



SME Advisory Group

Meeting 27 March 2023

Minutes

Attendees:

Minister of State Ossian Smyth - Chair	Karen Hynes - DETE	Shane Conneely - Chambers Ireland
Brendan Whelan - OGP	Laura Byrne - DETE	Elizabeth Bowen – Small Firms Association
Fergal Grogan - OGP	Neil McDonnell - ISME	Aidan Sweeney - IBEC
Fiona Costelloe - OGP	Paul Maguire - EI	Grant Gilmore – InterTrade Ireland
Anne Stewart - OGP	Seán Downey - CIF	

Apologies:

Jonathan Small - CCPC	Deirdre McPartlin – Enterprise Ireland
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Minister Donohoe arrived prior to the commencement of the meeting and was introduced to the group. He opened the floor for discussion around the current environment for SMEs.

1. Previous Minutes and Actions Arising

The Minister welcomed the group and the minutes of the previous meeting of 10 January were agreed. All actions from the previous meeting were completed with the following updates provided:

- Regarding the scheduling of 'Train the Trainer' sessions for public servants, these have now been confirmed and will commence from 19 April – 3 May. Basic training is arranged for 08 May, and webinars for economic operators will start from 10 May. There will be 6 webinar sessions arranged for economic operators. Another specific date for SMEs representative bodies will be arranged and sent to the group, however SMEs can avail of the economic operator training should they wish.
- The Minister invited any feedback relating to the GPP tool to which no comments were received.
- The Minister opened for further discussion regarding the Department of Education Administration Support Grant for the supply of school books. This was previously raised by SFA who offered further information as a meeting with the Department of Education has since taken place. Limited consultation relating to the scheme was conducted including only Department of Education, schools and school book suppliers. A review has been requested by SFA from DETE in 12 months to assess this scheme. The SFA have advised school book shops to contact schools directly.

2. Revision of Circular 10/2014 – New Circular 05/2023

The Minister provided an overview of the new Circular 05/2023 acknowledging the work and contribution from the group involved. The positive changes and enhancements were outlined. The Minister announced the new Circular will be published tomorrow (28 March) to coincide with arranged communications. The Minister invited any recommendations from the group on how best



the new Circular can be communicated to SMEs. Ibec suggested the communications surrounding the new Circular incorporate the use of local and regional media as this has been an effective route to reach SMEs nationwide. It was also advised to engage with local authorities network including County Councils would be of value. The Minister acknowledged that limited communications could happen before official approval from the Government was received and that these can now be considered.

Action: OGP to send the group a copy of the new Circular 05/2023 after the meeting today which is not to be further circulated before publication date.

3. eTenders

A discussion of eTenders and the 'Train the Trainer' sessions took place when reviewing the actions from the last meeting.

Action: OGP to send specific dates for SME representative bodies.

4. Strategic Public Procurement

The Minister opened the floor to the group to discuss any areas for consideration under strategic public procurement. CIF raised the importance of visibility on the status of projects. The more detailed information made available to suppliers by contracting authorities, as well as keeping the information up-to-date with realistic expectations of projects was emphasised. This, particularly in the area of large construction projects, was noted as invaluable to businesses.

Ibec added that insight on the sentiment of buyers would also prove beneficial for suppliers to anticipate which projects are most likely to progress and reasoning behind any delays. The Minister recognised the importance of transparency and realistic planning pipeline especially with Capital Projects along with the sentiment of buyers. The OGP affirmed their openness for any input including surveys conducted to gauge sentiment of buyers. It was confirmed that the OGP is preparing a survey of client public bodies.

The OGP highlighted the many variable factors that can affect the progression of projects and therefore can impede contracting authorities' ability to make planning information available. CIF suggested the possibility of using a scoring matrix for the likeliness of a project to progress to the market. It was agreed that there is a pool of information currently available through eTenders but it is fragmented. Specifically in the area of frameworks, where agreements will be expiring and businesses can see when the framework may open up again.

EI raised the opportunity to explore PINs over a certain threshold and the reasoning of their inclusion or exclusion in tendering. Ibec flagged the risk of PINs being misused as a free consultancy service. The value of including PINs was discussed, including shortening the timeframe for tendering, along with the potential need for monitoring their use, and providing justification if no tender then follows. The use and incorporation of PINS as part of the contracting authority's strategic procurement plan was raised, with their benefits when used correctly. OGP flagged that a measure promoting PINs has been included in the new circular and acknowledged there may be need for more education and communication on PINS as there currently is no regulation to enforce the use of PINs.



5. Macroeconomic Issues

The Minister noted Minister Donohoe's comments prior to the start of the meeting in relation to the currently slow growth as seen in 2013. SFA raised concerns flagged to them from Central Bank in relation to the emergence of alternative funding options with higher interest rates which may target smaller businesses in particular who are experiencing difficulties accessing finance and insurance.

6. Competition

The Minister handed over to ISME who provided an overview of the importance of not enabling a monopoly unnaturally emerge in particular markets. ISME offered an example of University gowns for which there is a main UK supplier and only one domestic supplier left, which is currently both a college and procurement issue to monitor. It was noted that the CCPC has been contacted in relation to this issue.

7. A.O.B.

The Minister invited any other discussion under AOB to the group. None were raised.