

Helpdesk for contracting authorities

Summary

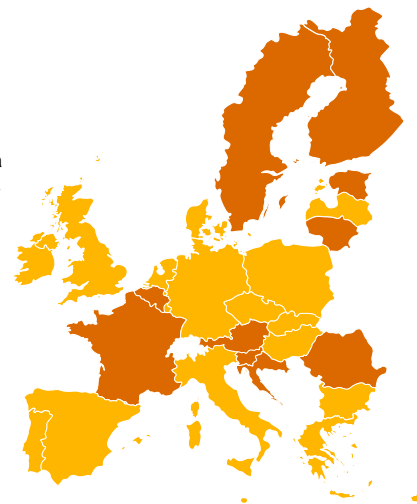
A public procurement helpdesk is a single point of contact for assistance to contracting authorities and often economic operators with inquiries related to public procurement rules.

Typically, procurement helpdesks take the form of call centres or phone “hotlines”. However, helpdesks can also be a general mailbox via which procurers can raise questions. Procurement helpdesks are usually featured on the website of the authority in charge of the implementation of the national public procurement law within a Member State (MS). They provide procurers with quick and tailor-made information and are particularly valuable for supporting infrequent procurers.

As public procurement regulations can be subject to frequent changes and entail a fair degree of complexity, helpdesks represent an efficient tool to ensure legal certainty as well as to solve recurrent issues in terms of choice of procedures, tender specifications and publication rules among others.

Good Practice Examples

- ✓ Austria
- ✓ Belgium
- ✓ Croatia
- ✓ Estonia
- ✓ Finland
- ✓ France
- ✓ Lithuania
- ✓ Romania
- ✓ Slovenia
- ✓ Sweden



Input

Cost – €€

- Medium set-up cost (e.g. implementation of an electronic form on the institution's existing web page)
- Medium operation cost (due to the need to staff the helpdesk with permanent personnel and therefore securing sufficient and efficient staff)



Time – Less than 6 months



Complexity – Low

- Permanent and skilled staff needed
- Organisational redesign and reorganisation of roles
- Infrastructure investment (e.g. computer, telephones, dedicated space for call centre)



Impact

Ensure better compliance



Providing expert advice to contracting authorities on legal, regulatory and practical aspects of procurement contributes to increasing the competence and confidence of contracting authorities in running procurement procedures, as well as the overall compliance with applicable rules. Educated and equipped contracting authorities tend to avoid errors and irregularities, which further increases compliance in the long term.

Promote professionalisation



Information provided by the helpdesk to address contracting authorities' queries contribute to their overall knowledge of public procurement rules, procedures and practices.

Key success factors and potential pitfalls (1)

Make it accessible and easy to use

Providing the information free of charge, promoting the helpdesk to ensure contracting authorities are aware of it and know how to use it, as well as having an easy to find phone number, interface or online chat, and encouraging proactive advice requests are several important ways to promote helpdesks and make them easy to use.

Duplication of services

Having more than one helpdesk providing the advice related to procurement could be confusing. Thus enhancing and promoting the existing one is recommended. When an additional helpdesk is needed, the type of advice provided by the helpdesk should be clearly stated so that contracting authorities and economic operators know which helpdesk to consult. In addition, indicating the geographic area covered could be useful.

Key success factors and potential pitfalls (2)

Focus on users' needs

It is key to offer feedback channels to users that give them the possibility to send suggestions or comments regarding the service. It is also important to manage user expectations. One important consideration in this regard is how responses are formulated, e.g. stressing that they are non-binding and therefore limiting the liability of the helpdesk.

For hotlines:

Allow for flexibility in terms of helpdesk operating hours;
Propose phone consultations for urgent issues.

For general mailbox:

Use an electronic form (with mandatory fields) to fill in for submitting queries in order to avoid missing crucial information (contract notice number, telephone number etc.) and ensure all information needed to address the query is available;
Offer the option to call users back.

Staff it sufficiently and operate it efficiently

Making sure sufficient staff is available is essential in keeping response times short. Ensuring that helpdesk staff is competent to address complex queries or situations is another prerequisite for a successful helpdesk. This requires that staff have hands-on experience running procurement procedures.

Implementing a "cascade" system for answering questions is a way to make sure that the helpdesk operates efficiently. Straightforward, common and easy questions should, as a rule, be answered on the spot or within a few days. More complex issues should be escalated to staff with relevant expertise, and answered with a short delay. Finally, very complex matters that cannot be answered by the helpdesk directly should be forwarded to legal specialists in the procurement office.

Encourage proactive queries

Contracting authorities often do not contact the helpdesk until too late, which makes it more difficult to address an issue or recover from a complex situation. To minimise this, contracting authorities should be encouraged to use the helpdesk early on in the procedure. Awareness-raising or defining specific time limits for answering questions could help in addressing this issue.

Helpdesk requests are not specific enough to answer

One common issue is contracting authorities not providing all the necessary information to understand the query or the context of the issue. In some cases, this may be intentional on the part of the requestor, who is trying to obtain a semi-official sanction for their preferred course of action. As such, helpdesks should be able to request additional information when necessary.

Monitor the quality and effectiveness of the helpdesk

A monitoring system can provide insight into the effectiveness of the helpdesk and allow for continuous improvement of the service. Furthermore, monitoring the most recurrent issues reported by contracting authorities is key to developing targeted guidance or other activities for capacity-building.

Deter overreliance on helpdesk

Contracting authorities may rely too heavily on the helpdesk instead of learning on the job, which ultimately could result in less professionalisation of procurement staff. A possible solution to that is to put contracting authorities that make very frequent requests, especially trivial ones, lower on the list of priorities or introduce some sort of cool down period.

Related Good Practices

- One-stop shop procurement portal
- Advisory Unit of public procurement experts

Slovenia – Helpdesk for contracting authorities and economic operators

Slovenia's Ministry of Administration has been operating a telephone consultation service for public procurement practitioners on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9AM to 12PM. The service aims to support contracting authorities throughout the whole procurement procedure, from preparation of tender documentation to publication and execution of the contract. Telephone consultations are also available to support economic operators.

As this initiative proved to be useful for contracting authorities and economic operators, the Slovenian government decided to strengthen it with the development of an enhanced helpdesk. The helpdesk was put in place by the Public Procurement Directorate of the Ministry of Public Administration in September 2016.

The helpdesk enables contracting authorities and economic operators to receive advice in the preparation of tender documents, implementation of public procurement procedures and performance of contractual provisions. Priority is given to contracts that are co-financed with EU funds. Additional human resources have been provided through technical assistance under the Operational Programme for the Implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy in the period 2014-2020 to ensure the set-up and the implementation of the helpdesk.

Contracting authorities and economic operators can fill in an online request form¹ for submission of a query stating the mandatory information (i.e. contract notice number, name and the contact person, telephone number, email address and question). They approach the helpdesk with all kinds of procurement-related questions and cases. Based on the information provided in the query, the issue can be investigated and the answer provided. The answer can take the form of a written mail or a phone call from the helpdesk to the contracting authority.

The aim of the helpdesk was primarily to enhance and strengthen the telephone consultation service already established and to support contracting authorities and economic operators when conducting public procurement financed by EU funds.

Finland – Hansel Oy's hotline

Hansel Oy is Finland's central purchasing body (CPB). It is a state-owned company steered by the Ministry of Finance. Hansel Oy was created in 2004 with the objective to promote established framework agreements, negotiate and manage new framework agreements, and to support the users of such framework agreements.

Today, Hansel Oy's helpdesk offers a phone hotline run Mondays to Fridays from 8AM to 4PM as well as a dedicated general email address for written queries. All emails are replied as soon as possible targeting an answer within 3 hours from the receipt of the e-mail during business hours.

Despite its initial focus on supporting the use of established framework agreements, users approach the helpdesk with various kinds of procurement-related questions coming both from contracting authorities and suppliers. Therefore, in addition to answering questions and providing advice, the helpdesk also reviews and comments on procurement documents users have prepared for reopening of competition within framework agreements. Users can also outsource the preparation of mini-tendering documents to the helpdesk's personnel. Unlike other provided services, preparation of mini-tendering is a chargeable service and is particularly requested by users when they do not have sufficient resources or know-how to define the scope, pricing model and evaluation criteria for the tender within framework agreements.

Sometimes users also approach the helpdesk with more complex cases and cases related to contracting authorities' own procurement procedures. In such cases, the helpdesk transfers the request to the relevant staff member at Hansel Oy for further assistance. Calls to the helpdesk can even lead to ancillary assistance for handling the procurement procedure on behalf of the customers by Hansel Oy's legal and procurement experts.

Contact

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¹ Online request form, see: <http://djin.mju.dov.si/narocniki/svetovanje>