

Common(s) sense

Nick de Bois MP, chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Events, chaired an open session on tendering for events at the House of Commons. The session, instigated by *Stand Out*, looked at the experiences of tendering for public sector contracts and called upon Government to listen to the concerns of our industry



Last month, under the shadow of Big Ben, event industry professionals gathered at the House of Commons to share their experiences of tendering for events. The open session presented the events industry with an opportunity to take part in a healthy discussion regarding the one issue that rallies such passionate response from the sector – tenders. It was the events industry's opportunity to quiz procurement officers, local authority representatives, associations and the Crown Commercial Service: Why are Government tenders so time consuming? Why do

to win new business. Some even feel that lengthy pre-qualification questionnaires (PQQ) deter businesses, particularly SMEs, from pitching for work. And, who has the time to spend three days filling in a form when the projects that have been won need fulfilling? Can we encourage procurement teams to liaise with an events department so sensible tenders are written? Why can't procurement teams issue events tenders at a "sensible" time of year when the events sector is not at the height of the season?

Service (CCS), formerly the Government Procurement Service, Brian D'Mello, procurement manager for the British Council, Andy Grove, chair of the Local Authority Event Organisers Group (LAE OG), Andy Lenthall, general manager of the Production Services Association, and Dean Parker, production manager at Wilde Ones, were joined on the panel by *Stand Out* editor, Caroline Clift, and Nick de Bois MP, chair of the APPG for Events, who chaired the session. He made sure that those present had their say. And those present were not short of opinions.

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Talking tenders

It was great to see the events industry open up and relay their experiences because, let's be honest, talking at public meetings is not for everyone. Those present described their experiences, both good and bad. And it was important that the positives were highlighted, as much as the negatives addressed.

For example, the British Council was praised for its "well thought out" tenders with questions "written in English with no legal mumbo jumbo". It's imperative that such good practice is identified and shared so that everyone can learn from the process. D'Mello revealed that each department within the British Council writes its own

local authorities and central Government departments have such different procurement processes? Why can't the tendering process be more transparent?

One of the event industry's main arguments is that time-consuming documentation is a drain on small event teams, agencies, production houses and suppliers that must sift through large procurement questionnaires in an attempt

And why are Government teams and local authorities not responding to event organisations and agencies that have been unsuccessful in the tender process when it's their right to have feedback?

These were just some of the questions put to a selected panel that represented both the public sector and the events industry. Sally Collier, deputy chief procurement officer and managing director of Crown Commercial



business requirement and then liaises with procurement so that sense is applied and templates adhered to. A scenario that industry wishes was commonplace.

The session suggested that badly thought out tenders are being received by extremely detailed and creative people – if the design process and tender template is flawed then the analysing process must also be flawed. Procurement teams need to better understand the needs of the events sector so that tenders are sensibly constructed and the correct terminology is used, because each event – conference, festival, public event and meeting – requires different thinking. As highlighted by Richard Foulkes, experimenter, The Paradise Experiment.

Dale Parmenter, group MD of drpgroup, and chair of Eventia-IVCA, asked whether industry associations could run workshops to help procurement officers write decent tenders, and Mike Richmond, MD of Richmond Event Management, cited that constructive feedback from procurement teams would encourage the sector to apply for more work: It is the coalition's aim to award 25 per cent of Government contracts to SMEs.

New rules

Collier, who is charged with leading the Government's commercial and procurement policy work, must receive a round of applause because she did not shy away from answering any question thrown at her, and was happy to take on board the concerns of the sector. Yes, we know that's what she's paid to do but she was happy to be shown the challenges faced by industry and pointed in the direction of where it would like to be.

She stated that she takes every opportunity to talk to suppliers about Government procurement processes and believes that her job is to listen, and also

address what she believes are the myths surrounding tendering and Government contracts. Bravely, she acknowledged that there is a risk that you lose some of the best suppliers if your procurement processes are not right.

It's Collier's job to drive up the amount of business that Government conducts with SMEs so it was refreshing to hear her confirm the following: She agreed that the CCS and local authorities should be more aware of peak times in the event industry's calendar so that tenders for outdoor events are not issued in the summer, for example. And she implored the events industry to "batter the door down" of any Government department or local authority that did not provide quality feedback to a company that is unsuccessful in a Government tender.

Of particular interest to the events industry is the news that new procurement rules have been introduced by the EU, which should come into effect in Brussels in March and the UK by the end of the year. What does this mean for industry? It means that timescales will be reduced and also means that tender documentation will only have to be submitted by the winning bidder. Collier also confirmed that PQs have been abolished for tenders under £100,000 in central Government and that this will follow later in the year for local Government.

The new EU rules on public procurement will ensure better quality and value for money when public authorities buy goods or services and will also make it easier for SMEs to bid for Government and local authority work. The new rules also include an "Innovation Partnership" that will allow public authorities to call for tenders to solve a specific problem without pre-empting the solution, thus leaving room for the authority and the tenderer to come up with innovative solutions together.

So where do we go from here? It's clear that there is insufficient communication



Event industry suppliers, agencies and associations all took the opportunity to share their tendering thoughts and experiences

between Government departments, local authorities and the events sector and that procurement teams are not aware of the differences between tendering for a piece of equipment and tendering for a creative event management service or solution. The approach should be different and, therefore, needs addressing. There is also a clear case for more transparency, and it's been suggested that some tenders in particular should even be written with SMEs in mind. There needs to be more opportunities to question a brief so that people can operate on a level playing field, and *Stand Out* has also been challenged to publish a league table of local authorities, a championship table of the best, and worst, councils to work with.

What's important is that the next steps are valid and achievable, inclusive and add value. There is scope to bring local authorities, procurement and the events sector together to take part in practical workshops because it's vital that we learn from each other, and perhaps this should be headed by *Stand Out* magazine in conjunction with all industry associations. The public sector must improve its procurement processes but could we learn more about how best to tackle that minefield of tender information? There is a strong business case in this country for holding events so Government does need to listen. But the events sector must be open to dialogue too. In the meantime, did you know that the Government has a Mystery Shopper service, which can be used by industry to raise concerns over unfair procurement practices? No, well you do now so use it wisely and keep your eyes peeled for more news, as this is just the beginning of a long and healthy debate.



The open session called for clarity and transparency in tendering

