

Q&A: UNISON's guide to campaigning and negotiating around procurement

What is the Procurement Guide?

The procurement guide is a step by step handbook for any branch dealing with the procurement process – from the commissioning of services by a public body to the outsourcing of jobs following the awarding of a contract to a private contractor. It provides advice on how UNISON branches can best influence the procurement process to secure positive outcomes for our members. It will help branch representatives to understand the sometimes complex process of public sector procurement and to identify the key stages at which our union can make a positive difference for members.

The guide is not designed to be read from cover to cover. Instead it has been developed as a toolkit that allows branches to dip in and out of the various sections to get the practical guidance that is relevant to them.

Why is the guide important?

UNISON is a public service union with members employed across the public sector. The Government's commissioning and procurement agenda, particularly in England, is causing fragmentation in the delivery of public services and could see the transfer of thousands more jobs to private companies and the community and voluntary sector. It could lead to the break-up of national bargaining frameworks and potentially undermine the terms and conditions of many UNISON members, including their pension benefits.

Early intervention with campaigning and negotiating around procurement helps to ensure that members interests are effectively represented.

What is in the Guide?

The guide begins by explaining the background and politics of commissioning and procurement. This includes a description of the various procurement models and sets out the key arguments for focusing on in-house improvements, rather than privatisation.

The guide emphasises the need for early intervention in the procurement process to maximise the chances of keeping services in-house. Each section includes "key points for action for UNISON branches" containing practical suggestions for branch officers. For each stage of the procurement process, the Guide also gives branches advice on recruiting new members, communicating with existing members, and organising around procurement issues so that branches can grow in size and influence through their campaigning.

There is an easy to understand chapter on the main stages of the commissioning and procurement process, including advice on developing a branch strategy and information about the more technical employment issues which may affect members. The guide includes a "Procurement and the law" section which explains the various pieces of legislation relevant to public sector procurement. In the appendices there is an example of a contract notice, references to further sources of information and links to useful websites.

Who is it aimed at?

Any branch representative that is dealing with local procurement related issues will find the guide useful.

The guide aims to provide advice to branches through practical steps that are relevant throughout the UK and highlights the differences in policy, procurement law and processes between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where they are relevant. It also aims to demystify some of the jargon around the EU procurement process. The guide is designed to help branches irrespective of which part of the public sector they work in. Branches in health, local government, education, criminal justice and other sectors will find it equally useful.

Who wrote the Procurement Guide?

The guide was written by the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) in consultation with UNISON officers. APSE is a not-for-profit organisation which aims to promote best practice in the public sector. They have considerable experience in advising organisations on procurement issues across the UK. Much of the guide's material was based on the excellent work done by UNISON's Northern region to develop their own procurement guidance.

Does the Guide stand alone or are there other resources my branch can access?

The Guide is just one part of a wider drive to provide branches with information and support to deal with the challenges posed by the procurement agenda. A procurement training programme for organising staff and activists is being developed, with training days for regional staff already underway and a course specifically designed to meet the needs of local activists will be available early in 2009. The course is not intended to create procurement experts, but to provide practical advice to accompany the toolkit. If you or your branch colleagues think you would benefit from this two-day training course please get in touch with Jim Lewis in Learning and Organising Services by e-mailing J.Lewis@unison.co.uk

UNISON is also in the process of setting up a dedicated procurement website designed to keep branches up to date with the constantly developing issues relating to procurement. We will contact all branches again as soon as the new website goes live.

Where do I go to get more help on procurement?

All UNISON regions have officers experienced in dealing with procurement and commissioning. If your branch is beginning to campaign and negotiate on procurement issues it is important to get in touch with your region to see what further advice and support they can offer and to ensure that they are updated on developments.

If you have a specific enquiry relating to the procurement guide itself you can contact UNISON Bargaining Support by e-mailing Gavin Edwards at g.edwards@unison.co.uk or by calling 0207 551 1402. Alternatively you can write to UNISON Bargaining Support, 1 Mabledon Place, London, WC1H 9AJ

How does my branch get hold of a copy of the Procurement Guide?

Every branch will be sent a copy of the guide directly.

If you would like further copies of the guide they can be ordered by e-mailing stockorders@unison.co.uk or by calling 020 7551 1455. You will need to quote the title: *From Commissioning to Contract Evaluation: UNISON's guide to campaigning negotiating around procurement* and the stock number which is 2734. You will also need to give your name, your branch name and number and full contact details.

You can also download an electronic version of the Guide from <http://www.unison.org.uk/activists/procurement>