



## SME Advisory Group

Meeting 19 June 2023

### Minutes

#### Attendees:

Minister of State Ossian Smyth - Chair	Anne Stewart - OGP	Fergal Grogan - OGP
Brendan Whelan - OGP (Substitute Chair)	Fiona Costelloe - OGP	Karen Hynes - DETE
Laura Byrne - DETE	Neil McDonnell - ISME	Aidan Sweeney - Ibec
Elizabeth Bowen - Small Firms Association	Gillian Ross - CIF	Jonathan Small - CCPC

#### Apologies:

Grant Gilmore - InterTrade Ireland	Caroline Sweeney - InterTrade Ireland
Paul Maguire - Enterprise Ireland	Shane Conneely - Chambers Ireland
Sean Downey - CIF	

### 1. Previous Minutes and Actions Arising

Minister Smyth welcomed members and advised that unfortunately, due to a last minute scheduling clash, he had to leave the meeting early. The Minister highlighted the significant work undertaken since the last meeting in March. In particular, the Minister referenced the publication of Circular 05/2023 and the launch of the new eTenders platform. The Minister invited any feedback on the new eTenders. CIF raised the issue of public bodies publishing tenders on the old eTenders. They noted that this was an issue that was previously raised with the OGP and, they understand, is being addressed. Ibec raised teething issues regarding log-ins with some staff having left organisations and noted the importance of nuancing the messaging. Ibec also noted that the European Court of Auditors are currently undertaking a report on procurement competition which should be released soon. The Minister apologised for having to leave the meeting early and handed over chairing duties to Brendan Whelan (BW) from the OGP.

BW welcomed the group and the minutes of the previous meeting of 27 March were agreed. Actions from the previous meeting, as below were completed:

- OGP to circulate the new circular, Circular 05/2023, to the group
- OGP to confirm dates for dedicated eTenders training webinar for SME representative bodies, which have since taken place.



## **2. New Circular 05/2023**

BW thanked the group for all of their input and assistance with the development of this circular and noted so far the feedback received has been positive. BW invited any feedback or comments from the group. He suggested that any feedback could also be sent to Fergal Grogan or Fiona Costelloe in the OGP. BW proposed that this item be removed as a standing item on the agenda and be included on the agenda again in a year to review. Members would continue to raise concerns regarding barriers to SME participation, to be added to the Agenda or raised under AOB, on an ad hoc basis. This was agreed by the group.

## **3. eTenders**

Anne Stewart (AS) from the OGP provided an overview of developments since the launch of the new eTenders on 15 May. Registration began on this date, with new tenders commencing a week later on 22 May. As advised that upwards of 13,000 users have now registered on the new eTenders. Initial issues were experienced, as expected. However, as people have become more comfortable with the system, the feedback has been positive especially surrounding some of the new functionality. AS noted that the OGP is actively contacting public bodies to take down any tenders published on the old eTenders platform. In the coming weeks, the alerts function will be disabled in order to deter public bodies from publishing new tenders on the old eTenders.

AS advised that OGP mini-competitions are not being progressed where all framework members have not activated their account on the new system. Frameworks members are being contacted directly via a variety of channels. AS outlined an option under consideration is to manually activate one user from each economic operator who had been registered on the old eTenders. However, the concern is that this could facilitate economic operators neglecting to update their business alerts. Different strategies involving communications, including engagement with the Companies Registration Office, are being considered to increase registrations in the new eTenders and the OGP welcomed any suggestions the group may have in this regard. A discussion took place regarding the number of bounce back emails and the impact that suppliers not activating accounts on the new system is having on mini-competitions. AS advised that further training will be provided by the OGP to support the transfer of historical data from the old eTenders before the platform is closed. Ibec suggested that upcoming events linked to the Regional Enterprise Plans may provide an opportunity to promote the new eTenders. OGP advised that they would liaise with DETE in this regard. Ibec also suggested that the Communications sub-group continue to discuss communications around the new eTenders. The overall look and branding of the new platform was discussed with AS advising that the OGP is conscious of the appearance of the website. BW advised that any other feedback or suggestions from the group can be forwarded to the OGP.

**Action:** eTenders communications to be discussed at the next SME Advisory Communications sub-group.

## **4. Strategic Public Procurement**

BW alerted the Group to the recent publication of an Information Note on Apprenticeships and Public Procurement which was developed by the OGP in collaboration with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. BW noted the broad range of apprenticeships now available, outside of the traditional apprenticeship areas. Ibec highlighted



Community Wealth Building, with a focus on buying local, as becoming more prominent and suggested that this as an issue that the group should come back to. Ibec noted that comparisons are often made between Ireland and England but that such comparisons are not always suitable as the size, structure, and type of goods and services procuring are vastly different. BW emphasised that social procurement is such a broad area with policy responsibilities dispersed across many departments. BW agreed that this is an issue that the Group could come back to under this Agenda item.

**Action:** OGP to circulate Apprenticeship and Public Procurement Information Note to group.

## **5. Macroeconomic Issues**

BW opened the floor to any macroeconomic issues the group may wish to raise. The issue of security clearance for businesses was raised as there is no system for non-government officials to get official security clearance in Ireland. ISME flagged that some small tech businesses are experiencing difficulties in accessing public procurement opportunities in other Member States and wider as public bodies have an expectation of security clearance. DETE confirmed there is an interdepartmental group currently working in the area of security clearance and will provide an update to the group. ISME and Ibec provided examples of the use of disproportionate cyber insurance levels being employed by public bodies. ISME observed that there appears to be little consideration of the risk of the requirement when setting insurance levels, particularly cyber insurance. SFA emphasised that insurance is still a major issue that is affecting businesses, particularly small firms. The OGP highlighted that the Tender Advisory Service (TAS) is open for anyone to raise concerns regarding a live tender process. OGP invited members to contact them even if the concern did not qualify for TAS.

## **6. A.O.B.**

BW raised repeat tendering by SMEs registered on eTenders in order to obtain any insight from the group on the issue. Analysis undertaken by the OGP indicates that 63% of SMEs that bid for a public contract in 2022 only bid for one contract. In many cases the lower the contract the lower the amount of competition and bids received. Ibec flagged the survey with SMEs that emanated from the Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan which may provide insights. The results of the survey should be available shortly. Ibec also informed the group that a report by the Procurement Expert Group in the European Court of Auditors is due to be released in September. The report is expected to focus on competition and Ibec recommended that this report be examined. Ibec suggested that it may prove useful to look at the numbers that went through the InterTrade Ireland mentoring program to see if they continue to tender after this program or if it was being used merely as support when applying for one particular tender. SFA agreed exploring this area could be valuable due to the popularity of mentoring in Ireland. The OGP thanked the group for this initial feedback and invited further could be given as there is an aim to improve the competition level identify barriers. BW invited any other discussion under AOB to the group, no further areas were raised.