dynamic market, a framework, or one-off tenders. Routes change when children start school, move house or change placement, so councils need operators who can start at short notice. A council advertising a lower-value contract worth £30,000 or more including VAT must first publish a below-threshold tender notice on Find a Tender, unless it only invites suppliers it has picked (section 87). The full above-threshold rules apply to council services contracts from £207,720 including VAT, for procurements started on or after 1 January 2026 (PPN 023).

The compliance evidence buyers check

Before a council admits you, expect to evidence the following, drawn from the DfE guidance, the PSV operator licence rules and the DfT taxi and private hire standards.

Evidence	Who needs it
PSV operator licence	Operators of vehicles that can carry 9 or more passengers for hire or reward, or smaller vehicles charging separate fares. Issued by the Traffic Commissioner.
Taxi or private hire licences	Taxi and private hire drivers, vehicles and operators, licensed by the local licensing authority.
Enhanced DBS check with a children's barred list check	Drivers and passenger assistants on dedicated school transport.
DBS Update Service registration	Licensed taxi and private hire drivers, so the licensing authority can check for new information every 6 months.
Safeguarding training	Drivers and passenger assistants. The council decides what training is needed, based on its risk assessments. The DfE says it should cover at least safeguarding, emergencies, equality and the needs of the children on board.

Evidence	Who needs it
Enhanced criminal records checks	Bus and coach drivers of closed-door school services who drive them on more than three days in a 30-day period. The operator must have checked the driver's enhanced certificate, with the children's barred list, within the past three years (Bus Services Act 2025, section 33, in force since 27 April 2026).
PSVAR-compliant vehicles	Buses and coaches with more than 22 seats on local or scheduled services. Council school services where at least one passenger pays a fare, or has a fare paid for them, are likely to be in scope.

Two details catch operators out. First, a council can rely on the DBS check your drivers had for their taxi or private hire licence, or run its own. A check the council requests for home-to-school drivers covers the children's barred list only, while a licensing check covers both barred lists. Check the specification for which one it accepts. Second, if you're a not-for-profit, a section 19 or section 22 permit under the Transport Act 1985 lets you carry passengers for hire or reward without a full PSV operator licence.

Keep a live register for every driver and passenger assistant: DBS certificate number and date, Update Service status, licence expiry and training dates.

Joining a DPS: a ProContract example

Lincolnshire County Council's supplier guide to its Transport DPS, dated 9 February 2022, shows how a DPS set up under the old rules runs on ProContract, the Proactis e-tendering portal. Proactis says supplier registration is free.

1. Register on ProContract, then search for the project reference DN595556 or the title LCC Transport DPS.
2. Open the project and click **Register interest in this opportunity**.
3. Complete the Standard Questionnaire. Work through each item until every red traffic light turns green, then submit.
4. To change an answer, use **Change Response** and submit again before the round ends. The council sees only your latest version, and only after the deadline.
5. If your questionnaire fails, the council tells you why. Fix the issue and reapply through the latest Acceptance round, the one with the highest number.

Labels may have changed since 2022, so follow the buyer's current instructions. Most DPSs share this shape: acceptance rounds to join, then further competitions for the routes.

From DPS to dynamic market

The Procurement Act 2023 has applied to new procurements since 24 February 2025, and it replaces the DPS with the dynamic market. The transitional guidance says any DPS set up under the old rules must end on the date set when it was created, or by 23 February 2029, whichever is earlier. Contracts already awarded under it run to their end under the old rules. If your council replaces its DPS with a dynamic market, joining is a new application, so watch Find a Tender for the dynamic market notice.

For a new dynamic market, section 36 of the Act says the council must:

- accept applications for membership at any time, and consider them within a reasonable period

- admit any supplier that meets the conditions and isn't excluded as soon as reasonably practicable, and give reasons for its decision
- not cap the number of members, or change the membership conditions while the market runs
- set only proportionate conditions. It can't ask for audited accounts unless you already have to be audited, or require contract insurance to be in place before award.

Under the dynamic markets guidance, fees can be charged only to suppliers that win a contract, as a fixed percentage of its estimated value, never for membership.

Three rules shape route competitions under a dynamic market. The minimum tendering period is usually 10 days (section 54). There is no mandatory standstill before the contract is signed, though the council can choose a voluntary one. And if you apply to join and tender in the same competition, the council must consider your membership application before it sets your tender aside, except in exceptional cases (section 34). You also need to be registered on the central digital platform, with your core supplier information shared with the council, before the tendering period ends.

Winning route competitions

Once you're on the list, check every route competition for:

- [ ] **Price on the council's basis.** If it asks for a daily rate per route, give one, and check what the rate covers, such as waiting time and a passenger assistant.
- [ ] **Vehicle fit.** Match seats, wheelchair access and seatbelts to the children on the route. Councils can require seatbelt-fitted vehicles in their contracts, and should procure PSVAR-compliant vehicles where possible when a service is in scope.
- [ ] **Passenger assistant cover.** Name who covers each route and confirm their DBS check and training are in place before the start date.
- [ ] **Contingency.** Say what happens when a vehicle breaks down or a driver is off sick: spare vehicles, relief drivers and how quickly you tell the council.
- [ ] **Journey times.** Plan the pick-up order against the 45 and 75-minute guide, especially on SEND routes.
- [ ] **Feedback.** After a competitive tendering procedure under the Act, which includes a dynamic market competition, every bidder whose tender was assessed gets an assessment summary (section 50). Use it to tune your next price.

Most of the effort sits in your standard answers on safeguarding, vehicle maintenance, complaints and contingency. Keep them current, and each new route becomes mainly a price and vehicle decision.

Getting paid on time

Section 68 of the Act writes a 30-day payment term into public contracts, and section 88 does the same for lower-value contracts. The council must pay undisputed sums within 30 days of receiving a valid invoice, or of the due date on the invoice if that is later. If it considers an invoice invalid or disputes it, it must tell you without undue delay. These terms cover contracts awarded under the Act. A route contract awarded under an older DPS stays under the old rules, so check its payment terms. Neither section applies to contracts awarded by a school, so check the terms if a school books transport directly.

- Invoice exactly as the contract asks, with the purchase order number, route reference and dates. A disputed or invalid invoice falls outside the 30-day term.
- Councils publish a payments compliance notice every six months on how they meet the 30-day term on contracts awarded under the Act (section 69). Check it before you bid.
- If a council pays late, you can claim statutory interest at 8% plus the Bank of England base rate, unless your contract sets its own rate. GOV.UK says a contract with a public authority can't use a lower rate.

APPENDIX A

Bid checklist

Run through this before every tender. Each line comes from the chapter shown.

Before you bid

- [ ] Save searches on Find a Tender for your services and regions, with email alerts on. Ch. 1
- [ ] Register free on ProContract and on any other portal your target buyers use. Ch. 1
- [ ] It is our service, in our area, at a size we can deliver Ch. 3
- [ ] We meet every condition of participation, or will by the date the buyer sets Ch. 3
- [ ] No exclusion ground applies to us or to anyone we rely on Ch. 3
- [ ] The weightings and the estimated value work for us at a profit Ch. 3

Get bid-ready

- [ ] Employer's liability certificate in date, with at least £5 million of cover Ch. 4
- [ ] Every certificate's expiry date in one list, with reminders a month ahead Ch. 4
- [ ] Cyber Essentials, or Plus, covering the whole organisation if you handle personal data Ch. 4
- [ ] Health and safety policy, written down and shared with staff if you have five or more employees Ch. 6
- [ ] Modern slavery policy, supplier code and a risk check of your top suppliers, dated this year Ch. 6
- [ ] After any change, create a new share code and stop pasting the old one into new bids. Ch. 2

Write and submit

- [ ] Every part of the question answered, in the order the question asks Ch. 7
- [ ] Each claim backed by evidence the buyer could check Ch. 7
- [ ] Self-scored against the top descriptor, with the gaps fixed Ch. 7
- [ ] Every number, date, accreditation and client name checked against a source document Ch. 8
- [ ] Within the word or page limit, counted the way the buyer counts Ch. 7
- [ ] A second reader has scored it and agreed the final version Ch. 7

After the award

- [ ] Note the standstill end date and the 30-day claim deadline on the day the result arrives Ch. 10
- [ ] Send any question or concern to the buyer in writing before the standstill ends Ch. 10
- [ ] Rewrite the answers that lost marks and file them in your answer library Ch. 10
- [ ] If you won, diary the KPIs, reporting dates and invoice requirements in the contract Ch. 10

APPENDIX B

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