

Conduction of a Mini Competition

1. Send an 'invitation to tender' to all suppliers capable of meeting your requirements.
2. Evaluate the suppliers' bids (or 'tenders') using award criteria, a scoring system and weightings.
3. Choose the 'most economically advantageous tender (MEAT)' (i.e. combining cost and quality).
4. Award the contract to the winning bidder.

Establish the award criteria, scoring system and weightings you'll use to assess suppliers' bids

Before you invite suppliers to tender, you should decide what 'award criteria' you'll use to assess the suppliers' bids.

Dorset County Council have already run a selection stage, assessing suppliers, this has included (within the tender submission):

- checking that HACCP (Food Safety Procedures) are in place
- staff are trained to an appropriate level
- Supply chains are managed to ensure that there is traceability and availability of food products
- Arrangements to produce special diet meals
- Support which suppliers would provide to schools
- Menus – compliance
- Complaints Procedure
- Online Ordering System
- How sustainability issues are addressed
- Business continuity Plan.

Visits to the supplier's production premises were also carried out as part of the selection process (during which records were checked to ensure that food safety procedures are integral to the business).

Some examples which can be included as award criteria for the mini competition:

- the supplier's quoted price
- how the supplier plans to meet your requirements
- are local suppliers used
- the quality of meals the supplier is offering

The quality aspect of the mini competition can be carried out as a paper submission, visits to schools where the suppliers currently supply the service, presentations to the evaluation panel etc.

Together, they should allow you to assess which of the suppliers' bids:

- best meets your requirements
- is the 'most economically advantageous tender' (MEAT), i.e. best combines cost and quality

Each of the criteria should have a range of possible scores (e.g. from 1 to 5, where 5 is the highest score) and a weighting (i.e. a figure by which to multiply the score depending on its relative importance to you). For example, if price is the most important criterion for you, give it a higher weighting than the other criteria.

You must include your award criteria, scoring system and weightings in your invitations to tender to suppliers.

Create a timeline for the tender process

Before you send invitations to tender to suppliers on the framework, you should create a timeline for the tender process. Set out the deadlines for:

- the clarification period (i.e. when suppliers can ask you questions about your requirements), with dates for when:
 - the clarification period starts
 - suppliers must send final questions
 - when you'll provide your final response
- when suppliers must submit their tender
- the end of the 'standstill' period
- when you expect to award the contract

When you're determining the deadlines, allow enough time for the suppliers to:

- understand your requirements
- ask questions for clarification and use the information you respond with

An ITT is the set of documents that you send suppliers on a framework to invite them to submit a bid for your requirements.

You must send an ITT to all suppliers on the framework who can meet your requirements.

Your ITT to each supplier should include:

- a covering letter, with a timeline for the process
- instructions on how suppliers:
 - can ask questions about your requirements for their clarification
 - should submit the tender
- Any requirements which are in addition to the framework specification

- your award criteria, scoring system and weightings
- if appropriate ask suppliers for a list of schools which they currently supply (in order that you can identify sites which you could visit to see the quality of their meals, how pupils perceive them, the amount of plate waste etc.).
- if appropriate, an invitation for suppliers to give a presentation

You must not change the contract's terms and conditions, which will have been set as part of the framework agreement.

Run the mini-competition and provide clarifications

Keep track of the progress of the mini-competition against your timeline.

You should allow time for a clarification stage where suppliers can ask questions about your requirements. Regardless of which supplier asked a question, you must:

- respond to all suppliers on the framework
- make all questions and answers anonymous

Evaluate suppliers' tender responses

Once the submission deadline has passed, you should assess suppliers' tenders using the award criteria, scores and weightings set out in your ITT.

To avoid any legal challenges, you should:

- not open any tenders before the deadline
- make sure you treat all bidding suppliers fairly and equally
- ensure that you clearly record how you've made your decisions so that you're able to defend them
- keep confidential, secure and auditable records of all the documents involved in the evaluation
- be aware that you may have to disclose records of the process under the Freedom of Information Act

It is best practice to have at least 2 people separately evaluate and score each bid. They should compare their scores only after each has completed their evaluation. During this 'moderation' process, they can discuss any disagreements and must agree overall scores. Bear in mind that the more people involved in evaluating the bids, the more difficult it can be to reach an agreement at moderation stage.

You must keep a record of your moderation decisions.

You must award the contract to the highest-scoring bidder.

Notify suppliers and award the contract

Once you've identified the winning bid, you should notify all of the suppliers of your decision at the same time.

Example letters to successful and unsuccessful bidders are available (please email r.allen@dorsetcc.gov.uk).

In your notification letter, we recommend that you include:

- the name of the winning bidder
- the award criteria you used
- the scores for the winning bid
- why you think the winning bid is the most economically advantageous
- when notifying unsuccessful bidders, their scores and feedback on their bid
- when the standstill period ends

If an unsuccessful bidder asks for the actual cost of the winning bid, you should provide it to them, but not a detailed breakdown of costs.

Debrief the unsuccessful suppliers

If an unsuccessful bidder asks for further feedback, you should:

- only comment on that bidder's tender (i.e. don't share specific details of other bidders' tenders)
- give positive feedback where it is appropriate to do so

If you have a face-to-face meeting, we recommend that you keep notes during the meeting and have more than 1 member of staff present.

Apply a standstill period

It is best practice to apply a standstill period of at least 10 calendar days between notifying the bidders of your decision and formal award of the contract. This standstill period is sometimes known as the 'Alcatel' period. It allows for any unsuccessful supplier to challenge the decision if they believe it is unfair.

If the period ends on a non-working day, you should extend it to the end of the next working day.

Award the contract

After the standstill period, notify the successful supplier that you're placing the contract with them. The school and the supplier should then sign the contract.

The contract's terms and conditions (or 'service order terms') will have already been set as part of the framework agreement and you shouldn't change them.

Please remember to return the User Agreement (Appendix 2) from the Framework User Guide to: Roger Allen, Dorset Procurement, W3 County Hall, Dorchester DT1 1XJ or email to r.allen@dorsetcc.gov.uk.

If you have any further questions regards carrying out a mini competition please email r.allen@dorsetcc.gov.uk