

# Selling to the Public Sector



A report on the delivery of a programme of Procurement training seminars aimed at the business community in Lincolnshire

May 2009



## The Challenge

Amongst the challenges facing public sector procurement professionals, there are two that are common not just within Lincolnshire, but across the whole of the public sector. With a drive for greater levels of efficiency and budgetary savings being called for at local, regional and national levels, there is a tendency to consider amalgamating contracts between a number of partners. This amalgamation consolidates the buying power of partners which in turn may lead to a reduction in the overall contract price for whatever is being procured while allowing for a single tender exercise, which in itself creates an opportunity for efficiency savings. In simple terms, the result is both cashable and non cashable savings which could well be considered a win-win situation.

However, the creation of these large contracts for a range of partners, contracts that could well cover a complete county or even region, can only potentially be delivered by large companies who have the capacity to supply a range of partners simultaneously, together with the resources to deliver across a wide geographical area. Unfortunately the result of this type of large contract is that small local firms, who, in the past may have provided goods and services to a single partner, are no longer able to consider tendering for such large contracts.

For the procurement professional this in itself is not an issue because their primary objective is not to consider the economic impact of carrying out a tender exercise, but to deliver the most economically advantageous tender. To do this, contract regulations (at a local level) together with European Guidelines, (which are subject to UK legislation) must be followed to ensure the tender process is fair, open and transparent, with all firms, irrespective of their geographical location, having equal opportunities to tender. This in effect is the second problem which is clearly interlinked with the first: how to develop a tender opportunity that is fair, open and transparent which is not detrimental to the local economy, Although procurement professionals may not have the development of local businesses as one of their key objectives, they are generally employed by local organisations whose overall objectives must be taken into consideration.

The problem facing the procurement professional therefore, is how to create an efficient and streamlined process that can create both cashable and non cashable savings, while at the same time not putting local firms at a disadvantage.

## The Partners

In late 2006 within Lincolnshire, members of the Lincolnshire Procurement Forum, (LPF) (which was made up of representatives of each of the eight local authorities within the county, together with Lincolnshire Police, the University of Lincoln, the United Lincoln Hospitals Trust and Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue) realised that working within the procurement community was not the answer as they clearly could not show any favouritism to local firms. The challenge therefore was to find a partner whose aims were to support the local economy, and to work together to create opportunities to support local firms. Following a number of informal meetings with Economic Development colleagues within the local authority, it became apparent that a joint approach to the problem was the way forward. Whereas the Procurement officers had a clear understanding of the tender process and the rules and regulations which needed to be followed, colleagues within the Economic Development community had a clear rationale to support the local economy through developing business opportunities within Lincolnshire. By working together it was felt that the range of skills and experience offered by both sides would allow for local businesses to be supported, without breaking any procurement regulations.

To drive the initiative forward a working group, representing members of the LPF and Economic Development officers, met to decide how best to tackle the problem. It quickly became apparent that although there was a wealth of knowledge relating to procurement and economic development issues, there was no detailed knowledge of the local business community. To address this gap, invitations were issued to both the Lincolnshire Chamber of Commerce and the Lincolnshire Branch of the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) to join the working group. Both organisations responded positively by sending the Chief Executive of the Chamber and the Regional Organiser of the FSB to sit on the working group and lend their expertise. The overall result was a small sub group consisting of representatives from the Lincolnshire business community, economic development professionals and procurement professionals.



# The Solution

It was agreed at an early stage that the way forward was to provide local businesses with an overview of procurement regulations, both at a local and national level; so that they could better understand the process the public sector had to follow. It was felt that with an improved level of understanding of the process followed by the public sector; this would improve their opportunities when tendering for work, not just within Lincolnshire, but regionally or nationally.

Because of the geographic size of the county it was felt that a number of training sessions/seminars would be needed to ensure all businesses had an opportunity to attend. It was also felt that if times were varied, this would also create further opportunities for firms to make sure they could become involved.

To ensure the programme of events was advertised appropriately, a professionally designed flyer was posted to all appropriate businesses listed in the County Council's business Data base. This resulted in a direct mail shot to approximately 8,000 local businesses. In addition the Lincolnshire Chamber of Commerce and the FSB also sent a direct mail shot to all their individual members. The direct marketing was supplemented by a number of press releases in various county newspapers, together with a two page article in the Lincolnshire Business Echo.

The resulting programme of events delivered in Spring 2007 were as follows -

## 2007 Events

Venue	Attendees
Riseholme	60
Manby	20
Stamford	21
Gainsborough	23
Grantham	12
Boston	30
Skegness	9
Sleaford	19
Spalding	40

Total attendees - 214

Each event was chaired by either the Lincolnshire Chamber of Commerce or the Lincolnshire FSB representative to provide a level of continuity. In a similar way and to ensure a consistent message, a power point presentation was produced which was presented at each event by one of the procurement professionals. A question and answer session followed each presentation, giving members of the business community the opportunity to ask any burning questions that they had.

To support the event each participant was provided with an information pack which consisted of:

- A copy of the seminar programme;
- A copy of the power point presentation;
- A contact list of procurement and economic development officers;
- Details of procurement web pages where contracts are advertised;
- A list of frequently asked questions;
- A flyer from the FSB and the Chamber;
- A feedback form.

Feedback from the sessions was overwhelmingly positive:

- 100% of participants were very/fairly satisfied with the training;
- 100% of participants found the event speakers very/fairly informative;
- 100% of participants found the event presentations very/fairly useful;
- 98% of participants were very/fairly satisfied with event Q&A session;
- **91% of participants said they would consider tendering for a public sector contract as a result of the training they had received.**

The team also captured additional training requests and participant knowledge gaps in order to improve future training delivery.



# Evolution

From analysis of the feedback form together with verbal comments received after the events, it was agreed that the series of seminars were very successful. However for the events to have a greater level of impact it has been agreed that a number of follow up actions are required. This will include:

- Developing the Frequently Raised Question sheet to include questions raised at the events. These questions and answers will be circulated electronically to all attendees;
- Provide further training in the completion of contract documents, especially the Pre Qualification Questionnaires and Invitations to Tender. These topics have been decided on following analysis of the feedback forms;
- Seek additional funding to allow for a rolling programme of ongoing events.

In October 2007 3 events were held in South Kesteven District Council, Boston Borough Council and Lincoln Chamber of Commerce. A total of 26 suppliers attended these sessions that concentrated on the completion of Pre Qualification Questionnaires and Invitation to Tender documentation. These sessions were viewed by the suppliers as either excellent or very good but it was felt that the lower take up at certain venues was due to the location of the events and further thought would be given to that in the future.

In March 2008 a further series of 3 sessions were held in The Enterprise Centre in Louth, South Holland District Council offices, Spalding and West Lindsey District Council offices, Marshalls Yard, Gainsborough. These sessions were a response to the feedback received from suppliers attending the events in 2007 and concentrated on the completion of Pre Qualification Questionnaires (PQQ) and Invitations to Tender (ITT) documentation. The sessions were also re named as Selling to the Public Sector. All administration for the events was managed by the Chamber of Commerce and a small charge was made to cover administration and a buffet lunch to provide networking opportunities at the end of the session.

As the sessions were much more detailed than ones previously run a decision was made to keep numbers to 15 per session. Due to high response from the Gainsborough area session was opened up to higher numbers. In total 50 suppliers attended the 3 events.

Sessions were advertised by economic development colleagues in the districts, by the Chamber of Commerce, the FSB, Supply to Gov, on the Procurement Lincolnshire website and taking flyers to various council owned buildings across the county.

Again each event was opened by either the Lincolnshire Chamber of Commerce or the Lincolnshire FSB representative to provide a level of continuity. In a similar way and to ensure a consistent message, a power point presentation was produced which was presented at each event by two procurement professionals. The same two officers presented at all of the events. A question and answer session followed each presentation, giving members of the business community the opportunity to ask any burning questions that they had.

To support the event each participant was provided with an information pack which consisted of:

- A copy of the seminar programme
- A copy of the power point presentation
- A copy of a completed PQQ with fictitious company details
- A copy of a completed ITT with fictitious company details with key areas for completion highlighted
- Details of procurement web pages where contracts are advertised
- A list of frequently asked questions
- A flyer from the FSB and the Chamber
- A feedback form

Again from analysis of the feedback forms together with verbal comments received after the events, it was agreed that the series of seminars were again very successful.

Based on this feedback a decision was made to run further events in Autumn 2008 that were a combination of the 2007 and 2008 sessions giving information on an Introduction to Procurement as well as how to fill in the key forms, the Selling to the Public Sector presentations.

Also as part of the training sessions organised for 2008 a full day session was held on 5<sup>th</sup> June at the University of Lincoln Risholme Campus. Selling to the Public Sector event was free of charge and again all administration of bookings were handled by the Chamber of Commerce.

As a shared service for procurement for 8 local authorities in Lincolnshire, known as Procurement Lincolnshire, had been established on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008 it was decided that this event would also launch Procurement Lincolnshire to the business community.

Funding had not been established so Economic Development colleagues from the district councils as well as Innovation Lincolnshire made some funds available to market and run future events.

The key aims and objectives of the event were:

- Provide businesses with an understanding of how to do business with the wider public sector in Lincolnshire;
- Guide businesses to where they can access support to ensure they are prepared for bidding for public sector opportunities;
- Inform businesses of up and coming opportunities;
- Provide networking opportunities for buyers and businesses that attend.

Presentations were delivered in the main hall at the campus and breakout rooms. Various public sector organisations had stands in the main hall where suppliers could chat to them. 91 suppliers attended the day in all so response again was very good but it was felt that if the event was held in 2009 the format of the day would need to be revised to cope with the peaks and troughs of attendance had been experienced.

Feedback from the day was either excellent or very good and highlighted that there was still interest in the PQQ and ITT training sessions so the group decided to run a further series of 4 events in October in West Lindsey District Council offices, Marshalls Yard, Gainsborough, East Lindsey District Council offices, Louth and 2 sessions at Lincoln Chamber of Commerce. These sessions had maximum subscription and 68 suppliers attended.

Procurement Lincolnshire attendance had also been requested at numerous events around the county in 2008 to deliver the Selling to The Public Sector presentation. The feedback has always been very positive and the ongoing invitations fully reflect this.

Work had also been completed on links to important websites to help suppliers find contract opportunities. These links can be found on the Procurement Lincolnshire website, FSB and Chamber of Commerce websites. This information is passed on to suppliers at the training events.

In early 2009 Procurement Lincolnshire made the supplier training events part of their annual work programme to show their continued commitment. However, there is an urgent need to find pockets of funding to further develop the programme. Local Authority budgets are no longer large enough to offer support for this type of activity but clearly there is an increased interest from the business community.

Events delivered so far in 2009 are as follows:

## April 2009 Procurement Training Events

Venue	Attendees
Gainsborough	12
Sleaford	22
Spalding	24
Lincoln	35
Louth	15
Boston	15

Total attendees - 123

The training events covered:

- (1) An Introduction to Procurement;
- (2) Advertising Opportunities;
- (3) Top Tips to winning business; and;
- (4) How to complete PQQ's and ITT's.

The training was advertised via The Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Small Business, Partner Economic Development Teams, East Midlands Business, Lincolnshire Food and Drink Forum, Lincolnshire County Council Communications Team and Lincolnshire Echo via the Federation of Small Business.

The sessions will be held again in October 2009 and mirror the April programme.

On June 4<sup>th</sup> 2009, the group is holding a 'Meet The Buyer' Expo at the University of Lincoln's Riseholme Campus. The event will provide businesses with an opportunity to meet many of Lincolnshire's Public Sector buyers as well as developing their understanding of public procurement protocols.

The event is expected to attract over 100 businesses.



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