

PIN - Productivity Projects Fund

Small Project Report

**How Can Enterprise Ecosystems Enhance Small Business  
Capability To Tender For Public Sector Contracts?  
A Case Study of Greater Manchester & Dashboard of Priorities for  
Regions**

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## About PIN

The Productivity Insights Network was established in January 2018 and is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. As a multi-disciplinary network of social science researchers engaged with public, private, and third sector partners, our aim is to change the tone of the productivity debate in theory and practice. It is led by the University of Sheffield, with co-investigators at Cambridge Econometrics, Cardiff University, Durham University, University of Sunderland, SQW, University of Cambridge, University of Essex, University of Glasgow, University of Leeds and University of Stirling. The support of the funder is acknowledged. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the funders.

## About The Centre for Tendering



The Centre for Tendering ([www.centrefortendering.com](http://www.centrefortendering.com)) is a private consultancy and training company housed within the Manchester Barclays Eagle Labs. It was established by academics Dr Paula Turner and Professor Julia Rouse who have a long history of supporting and researching small businesses. We draw on experience and research to propose that competitive tendering for public sector contracts demands a complex set of capabilities from small firms. Working with procurers, we seek to make supply chains more accessible to small businesses by raising awareness of the capabilities that tendering demands and helping to streamline processes. Working with the business support community and small firms directly, we seek to build capability to tender for public sector contracts. Working with procurers and small businesses, we help to maximise value from public sector tendering by enabling economic and social development and supply chain innovation.

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## Executive Summary

Tendering describes a set of processes where specifications for public work are encased in a regulatory set of documents, under which potential suppliers can respond through completion of specialised information requests. The UK Government's SME Action Plan (BEIS, 2019) sets out a modern, ambitious strategy that includes an ambition to spend £1 in every £3 of public sector procurement on smaller businesses by 2022. This ambition follows a long track record of Governments trying to radically increase spend with small firms and, indeed, reflects an international problem (OECD, 2018).

The effective exclusion of most SMEs from public sector supply chains, or their positioning at lowest end of value chains, impedes productivity by:

1. undermining SME growth and local economic development;
2. inhibiting innovation and competitiveness in public supply chains;
3. wasting scarce SME resource in unsuccessful tendering.

Achieving the Government's laudible objectives will demand both reform of procurement practices to streamline the capabilities demanded by tendering and investment to build the capability to tender in small firms. The Productivity Insights Network commissioned The Centre for Tendering to focus on the latter problem: how to build capability to tender in small firms.

The Centre for Tendering's Capability Model proposes that competitive tendering is a knowledge-intensive process of developing a complex set of routines that combine in various patterns to build operational capabilities, enabled and renewed by dynamic capabilities, that enable small firms to win a stream of public sector contracts. This project investigated how well business support in a case study area – Greater Manchester – builds tendering capability. It reviews how well each capability is developed and how effective the learning process is for small firms at different stages of the tendering journey. In particular, how support builds strategic commitment, absorptive capacity, diagnosis of learning journeys, learning to be tender-ready and learning to develop and refresh tendering capability. Indeed, the study asks how well business support in Greater Manchester acts as an ecosystem with the value proposition of enabling tendering capability and, so, procurement of £1 in £3 to small firms.

Findings indicate that overall, and with pockets of exception, business support across Greater Manchester does not create the value proposition of enabling small firms to be capable at tendering. The advice on offer is sparse; it offers partial or no advice about different capabilities in The Centre for Tendering Capability Model and is often limited to stating procurement rules and compliance demands. Information is often abstract and technical and there is no chance to contact a human being with whom to make sense of a particular business or tender invitation beyond tender question clarification procedures. Support is also fragmented, making it unlikely that most small firms will find most resources.

Advice therefore fails to engage with evidence on how small firms learn and to provide a learning process. There is no support available to diagnose where a small firm is in the process of learning to tender or to direct them to customised learning resources to suit different stages of the learning pathway. In particular, support to raise absorptive capacity and strategic commitment to tendering, build basic tender readiness and to develop and refresh tendering capability are not evident. Training, coaching and peer learning are largely absent. We make recommendations for developing tendering capability in Greater Manchester and offer a dashboard of priorities to develop enterprise ecosystems with the value proposition of building small firm tendering capability nationally.

## Introduction

Tendering is a competitive and specialist form of business exchange. Under regulation, it is necessary to trade with public bodies for contracts above a minimum financial threshold. Tendering describes a set of processes where specifications for public work are encased in a regulatory set of documents, under which potential suppliers can respond through completion of specialised information requests. The UK Government's SME Action Plan (BEIS, 2019) sets out a modern, ambitious strategy that includes an ambition to spend £1 in every £3 of public sector procurement on smaller businesses by 2022. The draft UK Industrial Strategy also included a chapter highlighting this problem and a pledge to award SMEs 33% of public spending by 2022 (UK Government, 2017); this was cut in the final version, perhaps because of uncertainty about how to make tendering more accessible to small firms. This ambition follows a long track record of Governments trying to radically increase spend with small firms and, indeed, reflects an international problem (OECD, 2018).

The effective exclusion of most SMEs from public sector supply chains, or their positioning at lowest end of value chains, impedes productivity by:

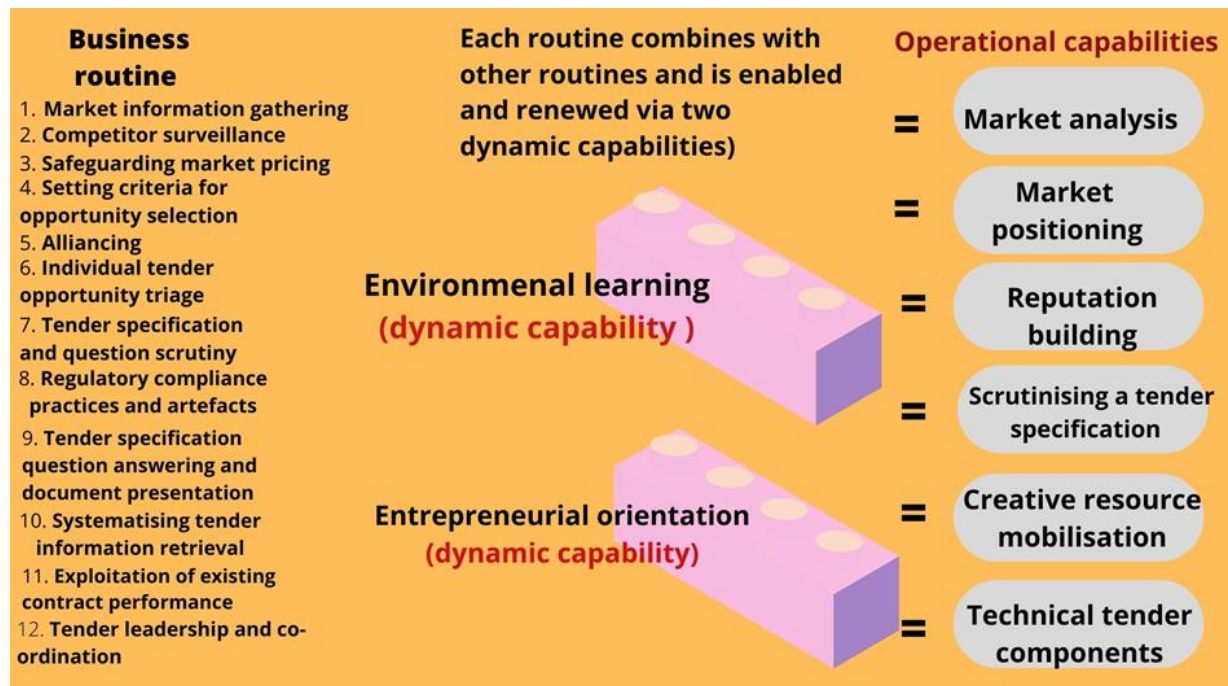
1. undermining SME growth and local economic development;
2. inhibiting innovation and competitiveness in public supply chains;
3. wasting scarce SME resource in unsuccessful tendering.

To date, policy innovation has focused on simplifying procurement processes. However, even after Brexit, the UK is likely to retain a political commitment and obligation (under new trade deals) to principles of transparency, fairness, quality, best value and ethics/sustainability that demand formal and complex procurement processes. A productive economy depends on SMEs developing capability to tender for public sector contracts and enterprise ecosystems that support that capability.

The management literature tells us that capabilities are a firm's abilities to get particular things done. They are made up through the combination of routines (semi-regular ways of doing operational tasks; Dosi *et al*, 2000). A strategic capability such as competitive tendering arises from coordinating a chain of operational capabilities and, so, a wider network of routines. Operational capabilities are refreshed and orientated to changing market conditions through dynamic capabilities. Building on this theory, in-depth research (Turner and Rouse, 2018; Turner, 2016) and experience of supporting small firms to tender, The Centre for Tendering proposes that competitive tendering is a knowledge-intensive process of developing a complex set of routines that combine in various patterns to build operational capabilities, enabled and renewed by dynamic capabilities, that enable small firms to win a stream of public sector contracts. Our model is summarised in Figure 1.

Following from this, achieving the Government's laudible objectives will demand both reform of procurement practices to streamline the capabilities demanded by tendering and investment to build the capability to tender in small firms. The Productivity Insights Network has commissioned The Centre for Tendering to focus, in this report, on the latter problem: how to build capability to tender in small firms.

Figure 1: The Centre for Tendering's Capability Model for SME Tendering



Further explanation of The Centre for Tendering's capability model for SME tendering is included in Appendix 1.

**Covid19.** Whilst this project was conceptualised pre-Covid-19, we believe it is vital in the Covid19 context because enabling small firms to permeate public sector procurement markets – and ensuring that procurement is used to fulfil economic and social goals so we can “build back better” – is an even higher priority. The pandemic has significantly disrupted 5.8m SMEs and recession means the private sector market will contract. Estimates predict 1 in 5 SMEs will close. Public sector spend is likely to come under further pressures and this may narrow attention on ‘best value’ processes that mean making larger commissions, judged more exclusively on price, sometimes by outsourced or distant procurement administrators who are not even tacitly aware of wider strategic objectives such as supporting small firms – i.e. it could move procurement even further away from small firms. This would be a retrograde step because it would undermine social and economic goals beyond the narrow purview of individual procurement processes. Small firms are open to innovation at a time of crisis and we know they often turn to their customers or suppliers to find collaborators for innovation (Roper, 2020). It would be unproductive for procurement to become a ‘flat process’ of administration rather than collaborative means of developing economies and communities. To achieve this, enterprise ecosystems must invest in developing small firm capability to tender and procurement must become more open to input from small businesses.

### How Do Small Firms Develop Capability To Tender?

Outside of the retail sector, business founding is usually focused on delivering goods and services to customers, rather than being ready to sell. Selling via tendering can be particularly alien to small firm leaders because most have product or service specific expertise and lack any experience of tendering. For many, their previous employment may have provided face-to-face customer negotiation skills but not ability to strategically situate a business in a tendering environment, decipher tender invitations and write a technical and competitive document.

While tender invitations share characteristics, they also vary. Each will ask specific questions and evaluate these in relation to a novel weighting system. Public procurement is also a turbulent



and idiosyncratic environment (Loader, 2013) so suppliers need to constantly learn about trends and variations and to 'upgrade' and 'retire' existing knowledge stocks. Learning to tender is not a 'one time' event, therefore, but an ongoing process.

**Strategic Commitment to Learning and Building Capability.** The Centre for Tendering's research indicates that public sector tendering capability arises from a strategic commitment to invest, on an ongoing basis, in developing and refreshing tendering capability and to orientating this to varied and changing public sector markets. Of course, this strategic commitment is often not consciously expressed although we argue that an important 'short cut' could be raising conscious commitment to developing tendering capability.

**Absorptive Capacity.** A firm's engagement with external learning, reflection on internal processes and use of both of these to change routines and capabilities depends on their absorptive capacity. This is the arrangement of their human capital - knowledge born out of education and experience – so that they are able and motivated to select relevant information and use it to enhance business practices (McPherson and Holt, 2007). In our model, environmental learning is a dynamic capability where knowledge is proactively sought, routines are changed in the light of learning and reflected upon so that capability builds alongside experience (success or failure in tendering).

**Learning by Doing?** The entrepreneurship literature tells us that small firm learning tends to be problem-situated. Small businesses tend to be focused on the short-term problem of survival and so they are not likely to spontaneously develop capability to tender prior to an individual tender invitation. There is an argument, then, for aligning learning to the process of responding to a specific tender invitation. Yet our prior research suggests that being successful at tendering demands some pre-existing capability as well as the ability to learn fast about efficient and competitive means of selecting tender invitations, writing tenders and reviewing outcomes. When a small firm approaches tendering without any awareness of its demands, and very low tendering capability, they are likely to waste resources on failure or an aborted attempt to tender, particularly when they have failed to 'triage' the opportunity to realise that they are trying to tender for a contract they cannot win or do not want. For some firms, public sector tendering is not the right strategic choice and learning to avoid this market is sensible. Of more concern are discouraged tenderers, with the potential to thrive through public sector contracting but low optimism or access to support to build capability. And, repeat failures that make multiple unsuccessful attempts to tender but do not learn from these or make a strategic choice to properly invest in building capability or to avoid this market.

There is a puzzle here: how to motivate and support small firms to strategically invest in developing a core set of capabilities so they become tender-ready as well as supporting them to use experience to hone and adapt tendering capability so they build and sustain their competitive edge. ***This small project considers how well the Greater Manchester Ecosystem supports firms at different stages of the journey to develop tendering capability.***

**Enterprise Ecosystems.** It is fashionable in research and policy circles to think about the system of organisations, rules and relationships that govern small businesses and shape their capabilities as an 'enterprise ecosystem'. If an ecosystem is a multi-lateral arrangement of actors and organisations that create a value proposition (Adner, 2017) then an enterprise ecosystem whose value proposition is to ensure that £1 of £3 of public sector procurement is spent on small firms is an arrangement of actors and organisations that make small firms capable to tender. Or, more specifically, an ecosystem that supports small firms to strategically commit (or not) to tendering, build the capability needed to be tender ready and continuously develop tendering capability through tendering experience. This ecosystem will not only supply information but enhance social capital: an entrepreneur's ability to get resource – in this case

information and sensemaking about tendering - out of networks. The support will, therefore, draw them into a relationship with procurers, expert business support providers and peers and encourage information sharing, reflection and mutual sensemaking.

Given that SMEs have such low tendering capability, it is evident that enterprise ecosystems are not widely designed to deliver the value proposition of making small firms capable of tendering. A crucial step forwards is to diagnose gaps in provision, compared to The Centre for Tendering's capability model and our understanding of how small firms can learn to build capability. Hence why this project took Greater Manchester as a case study and analysed how its enterprise ecosystem can be improved to support small firm tendering capability. From this case study, we make recommendations for Greater Manchester using a Dashboard of Priorities; an approach that offers potential to also support other regions to review and improve their enterprise ecosystems.

### **Case Study: Greater Manchester (GM) Enterprise Ecosystem**

In short, we offer a review of the services available to help small businesses in Greater Manchester to tender for public sector contracts. We compare this with The Centre for Tendering's capability model (Figure 1, page 6) and identify gaps in provision. We have argued that raising small firm capability to competitively tender for public sector contracts will mean raising their absorptive capacity, offering intensive support to be tender-ready and ongoing or specialist services that enable firms to build and refresh tendering capability and entrepreneurial orientation through the process of actually tendering. We therefore include in our audit consideration of how well provision supports small firm learning and tendering capability journeys. Finally, we consider the challenge of providing support that will build capability in small firms who are at different stages of the learning journey regarding competitive tendering.

The Greater Manchester (GM) enterprise ecosystem has a multilateral arrangement of business support via a Local Enterprise Partnership-commissioned GM-wide Business Growth Hub (with circa 120 Business Advisers), specialist local authority or community services, membership organisations, universities, science parks and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE)-specialist support. While there is some cooperation between actors, the reality is that these providers also compete for space in the business support supply chain. Provision or potential for support with tendering also resides in a large base of public procurers including ten local authorities, four universities, 35 Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership organisations, a large housing association sector (coordinated via Greater Manchester Housing Providers), Transport for Greater Manchester and branches of national institutions including the BBC and GCHQ, among others. Four out of ten Greater Manchester Combined Authority areas partner with a private company, Star Procurement, to provide their procurement function.

We worked with an Advisory Group to support identification of the resources available in GM to support small firms to learn about competitive tendering. The evidence presented in this report is exploratory, based on a systematic scrutiny of 22 websites, 35 sets of learning and signposting materials and 12 in-depth telephone interviews with leaders from publicly-commissioned and private business support bodies and public procurement professionals undertaken between March 2020 and May 2020. Project objectives were two-fold;

- *To explore how well business support serves small enterprises to build capability to tender*
- *To identify what changes to enterprise ecosystems are likely to enhance small enterprise learning to be capable tenderers to help policy leaders make better decisions on business support policies.*



## Audit Of The GM Ecosystem: Building Tendering Capability?

This section summarises our findings in two ways; first, about small firm learning processes and Capability journeys and, second, our analysis of how support provision to small firms to develop each of the core Capabilities in The Centre for Tendering's Capability Model (Figure 1, page 6).

### Audit Of Support For Small Firm Learning Processes and Capability Journeys

#### Learning Approaches

**Failure to raise absorptive capacity or strategic commitment.** We have described how building tendering capability requires strategic commitment to a considerable task and, so, depends on raising the absorptive capacity in firms so they are willing and able to go on a significant learning journey to build tender-readiness and then develop and sustain tendering capability. We did not identify any resource that works with small firms to develop this absorptive capacity or strategic commitment beyond some specialist Business Growth Hub provision. These deficiencies are likely to discourage tendering or to fuel frustration in firms trying, and often failing, to compete in public sector tendering because they develop only a fragment of the capability required to compete.

**Sporadic technical information rather than learning resources.** Support to small firms tends to be the provision of dry, technical information that is fragmented across suppliers and is partial compared with their information needs. There is a gap in provision that explains how technical know-how can be developed and stored in business routines and capabilities and an absence of information about the more 'soft' capabilities that enable firms to perform all the capabilities necessary to be competitive, prior to the technical completion of a tender document. As very little support is interactive and sustained, business leaders do not have a 'go-to' human partner with whom to make sense of their business context and the process of learning to build capability. They are also not organized into peer learning sets or referred to more interactive resources that include small firms making the tendering capability journey, such as via webinars and video.

For example, procurers tend to discharge their duties to support small firms by describing their tender advertisement and process compliance procedures on web pages, whilst remaining distant from individual firms. Small firms are left with a great deal of work to do in terms of interpreting quite technical information and associating this with the array of challenges they have in completing a tender document. Signposted materials, including artefacts such as a Social Value toolkit, also focus on explaining policy rather than providing a learning resource that would help firms to develop capabilities.

**Failure to diagnose journeys and customise support.** The idea that learning to be capable at tendering is a journey that requires initial investment to become tender-ready, followed by work to develop and then continuously renew and orientate capabilities is absent. There is no recognisable service to 'diagnose' where a firm is 'at', including within frontline 'soft' business advice. Nor is there support customized to businesses at different stages of the learning journey. However, from research, it is clear that Greater Manchester Business Growth Hub is continuously augmenting specialist learning provision and remains open to trialing new ways of support.

**Better Practice Examples** – VCSE, NHS and Construction. We did identify examples of better practice in support for VCSE enterprise champions and for potential suppliers to the NHS and construction sector. STEP Into Healthcare for example is a highly successful project (delivered in partnership with TRUSTECH and Health Innovation Manchester) and commissioned by

Manchester's Growth Company Business Growth Hub. It comprises three days of sessions at no cost to SMEs. The programme builds understanding of the healthcare landscape, market opportunity analysis, support to develop a value proposition, partnerships and a healthcare business case. These programmes promise to provide a more comprehensive learning journey and better support to build a system of tendering capabilities. Notably, they do provide on-going or deep-dive support that included opportunities to relate information to the development of individual small firms or even to address particular tender invitations. They also raised absorptive capacity by encouraging firms to see the scale of the challenge in becoming ready to tender and encouraging them to go on this journey. Within the VCSE sector, Macc is a further example of an organisation that nurtures sustainable and contextualized tendering support. It operates through long-term relationship building and hand-holding support with its members throughout their life-course and stimulates collaborative approaches by coordinating niche areas of spatial and service expertise.

### ***Learning to be Tender-Ready***

There is no central or coordinated systems of support to help small businesses to 'get going' with tendering and it seems likely that many will not identify the (relatively scarce) resources that do exist. Theoretically, novice tenderers can access dry compliance materials on procurer websites, occasional short (typically half or one-day) 'how to tender' workshops and sporadic 'meet the buyer' events. We think of these as 'hygiene resources' that provide basic information. They do not expressly encourage firms to strategically commit to tendering (or not), begin a tender journey and build a framework of capabilities to be tender-ready. 'Meet the procurer' events provide some chance to interact but it is likely that procurers are themselves unaware of the capabilities required in small firms to tender and so, while they can provide further insight into how procurers behave and tips for competitiveness, they cannot directly raise capability. Businesses may well lack basic compliance materials, such as social value reporting mechanisms, and so will be technically as well as more strategically incapable of competitive tendering. Neither mainstream business support nor business support organisations employ procurement experts to offer coaching in building tendering capability or competing in a particular competitive tender. SMEs cannot canvas public procurers for advice during a live tender. Therefore, they must resolve all problems themselves.

### ***Learning to build Tendering Capability and Orientate it to Changing Markets***





The GM ecosystem makes it tricky for small enterprises to manage the accumulation of external knowledge required to 'engage' then 'keep up'. Start-up and scale-up business and leadership programmes and membership organisations do not appear to assist firms to build and sustain tendering capability. We also did not identify systematic attempts to build peer learning processes so that firms can support one another in tendering. For most firms, then, tendering is a lonely journey or learning depends on their social capital (ability to draw resources – in this case, information and a reflexive partner for sensemaking – out of networks). Specialist social capital useful to tendering is likely to be scarce and not available to businesses in more disadvantaged groups and areas.







## **How Comprehensively Does Business Support Develop Tendering Capabilities?**

Table 1 (below) provides analysis of the Greater Manchester enterprise ecosystem support for small firms in terms of how well it raises capabilities in The Centre for Tendering's Capability Model (Figure 1, page 6). We use a traffic light system to identify which capabilities are more or less covered and to identify main gaps in provision. Analysis compares what 'general provision' looks like (everyday business advice, programmes, resources and signposting) with one specialist sectoral procurement programme (STEP INto Healthcare) that is shared as an example of better practice. STEP INto Healthcare is aimed at scale up life-science SMEs and

the Centre for Tendering has participated in it. Such programmes are rare. Complete Construction is a second sector-focused, deep-dive company programme that is being piloted. Data is not yet available on its programme content or methodology, so it is not analysed.







**Table 1: Audit of Greater Manchester Enterprise Ecosystem Support To Develop Tendering Capability In Small Firms**











Capability	Routines: what SMEs do to be capable*	General Business Support Status	Commentary on findings regarding general business support provision	Step into Health care status	Commentary on findings regarding specialist Step into Healthcare procurement programme <a href="https://www.businessgrowthhub.com/step-into-healthcare0">https://www.businessgrowthhub.com/step-into-healthcare0</a>
Market analysis	<p data-bbox="360 411 501 496">Market information gathering</p> <p data-bbox="360 967 501 1019">Competitor surveillance</p>	<p data-bbox="524 411 607 480"></p> <p data-bbox="524 967 607 1035"></p>	<p data-bbox="701 411 1350 935">All Council, NHS Trusts and university websites sampled prioritise clear signposting to registration points for tender publishing sites. For example, Council websites signpost to The Chest or onto Star Procurement. Business Growth Hub service zones do not carry information or signposting to sell to public markets. The NW tender portal (The Chest) user guide is only accessible from Star's website. The impact of supplier registration on portals is unclear – what happens next? Salford CC has one of the most comprehensive sections on How to Tender. Another Council refers businesses interested in tendering to the FSB; a membership organisation that does not offer micro-learning on tendering. Superficial investigation into the VCSE sector shows local networks are more effective: removing isolation and raising opportunity awareness.</p> <p data-bbox="701 967 1350 1337">Small firms seeking to discover contract awards to competitors, public sector demand for services or call for innovation must trawl multiple resources and may not identify what they are looking for: this is an energy drain. It is unclear how to investigate strategic and policy developments happening within buyer environments that affect sales chances (e.g. new regulations) to ensure a constant flow of high-quality information into the business. Initiatives like 'Buying into Bury' and Salford's 'Fit to Compete' aim to increase local SME capacity but stop short of teaching a systematic process of coming forward to compete.</p>	<p data-bbox="1373 411 1456 480"></p> <p data-bbox="1373 967 1456 1035"></p>	<p data-bbox="1487 411 2089 748">This programme operates at sector level and invites participants to identify niche target areas of the NHS that are likely to buy their product or service. Participants get an exclusive Q&amp;A session with a panel of senior procurers. This is the only example found where procurers put themselves forward for 'interrogation' to offer informal insight into what happens internally to 'get a foot in the door' and to hear how the NHS typically critiques an outside supplier's product or service proposition.</p> <p data-bbox="1487 967 2089 1251">Assistance is on hand to research NHS contract lifecycles, typical size/value and expected outputs. Participants are supported to develop a pitch to real procurers and receive live feedback in relation to how the idea will land in the NHS context. A specialist language and ethos exists for bidding into NHS – this programme is realistic in delivering expectation management that market entry can take a long time</p>




Capability	Routines: what SMEs do	General Business Support Status	Commentary on findings regarding general provision	Step into Health care status	Commentary on findings regarding specialist Step into Healthcare procurement programme
Market positioning	Setting criteria for opportunity selection		Support to help firms qualify themselves in or out of a tender is unreliable. Most procurer websites offer guidance for objective assessment of a contract opportunity (e.g. contract value, mandated experience). Salford CC states it will not discriminate against new or smaller suppliers and will review the potential risks. 'Bid readiness' is taught on the BGH one-day workshop but with limited detail. Business advice does not explicitly facilitate firms to set criteria for the kinds of tenders they want to and can win to act as a checklist against which to productively assess tender invitations.		Workshop sessions stimulate ideas on how to develop a 100-word value proposition and where to find the data to underpin it. A value proposition is extremely important to support SMEs in knowing how they can position themselves within NHS supply chains and it aids their attempts to open up dialogue with the NHS.
	Alliancing		GM's VCSE support sector represents best practice at fostering communities of practice for opportunity collaboration. Space to reflect on useful alliances or partnerships and network development specific to tendering is generally absent in other sectors.		This programme is exclusively for SMEs, but discussion around prohibitive contract volume and size does elucidate options for collaborative supply. The opportunity to pitch to a Procurement event acts as a platform where the panel consider and recommend potentially positive connections and relationships.
	Safeguarding market pricing		Firm leaders are generally not supported to engage confidently in knowing what to charge for their services and knowing the 'going rate' for units of service delivery. Advice about how to argue for quality, innovation or ethics in relation to price in tenders, rather than always competing on price, is not available.		SME owners can ask procurers what they pay for specific services and how value is calculated inside the NHS.





Capability	Routines: what SMEs do	General Business Support Status	Commentary on findings regarding general provision	Step status	Commentary on findings regarding specialist Step into Healthcare procurement programme
Scrutinising a tender specification	Individual tender opportunity triage		Most procurer websites offer basic guidance 'from their side' what a supplier should consider. This tends to encourage a realistic technical assessment of threshold questions (Yes/No answers that rule a bidder in or out of a competition). What is missing is business support to set criteria that helps a firm to consider the financial and other implications of taking on a particular contract that may be sub-economical in the overall business operating context. Limited or no guidance is given to develop a response plan and to decide which tenders are worth pursuing.		This level of detail is partially included in the programme through presentation material and peer to peer networking that encourages a strategic approach to opportunity selection and review.
	Tender question scrutiny		Star Procurement's guide distinguishes compliance and evaluation questions and explains scoring criteria. MCC's Social Value toolkit offers examples yet it lacks clarity on what 20% Social Value means. It does not enable a firm to audit themselves in the context of local community or a specific tender or help a business codify or write their own Social Value. An established Chamber Train tendering workshop teaches how to tailor your response to requirements		This level of detail is not included in the programme
Creative resource mobilisation	Tender leadership and co-ordination		Rochdale CC offer resources but also includes a named contact in its Economic Affairs team. They receive many calls from SME leaders who seek help to curate knowledge on tendering. Macc offers VCSE members free webinars - e.g. Understanding the new procurement guidance (PPN 01 20 and 02 20). University and commercial incubation hub resources and leadership programmes do not raise generally include support specific to tendering and so a chance to develop skills in mobilizing resources for competitive tendering is lost.		This programme is effective at changing thinking patterns. A three-minute pitch training session focuses attention on clarity of offer and how to lead a verbal pitch. It does not share or sufficiently provide guidance or discuss tender leadership and co-ordination practices.

Capability	Routines: what SMEs do to be capable*	General Business Support Status	Commentary on findings regarding general provision	Step into Health care status	Commentary on findings regarding specialist Step into Healthcare procurement programme
Technical Tender components	Tender specification question and answering		Salford CC and Star Procurement provide <i>Top Tips for Public Sector Tendering</i> guides. MCC produce opaque ITT guidance for Social Value with high interpretation demands: “ <i>weighted scores will be calculated by multiplying the score for each Social Value criteria by its weighting. The weighted scores will be totaled for each tender. The totals will be normalised so that the normalised highest total will attract the highest social value score i.e. (20%)</i> ”		Actual tender specifications are not examined. Less emphasis is placed on expressing business innovation in writing against a codified set of tender questions, which will be an inevitable part of contract award.
	Tender question answering and document presentation		Beyond hygiene factors (e.g. word-count, submit on time) there is an over reliance to let firms learn for themselves from experience. Capability to tender is positioned about answering a tender invitation; it starts before that.		Documentary preparation for tendering was partly addressed by a presentation on social value. How to build it inside a firm would likely require further support.
	Systematising tender document retrieval		Getting ready for tender submission by creating a library of standard firm material is encouraged in workshops and some in on-line material without detailed consideration or checklists.		This programme placed high emphasis upon being ready to produce a professional document with all appropriate attachments
Business adaptation: <b>dynamic capabilities</b>	Environmental learning		Environmental learning is the orientation of a firm’s goods or services to the specific need expressed in a particular invitation to tender. No support was identified that supports this. Scant feedback on tender outcomes is a part of this problem.		Firm-level absorptive capacity is boosted by peer-to-peer learning, access to further reading, downloadable teaching materials and multiple speaker perspectives; procurers, successful SMEs telling their journey to NHS contract award.
	Entrepreneurial orientation		Business procurement support does not consider how to showcase innovation		Programme builds innovation, risk-taking and resilience mindsets. Teaching uses practical examples and use of conceptual models (e.g. Butterfly tool) to aid learning and self-reflection.

**TABLE KEY**  = Evidence of comprehensive learning resources  = Evidence of partial learning resources and/or or a lack of clarity  = Evidence of no or minimal learning resources MCC: Manchester City Council; BGH : Business Growth Hub; CC: City Council

## Summary Critique of the GM Enterprise Ecosystem's Provision To Build Tendering Capabilities In Small Firms

### General Business Support Provision

**Market analysis.** Knowledge diffusion about finding tenders is good to variable across GMCA areas and resides in multiple locations. The ecosystem offers a fragmented customer journey with poor knowledge flows. Market information gathering is satisfactorily addressed for tender identification. Competitor surveillance and safeguarding market pricing routines are largely unaddressed. There is an over-reliance of non-verbal communication.

**Market positioning:** We appreciate that tendering contexts vary between procurers and tendering episodes, but what is generally missing is support to help an SME to consider how they 'stack up' against awarded contracts or to understand what leaps in supplier value are required to become competitive. There are a lack of informal 'social cues' – minimal support is detected to help a firm understand its knowledge background and knowledge stocks as pre-conditions. Setting criteria for opportunity selection, alliancing and safeguarding market pricing are all routines that are partially ignored.

**Reputation building:** Supplier profiles for winning public contracts tend to be idealised through regulatory compliance and not focused on firm innovation/agency. Support and guidance about regulatory compliance and artefacts is multi-layered, contradictory, largely disconnected and encased in policy language. Business requirements and 'effort' are not spelled out. Exploitation of existing contract performance demands pre-conditions that may be unrealistic for some firms (e.g. tech/AI market disruptor firms) that will avert their interest away from public supply with a loss of secured innovation for public services.

**Scrutinising a tender specification:** Business support does not support the pivotal importance of tender document scrutiny to assist with the arrangement of data to meet scoring requirements.

**Creative resource mobilisation:** Tender leadership and co-ordination is partially but not fully served. Unless an SME leader has prior tacit knowledge (usually from a larger firm) there is poor visibility of an end-to-end journey and the steps within this journey. Activity interventions do not seem to be guided by a clear set of principles for building tendering capability. There is no available evidence that influencing zones (SME leadership start up and growth programmes and networks) capitalise upon opportunities to build tendering capacity.

**Technical Tender Components:** The general level of business support does not teach a firm how to undertake a critical read of a tender specification prior to starting work on answering the questions. By doing so, readers will better understand how to write high scoring answers. Tender question answering and document presentation and Systematising tender documentation retrieval are micro-routines that are partially taught in workshops but not demonstrated in wider resources.

**Dynamic capabilities** (environmental learning and entrepreneurial orientation) are overlooked. Learning is constrained through rigid contractual entry gates where stiff sanctions apply for misunderstanding tender paperwork with a lack of informal safety nets. Opportunity to learn through reflection on tendering experience is largely absent and feedback on tender outcomes is scant. Innovation is at the heart of small enterprises with scant opportunity to showcase it through pre-engagement protocols (opportunities to 'show and tell' product or service features). The skill of orientating goods and services to a specific tender invitation is not taught.

In short, most capabilities are partially or negligibly supported through general business support.

## Specialist provision – STEP Into Healthcare

**Market analysis:** SME participants are sufficiently prepared and given time to formulate market information needs (both prior to and during programme hours). Competitor surveillance and safeguarding market pricing routines are addressed through peer discussion, specialist presentations and exercises. The NHS is a complex organisation to navigate and expert help is on hand to answer question about how clinical and non-clinical commissioning works.

**Market positioning:** SME participants are challenged to reflect upon and present their value proposition in a way that teaches them to ‘think like a procurer’. A defining programme benefit that serves market positioning is having procurement experts teaching business leaders how to distinguish themselves and sit within category management portfolios.

**Reputation building:** SME participants hear stories from other successful SME leaders about selling into the NHS and what resource demands this has placed upon their business. These are honest and reflective accounts, not PR soundbytes, to learn what expectations are placed upon a small supplier under contract.

**Scrutinising a tender specification:** This core Capability is partly addressed through programme delivery by programme materials that encourage realistic opportunity assessment. The programme does not ask a firm to formalise its opportunity assessment criteria (e.g. spatial delivery) but it offers strategic space for reflection on what ‘good business’ could look like as an NHS supplier.

**Creative resource mobilisation:** Tender leadership and co-ordination is partially but not fully served, primarily because time is not given to practicing tender completion.

**Technical Tender components:** This core Capability is partly served, although the level of business support to prepare and submit a tender is limited to anecdotal class discussion.

**Dynamic capabilities:** STEP Into Healthcare stimulates firm-level learning and positions it as a continuum, so a starting point for further exploration. As its core audience are Life Science SMEs with significant innovation potential the emphasis is on how to create market space rather than stay reactionary.

In short, STEP INTO Healthcare stimulates firms to partially build most core Capabilities within The Centre for Tendering’s Capability Model, with noted shortcomings.

## Summary And Recommendations For Greater Manchester

Greater Manchester lacks a learning support process that enables small firms to be competitive at public sector tendering. Information and advice predominantly emphasises the ‘front end’ of where to find suitable opportunities. As a consequence, there is a lack of explanation of the basic idea that tendering involves a series of capabilities and a learning journey to develop these or support to relate this to developing a specific firm. Help to diagnose learning journey, develops basic tender readiness, hone capabilities and refresh and orientate these as an ongoing process are essentially missing. There are fragmented pieces of dry technical help and very basic technical information on what tendering is, but this does not raise absorptive capacity, motivate strategic commitment or support capability development in customised learning journeys. We note exceptions where learning support is more intense (STEP Into Healthcare, NHS - a Construction pilot and targeted VCSE forms of support). Our key recommendation here is to develop learning resources that support varied learning pathways.



The content of business support, in terms of raising capabilities to meet those in The Centre for Tendering's Capability Model, is far from comprehensive. We provide detailed feedback in Table 1 about gaps. Step Into Healthcare is reviewed and found to be more comprehensive although this stand-alone programme cannot hope to be fully comprehensive. Our recommendation is that much more detailed support is required in general business support and that interventions such as STEP INto Healthcare needs to be a part of more comprehensive offers on learning pathways.

In Appendix 2 we detail comments made by interviewees regarding what is needed to improve tender capability support to small firms in Greater Manchester. We note a general acknowledgement of the support deficit that 'admits' to a lack of ideas as to how to address this significant challenge, accompanied by enthusiasm to affect positive change. We propose that matching support to The Centre for Tendering's Capability Model and the knowledge we cite around the importance of absorptive capacity, strategic commitment and small firm learning processes provides a novel and important route forwards.

### **A Dashboard of Priorities: What Needs To Change In Enterprise Ecosystems?**

This project has used a prior conceptualisation of small enterprise tendering capability to review current arrangements for business support access across a diverse base of ecosystem actors in Greater Manchester. We take Greater Manchester as a case study and suggest our findings have national applicability. Based on our analysis we have developed a digital dashboard with the aim of aiding regional enterprise ecosystems. The dashboard has been designed to enable better commissioning of business support so that enterprise ecosystems can deliver the value proposition of ensuring that £1 in £3 of public sector spend is invested in small firms.

Recommendations made are endorsed by our expert Advisory panel and, we hope, can serve to frame future enterprise ecosystem strategy and business support commissioning that can positively change conditions for small enterprises.

# How Can Enterprise Ecosystems Enhance Small Business Capability To Tender For Public Sector Contracts?

## A DASHBOARD OF PRIORITIES FOR REGIONS



### 1 BUILD ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY IN SMALL FIRMS

Help firms to manage the accumulation of external knowledge, and put tendering knowledge to work to adapt business operations. Encourage strategic space to make sense of business requirements (including tendering pre-conditions) to build capability alongside experience (success or failure in tendering)



### 2 DIAGNOSE LEARNING JOURNEYS

Enable frontline 'soft' business advice to diagnose where a firm is 'at' to customise business support. University and other SME start up and scale up providers can include a 'Learning to Build Tendering Capability' within their programmes



### 3 CREATE LEARNING RESOURCES, NOT INFORMATION

Replace dense, technical evergreen resources with practical and interactive tools. Use a micro-learning approach that aligns learning aides to business readiness and process requirements to respond to tender invitations



### 4 SUPPORT TENDER READINESS THROUGH COACHING AND PEER LEARNING

Socialise knowledge and encourage storytelling. Help firms learn from and between each other. Open up informal safety nets for everyday problem solving. After tender readiness there is a need to extend and refresh tendering capability



### 5 DEVELOP STRATEGIC COMMITMENT IN SMALL FIRMS

Encourage bold conversations. Ask if public contracts are the right strategic choice for a business or if avoiding this market is sensible. Of more concern are discouraged tenderers, with the potential to thrive through public sector contracting and bring innovation in, but with low optimism or access to support to build capability



### 6 CENTRALISE, CO-ORDINATE AND INTENSIVELY SIGNPOST RESOURCES

Organise, simplify and connect learning materials that allow a business to strategically situate itself in a tendering environment, decipher tender invitations and write technical and competitive documents

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## Appendix 1: The Centre For Tendering's Capability Model.

Figure 1 in the report (page 6) introduces The Centre for Tendering's Capability Model. This highlights the eight top performing capabilities observed in small businesses that have learnt to become highly successful at winning tenders. It is a sensitising framework for other firms to create their own capability framework.

We define three types of capability (situational, tender production and dynamic behavioural). Each capability is built on a set of routines, everyday activities that 'get things done' and that together combine to create operational capabilities.

### Situating capabilities

**Market Analysis:** To be competitive at public sector tendering, a firm must have the capability of Market Analysis. This is about investing management time and effort into developing specialist and current market knowledge and public procurer decision-making. One of the routines that support this is finding advertised tender invitations to which a business might respond. This means signing up to the right online portals, setting-up appropriate alerts and ensuring that alert emails are sent to one (or more) staff members who are resourced and motivated to routinely scrutinize them. Market Analysis also depends on other routines such as competitor surveillance.

**Market Positioning** is a core Capability that includes (but is not limited to) the process of selecting which tenders to compete for. This relies on setting criteria for opportunity selection. This routine can be implicit (relying on the 'common sense' of the scrutineer around the kinds of things the business usually does or can do) or it can be more explicitly developed as a shared process of sensemaking among business leaders that is allied to their ideas about what kind of work is winnable, profitable, necessary to manage competitors or will create a pathway to medium-term objectives. It can also be an implicit part of a person's workload (and potentially conducting erratically so that tenders are missed or less well scrutinized on occasion) or a standing item in leadership meetings, conducted much more strategically. Becoming really good at Market Positioning relies on awareness of another routine: alliancing. It may be that a competitive offer can be made in alliance with a partner, either by leading or acting as a supplier to the lead contractor. Effective Market Positioning includes knowing how or if it is possible to operate a potential contract in a financially stable way. Where there are prior routines that enable this, and awareness of what is possible by combining organizational routines, Market Positioning decisions are enhanced.

**Reputation building** is a core Capability that is primarily (although not exclusively) about regulatory compliance; a pre-condition to tendering. It describes how to invest in developing business processes and then how to use these to present the business as credible, relevant and reliable. Signals are built inside and outside of the firm: using prior contract success and delivery to articulate credibility; accreditations and prizes to signal quality; positions on advisory groups as an innovative thought leader in the field; employment policies and accreditations with bodies such as the Living Wage Foundation to indicate being a good employer; articulating how the business has a role in the community and protects the environment through policies and case studies of social value. Simply having good practices (inside the firm is insufficient; they require market display and utility to attract stakeholder attention and to become reputational resources.

### Tender Production Capabilities

**Tender Specification Scrutiny** is a core Capability that tends to rely on experience accumulation to forensically interpret and construct high scoring answers. A detailed review of a tender specification and bid/don't bid decision-making is enabled by an opportunity triage firm routine to set criteria for which tenders sit within their spatial, economic and expertise range of factors. Then, a detailed reading of tender questions allows a firm to plan and reveals what opportunities and threats the specification of services to be delivered pose to the firm. For example, a careful assessment of the budget available and tender scoring against price, quality, technical aspects of service delivery and other areas enables sound decision making.

**Creative resource mobilisation** is a core Capability which operates throughout a single tender completion cycle inside a firm. Effective resource mobilisation arises from tender leadership and co-ordination and a cultural motivation to 'get the job done.' Tender instructions act as a trigger to enact collective problem solving and tender assembly activities. Resources are primarily staff time, with a porous boundary to harnessing external resources such as lawyers. There is a creative element here as products and services or business processes may need to be re-imagined in order to articulate a market offer and deliver if successful. This routine is highly related to alliancing as small firms can overcome resource gaps through collaborative partnering.

**Technical Tender Components** is a core Capability to get a tender successfully completed and submitted. Careful question answering, document formatting and design and storing/retrieving specific standard information such as policies create efficient, lean and competitive tender production processes.

### Dynamic Capabilities

**Environmental Learning** is a core Capability that shapes and interacts with all the other core Capabilities. Learning arises both from external engagement and from reflection on business activity and experience, including the tendering process. Crucially, learning is then used to reconfigure Capabilities, so they are more efficient or effective and respond to contemporary conditions and strategic aims. Environmental learning is often enhanced when businesses structure 'strategic space' and prioritise reflection. So, for example, if reflecting on tendering processes is a routine in management or team meetings or at key points in the process of preparing a tender. Peer learning can be important in providing external information and new reflection on internal processes. Detailed feedback on tender outcomes, and commitment to using this to reflect and adjust future practice, is crucial.

**Entrepreneurial orientation** is a core Capability that switches on improvised resource construction to sense and seize opportunities, including those that may appear potentially out of reach (e.g. because of firm size). Entrepreneurial culture leads to modes of innovation, both in how tenders were answered and constructed but also through firm strategies for limiting imitation by competitors and protecting contract values. Organisational learning is enabled through entrepreneurial orientation.



## Appendix 2: Business Support Provider and Procurer Insights

Interview respondents answered a set of questions on three key questions;

1. Their perception of a skills leap small enterprises need to make
2. Their personal suggestions for eco-system improvement
3. Whose responsibility it is to make system improvements

*Q1: Their perception of a skills leap small enterprises need to make*

<b>Procurer views</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many small enterprises just don't know how to collect the right kind of data we want to see in tender responses</li> <li>• We know that a lot of the time, a small enterprise 'on the ground performance' is a million times better than how they write up their capacity in a method statement. We have to award elsewhere</li> <li>• We have the problem in reverse, sometimes. Some great firms don't bother tendering because they see it as too bureaucratic and we miss out on their ideas</li> <li>• Particularly in Healthcare, supplier innovation can be dismissed as unwelcome. It might save money and improve quality, but it gets messy when it might impact on other contract delivery</li> <li>• Small enterprises don't know how to blow their own trumpets</li> <li>• Small firms need to behave like bid-writers</li> <li>• We've had, on occasion, to remove a successful incumbent provider because their re-tender was too weak</li> </ul>
<b>Business support body views</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enterprises can display poor awareness of capacity to tender because they don't understand what it entails</li> <li>• It is easy to present yourself as the 'wrong kind of organisation' to be awarded a contract by how you answer questions</li> <li>• You need to have the right policies etc. in place before you can start</li> <li>• Essentially, we expect small firms to know where to find policy, to understand it, then apply it on their own</li> <li>• Small for-profit enterprises are engaged in playing catch up on Social Value</li> </ul>

*Q2: Respondent suggestions for eco-system improvement*

<i>Procurer views</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We may be the cause as we do tend to throw a lot of policy information at suppliers that blind-sides them</li> <li>• There is more we can do for below-OJEU threshold tenders. We could ask less, but it's dangerous to associate low value with low risk. Risk and value are not associated</li> <li>• Procurement legal teams directly affect the social proximity small enterprises can achieve</li> <li>• We all use The Chest but it's really off-putting to use</li> <li>• There are some really good things happening</li> <li>• Feedback we offer is perfunctory, but we do make it available and a lot of small organisations don't even ask us for it</li> <li>• We are asking (for-profit) firms to dig deeper to provide social value. Suppliers are also offering us auditable social value, but what they offer doesn't serve our needs</li> <li>• Buy local spend local campaigns work</li> <li>• We are thinking of running SME workshops around specific framework bids and in general to break down barriers</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We capture social value in tender questions and responses. Making it work in practice is very challenging - we need to educate our [anchor institution] staff better. That isn't procurement's job.</li> </ul>
<i>Business support body views</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Procurement language and expression can improve</li> <li>Documents are technically specific - their drafting is also often technically exclusionary</li> <li>Clinical Commissioning Groups are reactionary - too slow to respond to new ideas</li> <li>VCSE bodies rely on bid writing to top up funding so we'd like to do more</li> <li>Commissioners need to understand how what they do impacts on small enterprises further down the line</li> <li>The awareness piece is missing</li> <li>Business advisers don't have specialist knowledge or a way of diagnostic tool to offer situated learning</li> <li>New tenderers need someone who has done it before to interpret the language of the tendering and optimal way business to communicate its relevance</li> <li>There is a false boundary between for-profit and social enterprise support. For-profit organisations could be encouraged to adopt co-operative values to build better community productivity.</li> <li>It's difficult to know how GM advice can address multiple procurers</li> <li>Existing on-line resources/toolkits just restate policy commands – they aren't really learning resources for firms</li> <li>Picking stuff up off websites and from some of the resources these (e.g. toolkits) is a terrible way of learning. Open a social /peer-to-peer aspect to it that allows leaders to ask questions. Create an informal safety net. Resources should be more inspiring and less boring.</li> <li>There is far too much information to absorb in some documents- say less, but better, and do it through networks to act as sounding boards</li> <li>Nothing replaces somebody sat next to you who understands your business and that sector</li> <li>New tenderers need someone who has done it before to interpret the language of the tendering and optimal way business to communicate its relevance</li> </ul>

### Q3. Whose responsibility is it to make improvements?

<i>Procurer views</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is our job to help SMEs to understand the rules of participation. But businesses should be tender ready before they engage with us</li> <li>It is only right and fair that firms know the game before entering into a formal tendering round.</li> <li>We do not know if advice given make firms submit better tenders</li> <li>We create a trap for ourselves - the 'cycle of mediocrity'</li> <li>We should offer more pre-engagement protocols – building up suppliers for the future</li> <li>We know our resources are clunky, but it is a complicated and time-consuming job to change them and we are already stripped of resources.</li> <li>In terms of extra support for businesses in the main we would refer to Business Growth hub.</li> <li>I have offered to speak and mingle at business growth programmes – nobody has taken up my offer yet</li> </ul>
<i>Business support provider view</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We can use our Executive Education coaching to supply support</li> <li>We are unclear how to sit in the middle of the buy and supply side – we pass on what we can that is useful from accumulated adviser experience</li> </ul>