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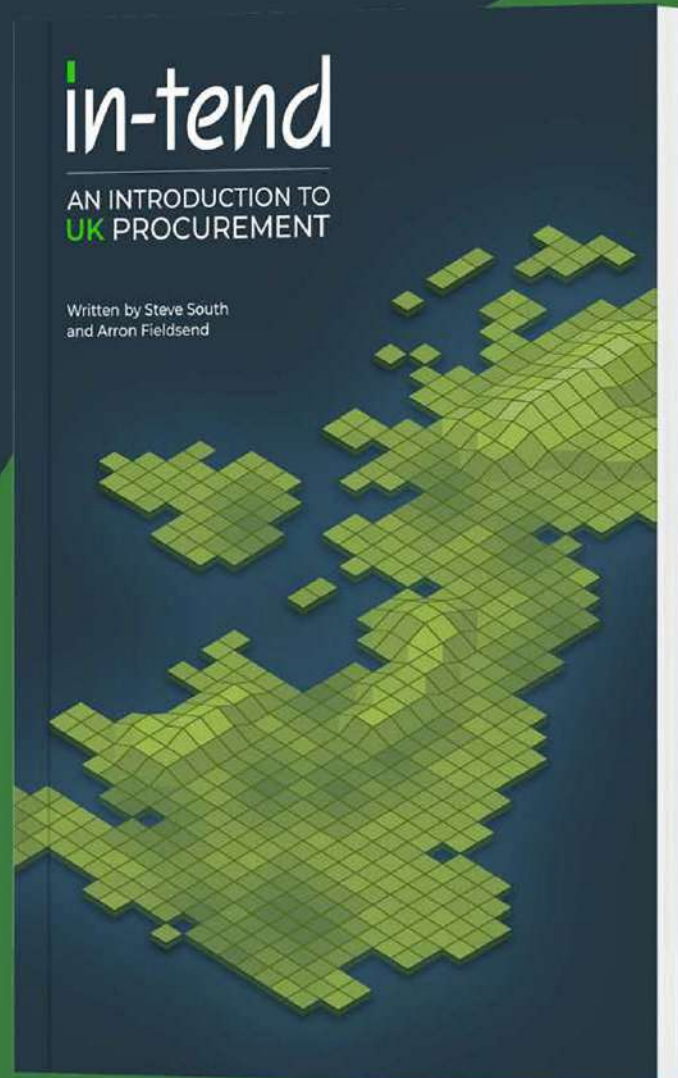
THE HIDDEN COMPLEXITY OF HEALTHCARE PROCUREMENT

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**THE BEST EARLY-
CAREER HIRES DON'T
ALWAYS LOOK PERFECT
ON PAPER**



By Kelly Singleton SCMP, FSCMP
Director of Supply Chain -
Operation Shared Services
Price Industries

If you ask supply chain leaders what they look for in early-career hires, you might expect to hear about technical skills, ERP experience, analytics capability, or professional certifications.

Those things matter. But they're not what separates good from great early-career professionals.

After years of hiring in a fast-paced manufacturing environment, I've learned something that may surprise students and hiring managers alike: the best early-career hires I've made didn't look exceptional on paper. They showed up exceptionally in real life.

The Reality of Today's Job Market

On both sides of the Atlantic, the early-career market is competitive. It can take dozens of applications just to secure one interview and many more before receiving an offer. That's not a reflection of ability. It's a reflection of volume and competition.

In the UK, whether candidates are applying through NHS Jobs, Civil Service portals, or local authority frameworks, CVs often share similar qualifications: comparable degrees, overlapping coursework, and exposure to the same systems. Formatting and keyword optimisation may help a document pass through screening systems, but they are rarely what truly differentiate a candidate.

What stands out instead is connection.

It's the conversation you had at a professional event. The follow-up email you sent. The impression you left during a group exercise. The way you show up when no one is formally evaluating you. Networking isn't about collecting contacts; it's about building credibility before you need it.

There Is No "Right" Background for Procurement or Supply Chain

One of the biggest myths students believe is that there's a "correct" background for entering supply chain or procurement. Trust me: there isn't.

Supply chain is not built on job titles. It's built on behaviours under pressure.

During an interview for an entry-level buyer role, a candidate with restaurant experience reframed their job as a waiter in a way I've never forgotten.



“
Networking isn't about collecting contacts; it's about building credibility before you need it.
”

They described a manufacturing buyer as "a waiter for production." Different menu. Higher stakes.

As a waiter, they balance multiple tables, competing demands, and shifting priorities. A buyer balances multiple suppliers, contract call-offs, part numbers, and urgent requests. In both cases, everyone believes their request is the most urgent. The skill isn't doing everything at once, it's sequencing effectively.

A waiter anticipates problems before the complaint comes.

A strong procurement or supply chain professional anticipates disruption before it affects service delivery.

It doesn't matter whether your experience comes from retail, warehousing, call centres, hospitality, sport, or volunteering. These roles are not peripheral to procurement and supply chain, they are training grounds for prioritisation, communication, resilience, and service. In the UK public sector especially, where service continuity and stakeholder management are critical, those behaviours matter deeply.

Early in a career, I'm hiring you for how you think, how you respond, and how you show up, not for what you already know.

The 10 Things That Require Zero Talent

There is another factor that consistently predicts early-career success, and it has nothing to do with technical proficiency.

It's what I call the "10 Things That Require Zero Talent." The list isn't original to me, versions of it circulate widely, but I've kept it on my whiteboard for most of my career. Not because I've mastered these things, but because I haven't. I keep it there as a reminder that no matter how senior I become, I am never above the basics.



Growth isn't about brilliance. It's about consistency. Leadership isn't about titles. It's about how you show up.

- Being on time
- Work ethic
- Effort
- Body language
- Energy
- Attitude
- Passion
- Being coachable
- Doing extra
- Being prepared

None of these require special talent or credentials. Yet in supply chain and public procurement, where scrutiny is high, budgets are tight, and collaboration is essential, these behaviours often make the difference between being competent and being trusted.

And trust, particularly in the public sector, is everything.

Coachability: The Career Accelerator

If I had to choose one of the ten that outweighs the rest, it would be coachability.

Coachability is not passive agreement or blind acceptance. It is the willingness to improve, even when feedback feels uncomfortable.

Early-career professionals will receive feedback they don't agree with.



One of the biggest myths students believe is that there's a "correct" background for entering supply chain or procurement.



Most of us have received an appraisal or assessment and thought, "I deserved better," or "I completely disagree."

You need to remember that someone has that perception and there is a reason for it. You may not agree with the evaluation, but the perception is real.

The most powerful response to feedback is not defensiveness; it's curiosity. Try this instead: "Thank you for the feedback. Can you help me understand where I can improve?"

That response signals maturity. It builds trust. It accelerates development.

Skills can be taught. Systems can be learned. Public procurement regulations, frameworks, and governance structures can all be understood over time. But humility, curiosity, and a willingness to grow are harder to instill.

The Long Game: Impressions Compound

Supply chain and procurement are relationship-driven professions. In the UK public sector, where stakeholders span finance, operations, clinicians, elected members, and suppliers, reputation travels quickly.

Early-career professionals often focus heavily on CV optimisation. But long-term careers are built on reputation.

What impression do you leave in meetings? Do colleagues describe you as reliable? Do you show up prepared? Or are you reactive and defensive? Do you run late? Do you close the loop?

Think about the impression you are leaving on others. What will they remember about you when you walk away?

In public procurement especially, your credibility compounds.

Every interaction either reinforces trust or erodes it.

Final Thought

When I hire early-career professionals, I'm not looking for polish. I'm looking for trajectory.

I'm looking for someone who shows up prepared, takes feedback well, earns trust, and gets better every month.

In supply chain and procurement, creativity matters. Problems are rarely solved by process alone. They require curiosity, critical thinking, and the confidence to suggest a better way, even if you're early in your career.

You don't have to be senior to deliver value. You have to be engaged. You have to be willing to think. You have to be willing to contribute.

In this profession, growth isn't reserved for those with the longest tenure. It's earned by those who improve, adapt, and step forward.

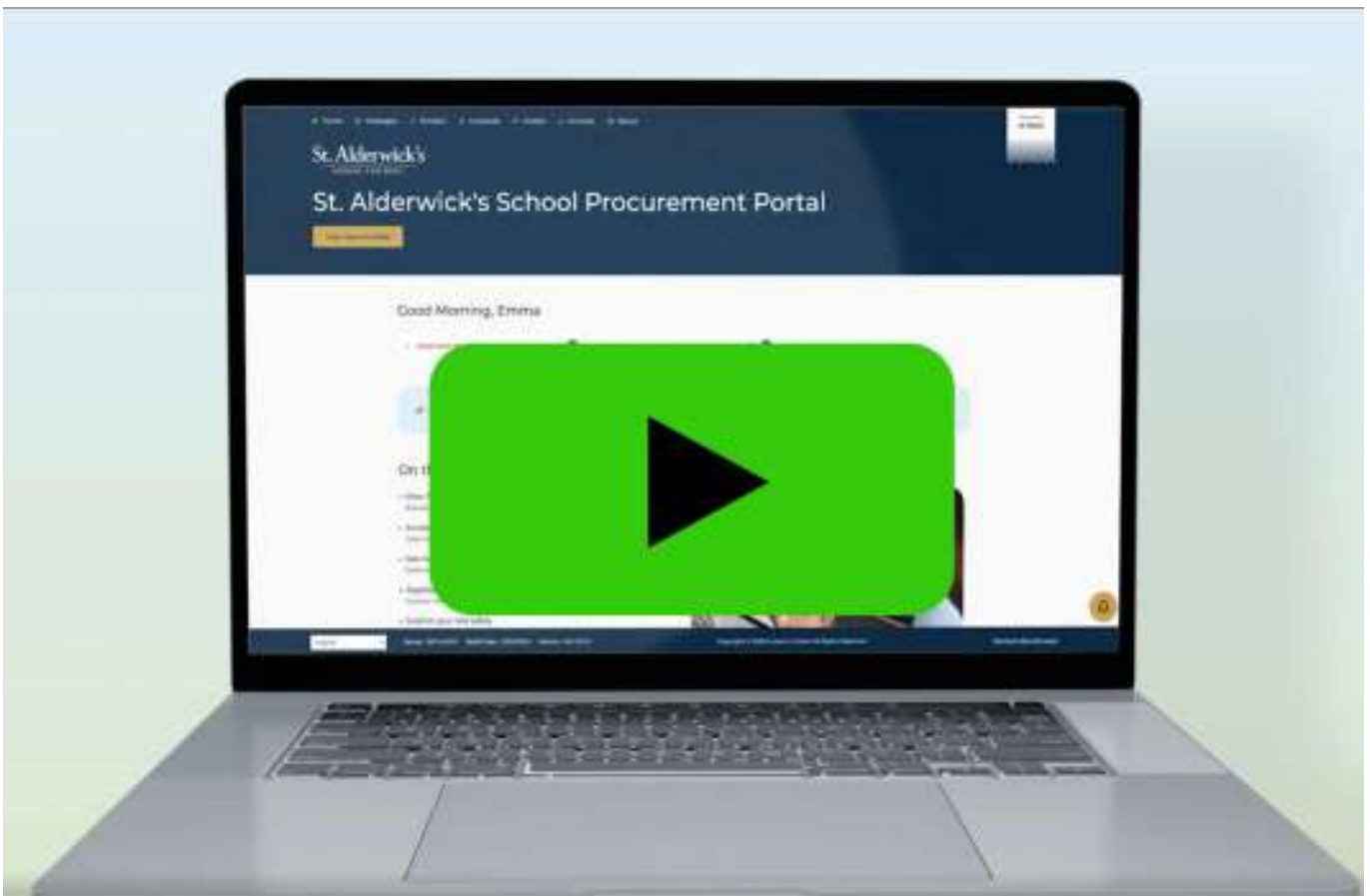
Kelly Singleton, SCMP, FSCMP is an accomplished supply chain professional with over 20 years of experience leading procurement, logistics, inventory, and trade compliance strategies.

As Director of Supply Chain at Price Industries, Kelly is known for building strong supplier partnerships, optimizing sourcing strategies, and mentoring high-performing teams.

In 2025, Kelly was honoured with the Fellowship Award from Supply Chain Canada, the highest recognition bestowed by the association, celebrating her outstanding leadership, mentorship, and contributions to the advancement of the supply chain profession. She has also contributed extensively to the field through her leadership roles with Supply Chain Canada, including serving as President of the Manitoba Institute and as Chair of the National Board. Kelly is a dedicated instructor for the SCMP designation program, shaping the next generation of supply chain professionals.



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THE HIDDEN COMPLEXITY OF HEALTHCARE PROCUREMENT

**UNDERSTANDING THE HIDDEN
CHALLENGES OF COMPLIANCE,
COSTS, SPECIALIST PRODUCTS
AND WORKING WITHIN LIVE CLINICAL
ENVIRONMENTS**



By Damian Wieczorek
Head of Procurement
LakeRidge Solutions Ltd

Healthcare construction and refurbishment projects present a unique set of procurement challenges. Unlike many other sectors, healthcare environments must balance strict regulatory compliance, operational continuity and patient safety, often within tight financial constraints and strict deadlines which must be adhered to.

For procurement professionals working across healthcare estates, ranging from hospitals and neurological centres to mental health treatment facilities and particularly within organisations such as the National Health Service (NHS), the goal is to deliver safe, compliant and cost-effective environments. However, the realities of delivering projects within live clinical settings mean that procurement decisions can have significant implications for both project outcomes and long-term operational performance.

Understanding the complexities of each healthcare environment individually is therefore critical to ensuring that procurement processes support successful project delivery, rather than hindering it.



Compliance and Regulatory Complexity

Healthcare facilities are subject to a wide range of regulatory requirements designed to protect patients, staff and visitors. These requirements influence everything from building materials to mechanical and electrical systems.

In many cases, products must meet specific healthcare-related standards. Lighting systems, for example, may need to meet particular emergency lighting requirements, infection control considerations, and in some environments, anti-ligature design standards.

For example, in mental health facilities, anti-ligature solutions are vital to ensure patient safety, which is not typically the case in other healthcare environments. In contrast, in neurological rehabilitation centres the focus is often on creating accessible environments that are neuro-inclusive in their design.

Procurement teams are therefore tasked with sourcing products and solutions that not only meet technical specifications but also align with regulatory guidance and clinical safety requirements.

This can present challenges when standard procurement approaches focus primarily on cost comparisons between suppliers offering seemingly similar products. In healthcare environments, small differences in product design, durability or compliance certification can have significant operational implications.

Healthcare facilities are subject to a wide range of regulatory requirements designed to protect patients, staff and visitors.

The 'Lowest Cost' Procurement Trap

One of the most common challenges in healthcare procurement is the pressure to achieve immediate cost savings. Public sector procurement frameworks understandably place strong emphasis on value for money, but the interpretation of value can sometimes focus too heavily on upfront cost

rather than lifecycle performance. Increasing emphasis is also being placed on creating modern and visually refined spaces, which can be difficult to achieve when procurement decisions focus solely on the lowest-cost option.

In high-demand healthcare environments, building systems are subjected to constant use. Lighting, fixtures and electric components must operate reliably under conditions that are often more demanding than those found in commercial buildings. It is therefore vital to find the correct balance between cost, reliability and performance.

When procurement decisions prioritise the lowest initial cost, organisations may inadvertently introduce longer-term risks. Products that technically meet minimum specifications may not provide the durability or performance required for healthcare environments, leading to premature failures or increased maintenance requirements. In practice, the disruption caused can often outweigh the initial procurement saving, as maintenance within clinical areas frequently requires strict infection control procedures, planned shutdowns or out-of-hours working.

Adopting a lifecycle approach to procurement - considering durability, maintenance requirements and long-term performance, can therefore provide significantly better value over the lifespan of a healthcare facility.



Working Within Live Clinical Environments

Unlike many construction projects, healthcare refurbishment and upgrade works are rarely carried out in empty buildings. Hospitals, clinics and mental health facilities operate continuously, meaning that projects must often be delivered alongside operational environments.

Working hours may be restricted to minimise disruption to patient care. Infection prevention and control procedures may require the segregation of work areas, specialised cleaning regimes or temporary control measures. In some cases, works must be carefully phased to maintain access to critical clinical spaces.

These constraints inevitably increase labour time and coordination requirements, which can in turn lead to higher labour costs. Procurement teams evaluating project costs may not always have full visibility of the operational complexities contractors face when working in these environments.

Recognising the practical realities of delivering projects in healthcare settings is therefore essential when assessing both programme timelines and cost structures. It is therefore critical to work closely with clients and subcontractors to mitigate risks and ensure that programmes are delivered on time.



When procurement decisions prioritise the lowest initial cost, organisations may inadvertently introduce longer-term risks.

Supply Chain and Specialist Products

Healthcare facilities often require specialist products that are not widely used in other sectors.

Anti-ligature solutions used within mental health wards to reduce risk, medical-grade lighting systems, and specialist finishes designed to support infection control are just a few examples.

In some cases, the number of approved manufacturers capable of meeting these requirements can be limited. This naturally reduces the level of competition available through traditional procurement routes. In these situations supplier choice may be limited, but it can also create opportunities for standardisation.

Longer lead times can also be a factor, particularly where specialist manufacturing processes or certification requirements are involved. Procurement strategies that do not fully account for these constraints may encounter delays during project delivery, which can have significant implications for the healthcare provider.

Early engagement with specialist suppliers and contractors can help mitigate these risks by identifying suitable products and lead times at an earlier stage of project planning.



The Value of Early Collaboration

One of the most effective ways to address procurement challenges in healthcare construction is through closer collaboration between procurement teams, estates departments and specialist advisors.

Early engagement with project stakeholders can provide valuable insight into practical delivery considerations, supply chain constraints and opportunities to refine specifications before projects progress to the tender stage.

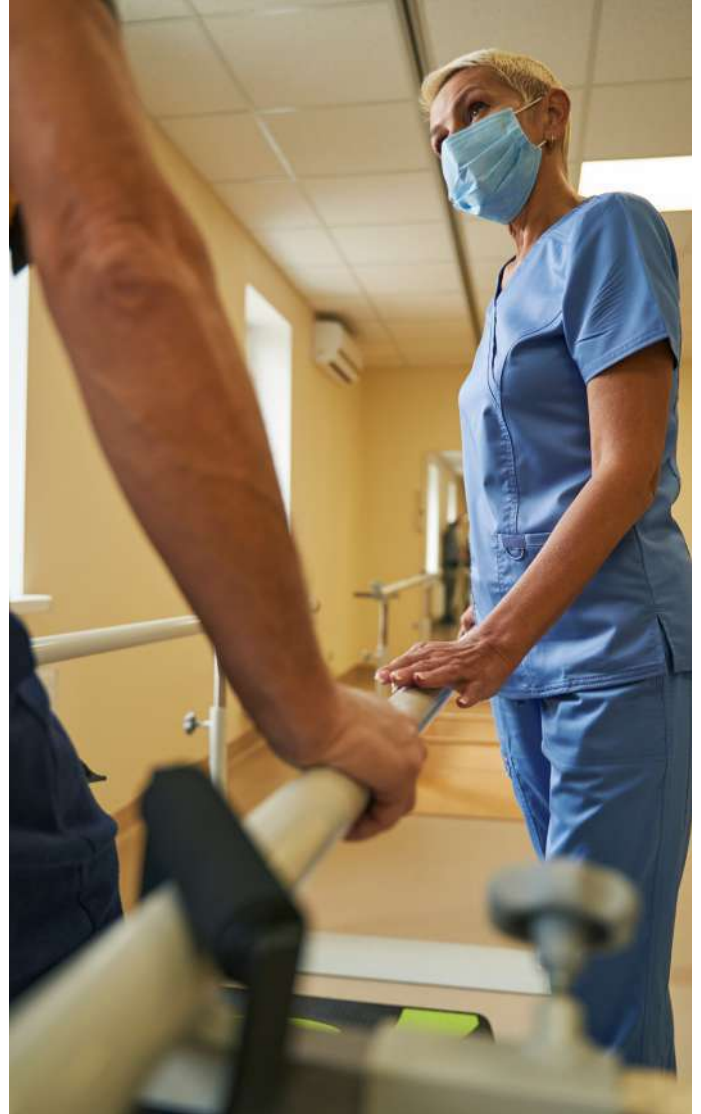
This collaborative approach can help avoid situations where technically compliant specifications prove difficult or unnecessarily costly to implement in practice. It can also support more accurate cost planning by ensuring that procurement strategies reflect the practical realities of delivering works within healthcare environments.

Ultimately, stronger collaboration between procurement, estates and project teams can lead to more efficient decision-making and more reliable project outcomes.

Looking Ahead

Healthcare procurement will always involve balancing competing priorities: cost control, regulatory compliance, operational continuity and patient safety. Achieving the right balance requires a clear understanding of the unique challenges associated with delivering projects within healthcare environments.

As healthcare estates continue to evolve in response to changing clinical demands, procurement strategies that prioritise practicality alongside compliance and cost will become increasingly important in supporting the delivery of resilient, high-performing healthcare environments.



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THE STRUCTURAL GAP BETWEEN SME PROCUREMENT POLICY AND OUTCOMES

WHY A DECADE OF TARGETS HAS NOT CHANGED WHO WINS GOVERNMENT WORK, AND WHY THE COST FALLS ON BUYING ORGANISATIONS



By Laurie Nicol
CEO
Tendl

The UK government has committed to directing a third of its procurement spend to small and medium-sized enterprises for over a decade. The target has been announced, reaffirmed, and restated by successive administrations. The most recent iteration sets departmental spending targets exceeding £7.4 billion per year by 2028. The political will is there.

The policy architecture exists. And yet direct SME spend has remained effectively flat at 26 to 27 percent of central government procurement since the mid-2010s. The gap between intent and outcome is structural.

Framework design narrows the field before competition begins

Most public sector procurement flows through framework agreements. These are intended to streamline buying by pre-qualifying a panel of suppliers.

In practice, they function as gatekeepers.

Turnover requirements are the most effective filter. Many frameworks require bidders to demonstrate annual revenue of two to three times the annualised contract value. A framework worth £5 million per year automatically excludes any firm turning over less than

£10 million. The Public Contracts Regulations 2015 stated that minimum turnover should generally not exceed twice the estimated contract value. That ceiling is routinely treated as the floor.

Insurance thresholds compound the problem. Professional indemnity requirements of £5 to £10 million are common. For a small firm, the annual premium for that level of cover can represent a material fraction of turnover,



payable regardless of whether any work materialises from the framework.

Then there is the experience trap. Selection questionnaires frequently require three to five named contract references of similar size and scope delivered to public sector clients.

Firms doing equivalent work in the private sector, or at smaller scale, are excluded. They cannot win contracts because they lack government experience. They cannot gain government experience because they cannot win contracts. The National Audit Office identified this circular barrier explicitly.

Incumbency is self-reinforcing

Beyond formal criteria, incumbent suppliers hold advantages that no policy announcement can neutralise. They possess detailed knowledge of the contracting authority's systems, staff, culture, and expectations. Requirements specifications are frequently drafted around how the incumbent delivers the service, describing an existing solution rather than desired outcomes. Transition scoring, where evaluators assess mobilisation risk, inherently favours the supplier already in place.

TUPE obligations amplify this further. When services transfer between providers, the incoming supplier must absorb existing staff on their current terms, often including legacy pay rates and pension commitments inherited from the public sector.



The most recent iteration sets departmental spending targets exceeding £7.4 billion per year by 2028. The political will is there.



For smaller firms, these unknown liabilities represent unquantifiable financial risk. TUPE information is frequently provided late or incompletely, creating uncertainty that deters exactly the kind of challenger bidder the policy is designed to attract.

The result is a procurement ecosystem where an estimated 50 to 60 percent of central government spend flows through frameworks dominated by a small group of strategic suppliers. The collapse of Carillion in 2018, which held hundreds of government

contracts and left massive service gaps, demonstrated the systemic risk of that concentration. The dynamics that produced it have not materially changed.

Narrow competition costs the buying organisation

This is where the conversation usually stops: at the unfairness to excluded suppliers. But the more significant cost falls on the buyer.

Research by the Office of Fair Trading found that each additional bidder in a competitive process reduces prices by approximately two to four percent. Moving from a single bidder to two produces price reductions of five to fifteen percent depending on the sector. The OECD estimates that reduced competition increases procurement costs by five to twenty percent across various contexts, with optimal competitive tension typically occurring at four to six serious bidders.

When SMEs withdraw from procurement processes, and evidence from the Federation of Small Businesses suggests roughly one in three do so before submission, the competitive field narrows in real time. Prices rise. Innovation stalls. Buying organisations become locked into legacy approaches from established suppliers whose business model rewards stability over transformation. Government research has acknowledged that SMEs are disproportionately responsible for

disruptive innovation. When procurement structures exclude them, buying organisations lose access to novel solutions and become dependent on incremental improvement from incumbents. Supply chain resilience suffers in parallel: concentration of contracts with a small number of large suppliers creates single points of failure, as Carillion proved.

The Procurement Act provides tools, not answers

The Procurement Act 2023, which came into force in February 2025, introduces several provisions that directly target these barriers. Pipeline notices give SMEs advance visibility of upcoming opportunities. Open frameworks allow new suppliers to join periodically rather than being locked out for half a decade. Payment terms of 30 days with flow-down to subcontractors address the late payment crisis that has long undermined smaller firms' ability to sustain government work.

These are meaningful reforms. But the Act imposes "have regard to" duties rather than binding requirements. It extends maximum framework duration to eight years, potentially worsening lock-out periods even as open frameworks theoretically mitigate them.



Incumbency is self-reinforcing. Beyond formal criteria, incumbent suppliers hold advantages that no policy announcement can neutralise.



Legislation alone cannot solve what is essentially a problem of procurement culture: risk-averse officers defaulting to large, familiar suppliers to avoid accountability for contract failures.

The question for buying organisations

The mechanisms described here, from turnover thresholds set at maximum permissible levels to evaluation criteria that reward incumbency over capability, are choices. Every one of them can be designed differently. The G-Cloud and Digital Marketplace have demonstrated that fundamentally different outcomes are achievable, with over 50 percent of spend going to SMEs, when procurement vehicles are built with low entry barriers, ongoing admission, and direct buyer-supplier matching.

The question is whether buying organisations will use the flexibility the new Act provides to genuinely widen competition, or whether the path of least resistance will prevail. A decade of flat SME spend despite continuous policy attention suggests the answer so far. The next chapter depends on procurement teams, not procurement targets.

Laurie Nicol, a mechatronic engineer and economist by training, started his career in professional engineering services and infrastructure advisory, where he saw firsthand how organisations win and lose large public contracts. He went on to found a spatial analytics platform for government infrastructure planning, spending a decade on both sides of the tendering problem: building the bids and running the business that depends on them.

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