

SME Advisory Group

Wednesday 25th September 2019

South Block, Government Buildings, Merrion Street, Dublin 2

Minutes

Attendees:

Minister of State Patrick O'Donovan – Chair		Nora Bermingham – OGP
Gillian Ross - CIF	Aidan Sweeney - IBEC	Shane Conneely – Chambers
Tonia Spollen Behrens - EI	Neil McDonnell – ISME	Elizabeth Bowen – SFA
Áine Carroll - CCPC	Joan Grogan – OGP	Derek Flanagan – OGP
Jason Coyle - OGP		

Apologies:

Paul Quinn – OGP	Jim Deane – OGP
Grant Gilmore – ITI	Eoghan Richardson – DBEI
Caroline Sweeney – ITI	Declan Hughes – DBEI
Christine Murray – DBEI	Sarah Smithers – DBEI
Ian Talbot – Chambers	Emma Kerrins – Chambers
Margaret Hearty – ITI	

1. Minutes of previous meeting and Actions Arising

The Minister of State welcomed the Group. The minutes of the last meeting were taken as read and will be published on the OGP website. There were no matters arising.

2. Programme for Government Review

Arising from OGP's consultation on the merits of establishing a Procurement Ombudsman. Minister of State O'Donovan requested that OGP conduct a wide-scope consultation on review mechanisms in public procurement. In June, OGP officials visited CoPE (Commission of Procurement Experts) in the Netherlands. OGP anticipate additional consultations with another two procurement offices in two different Member States. These visits will help inform the wider public and political consultation on how best to provide an effective and accessible review mechanism for public procurement. ISME stated it is important for a wider consultation independent of the OGP. OGP anticipate making the findings from this consultative process available early in 2020.

3. Minister of State's Proposals

Minister of State advised that he and Minister Donohoe had consulted with Government Ministers and their Departments on the reform programme to date. Views had also been sought from the sectors and industry representatives. Opposition spokespeople on procurement were also consulted but no responses have been received to date. Bilateral meetings are being organised to follow up on the submissions from the industry representative bodies on the SME AG. Feedback from these meetings, and submissions on the reform programme received to date, will inform a submission from OGP to the Minister to be made later this year.

Following feedback received via the review of the reform programme, the Minister raised the matter of the national advertising threshold currently set at €25k (excl. VAT) for goods and services. This matter had been considered by the Group previously. It had been agreed not to change the threshold and to keep the matter under review. The group acknowledged that the €25k threshold supports transparency. However, following discussion, the general consensus was that the threshold should be maintained at its present level. It was suggested a poll of suppliers might establish the views of industry on this matter. Other items which arose from this discussion included increasing awareness of public contract opportunities, particularly targeting small or micro companies; the impact of aggregating contracts on smaller companies and using proportionate turnover requirements.

The Minister advised he is due to meet the LGMA and LGOPC in Kerry in the coming weeks. In response to the Minister's request for more regular engagement between the SME AG members and the Procurement Executive, OGP confirmed that members of the Procurement Executive will be invited to the next SME AG meeting in December.

4. Communication Strategy Update

A Meet the Buyer event, relevant to the Health sector was held on 24 September in Galway. 124 suppliers attended with 17 HSE buyers present. Items in the programme included Brexit preparations and upcoming opportunities. There were two parallel sessions (a) Meet the Buyer One to One Meetings and (b) Tender Training. Feedback has been very positive. The event, which was open to all ran, from 8 am to 12 pm and was promoted heavily. EI noted that this type of event would benefit any and all suppliers but particularly new companies. Presentations are available from EI.

OGP provided an update on Breakfast Briefings. Two briefings took place in regional locations in August and an advanced briefing titled 'Selling to Government' is scheduled for 6 November. Industry representatives were invited to attend and provide feedback. SFA hope to stage an introductory-level

Breakfast Briefing before Christmas, likely in Sligo. Ibec thanked OGP for supporting their Bord Bia event in Donegal which was attended by c. 270 delegates.

Other events to be held in the coming weeks include: LGMA meeting on 30 September; Ibec and SFA will stage a Meet the Buyer in collaboration with Eirvia in relation to treatment plants on 17 September; EI are planning a Meet the Buyer event in relation to housing; and ITI are staging an information session for SMEs around Consortia Bidding on 22 October. In addition, OGP will host an FM meet the buyer event in Athlone in October and an ICT-category event in New Year. OGP agreed to consult with their colleagues in Sourcing in relation to staging ICT-related events for framework members.

The Minister highlighted possible opportunities for small companies in Project Ireland 2040 because of the capital sums involved. It is important that the group make their members aware of these events as part of the agreed Communications Strategy. Ibec suggested awareness could be raised via the Communications Group.

5. Terms of Reference for the Group

The revised Terms of Reference for the group were taken as agreed.

6. Brexit

The Minister advised that there can be no guarantees in relation to Brexit and that we all need to continue to ensure that public sector supply chains are as insulated as possible. Industry representatives suggested that businesses may not be engaging with public contracts because of the inclusion of Brexit-related clauses, particularly around risk. The Minister advised the SME AG to continue to plan for Brexit and avail of the supports across Government in this regard. The OGP continues to prepare for Brexit, including advising public bodies and updating its information notes as matters develop. The OGP has established a dedicated email address and has sufficient capacity on its helpdesk to deal with Brexit queries.

7. A.O.B.

ISME raised concerns around the inclusion of Brexit-clauses in public contracts, as well as concerns around the apparent adoption by HSE and NTA of 60 to 90 days to honour payments. OGP agreed to follow these issues up with the Procurement Executive.

Social Considerations Advisory Group

The OGP advised that the Social Considerations Advisory Group held meetings in March and June 2019 with the next meeting to take place in [October]. The OGP are working with the Department of Communication, Climate Action and Environment in the development of frameworks that may have a social/environmental element incorporated and the impact on SMEs is being considered in this process.