

THE SME'S GUIDE TO WINNING PUBLIC-SECTOR CONTRACTS

£billions up for grabs

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£300bn

UK public bodies buy roughly £300 billion of goods, works and services every year.

Schools, hospitals, councils, police forces and government departments all buy from outside suppliers, and the rules generally require them to advertise the work and run a fair, written competition. Cleaning, grounds maintenance, IT support, training, repairs, professional advice: it is bought this way, every day, in every part of the country. A small or medium-sized firm can compete for it on the same published rules as anyone else.

Some of that work has your name on it. The job is finding it, then bidding well.



the door is being held open for firms like yours

a third

Government aims to direct around a third of all public spending to small and medium-sized firms. That is a deliberate tilt towards smaller suppliers.

Feb 2025

The Procurement Act 2023 came into force in February 2025, the new rulebook for how public bodies buy.

The Act is designed to make public buying more open, more transparent and easier for smaller suppliers to take part in, with prompt-payment expectations down the supply chain. In plain terms: more of the work is visible, the process is meant to be fairer to a newcomer, and slow payment from a main contractor is less of a given than it used to be. The rules now favour the supplier who turns up prepared, and a small, sharp firm can do that as well as a large one.



the challenge for SMEs

Public-sector procurement was built around process, paperwork and the assumption that a supplier has time and people to spare on it. Larger firms keep bid teams who do this for a living. A small or medium-sized firm rarely can, so rules that are meant to be fair can feel like a closed shop from the outside, and many good firms never start. None of it is beyond an SME. Five things have simply made it harder to break in, and each one has a fix, which is what the rest of this guide is for.

The work is scattered.

It sits across several systems: Find a Tender, Contracts Finder, Public Contracts Scotland, and the council quote portals that carry smaller jobs. No single place shows you all of it, so good work goes unseen.

The language is unfamiliar.

Selection criteria, award criteria, weightings, mandatory requirements, exclusion grounds. It reads like a different trade until someone translates it into plain English.

There are gates.

Insurance levels, certifications, turnover thresholds, sometimes a place on a framework. Any one of them can stop a firm before it starts, and they are easy to miss until you have spent a day on the response.

The scoring is hidden in plain sight.

Bids are marked against published award criteria with set weightings. If you have never seen a scoresheet, you write to the wrong things and lose marks you could have had.

The tools that fix this were built for big bid teams.

And priced to match, often thousands of pounds a year. For a busy owner with no bid department, that has put the whole thing out of reach.



THE PART WORTH KEEPING

the playbook.

Ten things an SME can do to win more public-sector work.

find it, and get ready

1 Look in all the right places.

Public bodies must advertise most contracts above roughly £12,000 for central government and £30,000 for the wider public sector, but the notices are scattered across several systems and no single portal carries them all. Find a Tender and Contracts Finder hold UK-wide and English notices, Public Contracts Scotland holds Scottish work, and the council quote portals carry the smaller sub-£30,000 jobs that often suit an SME and draw far less competition. Most firms only ever check one of these, which is exactly why good work goes unbid. The win is not working harder, it is watching all the right places at once so nothing slips past you.

Do this week: Set up a saved search and email alerts on each portal for your trade and your area, so new work comes to you.

2 Get registered and build a bid library.

Most of any bid is the same evidence every time: insurances, certifications, policies, accounts and case studies. The firms that win regularly are not writing each bid from nothing, they are assembling it from a kit they already keep to hand. Register on the portals early, because registration alone can take the best part of a day, and keep one folder with your employers' and public liability insurance, certifications such as Cyber Essentials, Gas Safe or CHAS, your health and safety and equality policies, two years of accounts, and three or four written case studies with the client, value, scope and outcome for each.

Do this week: Build that folder, and put a renewal date against every certificate so nothing lapses in the middle of a live bid.



get listed, choose well

3 Get onto frameworks and dynamic markets.

A great deal of public work is never openly tendered. It is called off from frameworks and dynamic markets: lists of pre-approved suppliers a buyer can buy from quickly, without running a full competition each time. If you are not on the list, you never even see that work. Under the Procurement Act 2023, dynamic markets replace the old dynamic purchasing systems and must stay open for new suppliers to join at any time, so missing the original start date no longer locks you out. Getting onto the right one is among the highest-return moves an SME can make: one application becomes a stream of repeat opportunities.

Do this week: Find the frameworks and dynamic markets that cover your trade, and check exactly what joining takes.

4 Be ruthless about bid or no-bid.

Most wasted effort goes into bids a firm was never going to win, and a bid costs the one thing an SME cannot spare: time. The discipline that separates winners is not writing more bids, it is writing fewer, better ones. Before you draft a word, score the opportunity honestly on four things: how well you fit the buyer's stated need, your capacity to deliver it if you win, the likely competition, and whether the margin is genuinely worth the work. If two of those are weak, walk away without guilt and put your energy into a contract you can actually take.

Do this week: Write a simple bid or no-bid checklist you can run in ten minutes against any new notice.



read it, then ask

5 Read the whole tender before you write a word.

The documents tell you exactly how to win, and exactly how to be disqualified, before you write anything. Separate the selection criteria (whether you are even allowed to bid: insurance levels, turnover, experience) from the award criteria (how the bid itself is scored), then read the weightings and the scoring method so you know where the marks really sit. Read the contract terms, payment terms and exclusion grounds as well. Firms lose days writing a beautiful answer to a contract they were never eligible for. A deal-breaker is far cheaper to find now than after you have won.

Do this week: On your next live notice, map the criteria, weightings and any deal-breakers onto one page before drafting.

6 Use your clarification questions.

During the tender window you are allowed to ask the buyer questions, and the strongest bidders always do. If a requirement is ambiguous, a document is missing or a specification seems contradictory, a clarification question gets you a written, binding answer, and that answer is usually shared with every bidder, so it costs you nothing in competitive advantage. It also signals that you are a serious, professional supplier. The catch is timing: the deadline for questions falls well before submission, so a doubt left until the final weekend is a doubt you carry into the bid.

Do this week: List your questions as you read, and send them in early rather than the night before the cut-off.



win on the page

7

Know how you will be judged: most advantageous tender.

Public bids are rarely won on price alone, and assuming otherwise is one of the most expensive mistakes an SME makes. Under the Procurement Act 2023 the award basis is the most advantageous tender, which deliberately replaced the older most economically advantageous tender. The wording change matters: it reminds buyers they do not have to take the cheapest bid, and may weight quality, social value and delivery method right alongside cost. A low price will not rescue a thin, poorly argued response. Read the weightings before you price anything, and put most of your effort where most of the marks are.

Do this week: Look back at a recent tender and work out where the marks really sat, price against quality.

8

Write to the scoresheet.

Evaluators mark what is actually on the page against the published words, not what they happen to assume about you. Answer the exact question asked, in the order the criteria set it out, and mirror the wording of each criterion so the marker can find your point without hunting for it. Lead every answer with the evidence that scores: named certifications, proven contracts, real figures and measurable outcomes. Respect the word count, and put your strongest material first, because a tired evaluator on their twentieth bid may not reach your final paragraph. Padded prose loses marks because it gives the marker nothing concrete to award.

Do this week: Take one answer and rewrite it to open with your single hardest piece of evidence.



the details that decide it

9 Make social value specific and measurable.

Many contracts now score social value, for example local employment, apprenticeships, skills or carbon reduction, often around ten per cent of the available marks. Those marks are some of the easiest to win and the most commonly thrown away, because firms answer them with warm sentiment instead of hard commitment. A social value answer scores when it is specific, measurable and tied to this contract. “We will take on one local apprentice within six months and report progress quarterly” beats “we are passionate about our community” every time, because the evaluator can put a mark against it and the buyer can hold you to it later.

Do this week: Draft two or three social value commitments you could genuinely deliver, each with a number and a date attached.

10 Mind the admin, stay compliant, and learn from every result.

Strong bids still fail on entirely avoidable things: a missed deadline, the wrong file format, a single unmet mandatory requirement. A late submission scores nothing however good it is, and a non-compliant bid is set aside before anyone reads the quality you worked so hard on, so meet every mandatory requirement exactly and submit with time to spare, not in the final hour. Then, win or lose, ask for feedback. Public buyers must give reasons, and the assessment of your bid shows you precisely where you gained and lost marks. Every result, handled this way, makes the next bid stronger.

Do this week: Put every key date in one calendar with reminders, and request a debrief on every result, won or lost.

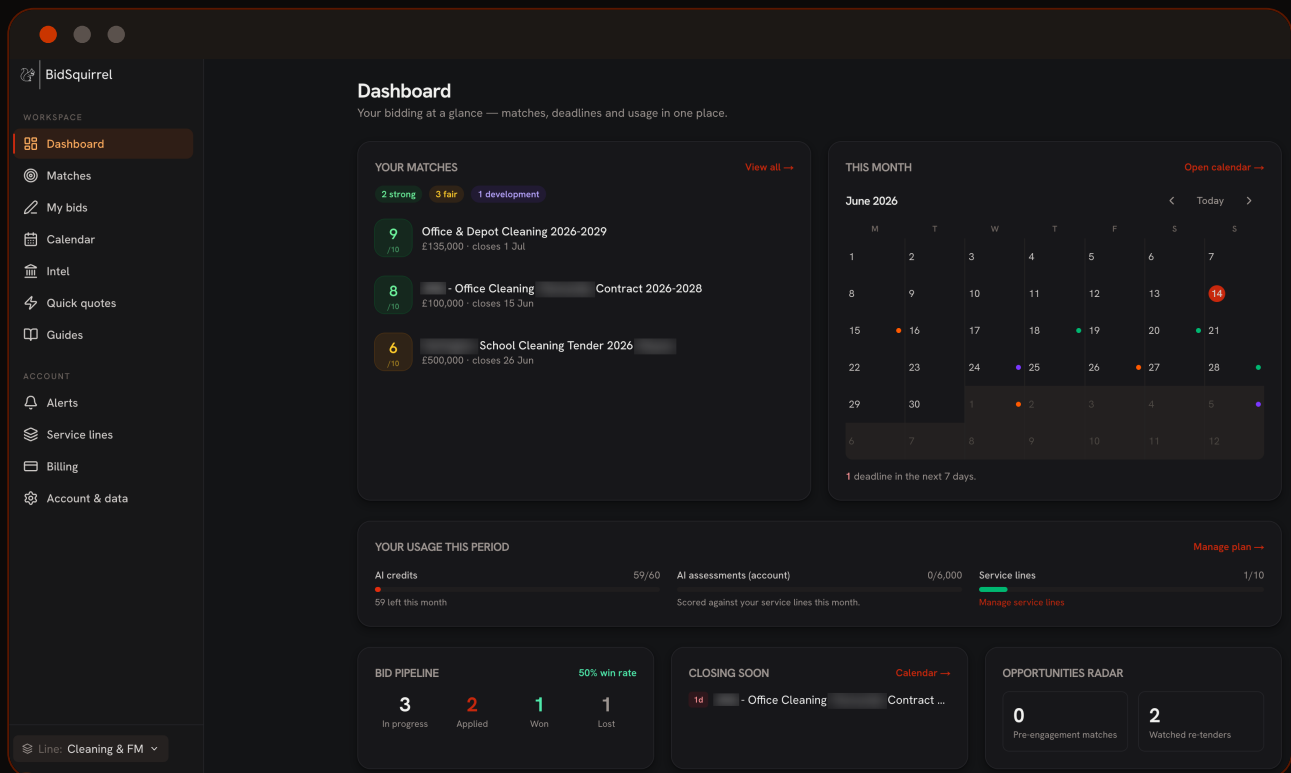
That is the playbook. Work through it and you will win more than you do today. If you would rather not do it alone, the next pages show how BidSquirrel helps. **Start free at bidsquirrel.co.uk.**



You could do every one of these things yourself, or employ a whole bid team to do it for you. But this is where BidSquirrel comes in and does the heavy lifting, so you can stay focused on running and growing your business while the slow, repetitive parts of bidding look after themselves.

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find only the work worth winning

Every live opportunity scored to your business, with the three worth bidding for surfaced first, and the reasoning behind each score.

1 Awareness and discovery.

Every major British public-sector source scanned daily, in one feed, including the sub-£30,000 council work most tools skip. Daily alerts and a scored digest bring the right contracts to you, so you stop trawling portals.

2 Proper fit evaluation.

Each opportunity is scored to your business as a Strong, Fair or Stretch fit, with the reasoning written down, so you spend your time only on work you can win.

3 Eligibility check.

A gap-check against the mandatory requirements, so you know whether you qualify before you commit a day to the response.



from shortlist to a winning bid

At the centre is a trained procurement assessor, grounded in the UK rules including the Procurement Act 2023 and tested against a library of expert cases. It marks a bid the way a real evaluator does, and keeps you writing in your own words, because generic auto-written prose scores badly.

4 How to win.

Per-criterion guidance grounded in your real evidence and the notice's exact wording: what a top-scoring answer must cover, which of your proofs to lead with, and what loses marks.

5 Guided bid writing.

The response built section by section, with a starting scaffold to complete in your own words. The assessor keeps every answer pointed at what the evaluator rewards.

6 Bid checking.

A pre-submission review of your finished draft, so weak spots are caught before it goes in.

7 Staying on top of it.

A calendar with deadline reminders, plus a radar for contracts coming up for re-tender, so nothing is missed.

BidSquirrel turns the scattered, time-heavy, expert-knowledge parts of public bidding into a guided process a busy small or medium-sized firm can actually run.



two ways to start

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