



Association of
Translation Companies
DEFINING STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE

ATC Small Business Public Sector White Paper

Towards sustainable development
in the procurement and provision of
language services for the public sector

June 2023

Introduction

This White Paper sets out recommendations for the UK's public sector commissioning and buying organisations on how to support small companies in accessing public sector language service contracts, striking a balance between centralised procurement approaches and the social value of local provision.

Background to White Paper

In 2020, the ATC's [Public Sector Manifesto](#) defined the association's objectives towards sustainable development within the procurement and provision of language services in the UK's public sector. These objectives were to:

- identify and promote sustainable best practices within the procurement and provision of language services;
- proactively work together with stakeholders on implementing realistic, concrete solutions that benefit the entire ecosystem;
- work towards a regulated environment, with more effective governance and oversight of the provision of language services at all levels; and to
- look beyond immediate challenges and into the future, supporting inspirational solutions and technology that advance the development of the industry, in meeting the needs of all users.

The Manifesto identified a number of areas where the foundations for sustainability across public sector procurement were best laid at framework specification level. These included framework specifications built to support the Government's objectives of awarding more public sector contracts to SMEs, and centralised procurement processes balanced with the social value of local and regional procurement.

This White Paper develops the themes of the Manifesto, and includes seven key recommendations to enable public sector commissioning and buying organisations to support small businesses in accessing public sector translation, interpreting and other language service contracts.

Micro, small or medium?

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of UK economy, making up 99.9% of the UK's businesses. In 2023, the Government reasserted its commitment to support SMEs in the [BEIS SME action plan](#) which set out a roadmap to reduce the barriers for SMEs around accessing public sector contracts.

When it comes to language services, apart from a few companies classified as 'large', virtually all of the companies operating in the UK's language services industry can be classified as SMEs, which covers all companies employing up to 250 people and with a turnover of up to €50 million. However, the notion of supporting SMEs to access public sector language service contracts is slightly misguided, because the diversity of suppliers of language services means that the need for support applies much more to 'micro' businesses employing fewer than 10 people and with a turnover of less than €2 million, and within 'small' businesses employing fewer than 50 people and with turnover less than €10 million.

These micro and small businesses coming under the 'S' in the definition of SMEs also make up the majority of the ATC's member companies. As businesses, they have the wealth of expertise, commitment and local and regional connections to add value to the diverse landscape of the UK's multicultural and multilingual public services. However, they are also the ones facing the highest barriers to access public sector contracts, and the most challenges in terms of meeting tender, framework and contractual requirements with very limited financial and human resources.

Ad hoc, off-contract and local

In the UK's public sector language services landscape, there are two typical ways through which small businesses provide public sector translation, interpreting and other language services: through ad hoc, off-contract work, and through local or regional commissioning organisations.

Small language service companies often act as a relief valve, providing ad hoc and off-contract work services for rare and scarce language combinations and for urgent requests. While providing a stream of work for small, local businesses, these ad hoc and off-contract services are problematic for commissioning organisations, in that they fall outside normal framework and other contractual agreements, and as such also outside structured vetting, governance and quality control processes other than the internal quality control and administration processes of the language service company.

Small businesses also have a significant social and commercial role to play as local experts, providing local authorities and commissioning organisations with recognised local and regional language services, contributing to the local economy and supporting local workforces. Although this work often used to be governed by direct contracts with commissioning organisations, it is increasingly being integrated into larger centralised frameworks, and lost to the previous small business suppliers.

As the Government's public buying organisations (PBOs) continue to close gaps in unmonitored, ungoverned ad hoc and off-contract work, and to bring local public sector work under centralised control, it is hugely important that provisions are made for small businesses' access to public sector work in a way that is proportionate to the commercial opportunity, and within the reach of small businesses' capabilities and resources.

7 recommendations to support small businesses

These are the ATC's seven recommendations for public sector commissioning and buying organisations to specifically support small businesses, striking the right balance between centralised procurement and the social value of localised provision.

1. Engage with the market to lower barriers to entry.

Open up access to public sector contracts and lower small businesses' barriers to entry through clear guidance and information on how to access frameworks and contracts, how to participate in tenders, and how to read and understand tender documentation.

2. Establish a structure to support small businesses.

Review how small businesses can realistically compete against medium-sized and large businesses in the tender process, and consider establishing a tiered procurement structure with smaller and regional lots or categories solely intended for small businesses.

3. Build in pricing that keeps small businesses in business.

Ensure that the quality-pricing ratio is at a sustainable 80/20 or 70/30 level, to ensure that small businesses are able to compete in the market. If small business lots or categories are intended to replace ad hoc or off-contract work, ensure that there is enough flexibility in pricing mechanisms to enable job fulfilment. Build in mechanisms to ensure fair and equitable fees to translators and interpreters, and fair compensation for travel and expenses.

4. Adjust requirements to small business scale.

Review the tendering, vetting, quality control, governance and liability requirements and ensure that they are attainable to small businesses with limited financial and human resources, and that the requirements are proportionate with the commercial scope and size of the contract opportunity, as well as relevant to smaller businesses and to the purposes of the work being tendered for.

5. Set uniform qualification and competence levels.

Ensure that the qualification, competence and/or experience level requirements for translators, interpreters, and other language professionals are defined in such a way that small businesses, which may not have the vendor management resources that larger businesses have, can rely on national registers to source qualified translators and interpreters to support their own vetting processes and to demonstrate the required credentials.

6. Support remote solutions through accessible technology.

Promote the provision of remote solutions where they enable increased accessibility for users of language services, but ensure that the required remote technology is commercially accessible to small businesses.

7. Define financial controls fairly and appropriately.

Link the cost of contracts to inflation to ensure small businesses' ability to deliver throughout the lifetime of the contract. Link financial penalties to fulfilment and service provision at a level appropriate to the framework or contract, and within small businesses' reach. Ensure that assignment cancellation policies are fair, appropriate and specific throughout the supply chain.