THE TRADESMAN'S COMPLETE GUIDE TO

WINNING WORK

The Tradesman's Complete Guide to Tendering

How to find public sector contracts, write bids that win, price profitably, and build a tendering business that grows stronger with every bid.

FIND THE RIGHT OPPORTUNITIES | WRITE BIDS THAT WIN | PRICE PROFITABLY | MANAGE RISK WITH CONFIDENCE | WIN MORE CONTRACTS | BUILD A BUSINESS THAT GROWS

PRACTICAL TEMPLATES CHECKLISTS & WORKED EXAMPLES

FROM FINDING THE OPPORTUNITY TO DELIVERING THE CONTRACT

A STEP-BY-STEP SYSTEM FOR TRADE CONTRACTORS

ELECTRICAL | GAS | PLUMBING | CLEANING | GROUNDS MAINTENANCE | PAINTING | ROOFING | & ALL TRADE DISCIPLINES

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Covering electrical, gas, plumbing, cleaning, grounds maintenance, painting, roofing, and all trade contractor disciplines

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The information in this book is provided for general guidance only. Readers should seek professional advice where appropriate, particularly in relation to employment law, health and safety legislation, insurance, and contract conditions. Procurement regulations and legislative requirements change over time; readers should verify current requirements before submitting any tender.

All businesses, individuals, and contracts referenced in the worked examples in Part 8 of this book — including Bright Spark Electrical Services Ltd, Millbrook Housing Association, and all named individuals — are entirely fictional and are used for illustrative purposes only. Any resemblance to real businesses, individuals, or contracts is coincidental.

Foreword

Every year, thousands of small trade contractors miss out on public sector contracts they could win. Not because they are not good enough at their trade. Not because they lack the right qualifications or accreditations. But because they do not know how to bid.

They have never written a method statement. They have never built a cost model. They have never read a specification carefully enough to understand what the buyer actually wants, or structured a quality response in a way that earns full marks from an evaluator working through thirty submissions on a Friday afternoon.

This gap — between the competence to deliver a contract and the skill to win it in the first place — is the gap this book is designed to close.

Winning Work was written for the electrician who has never bid for a housing association contract but wants to. For the gas engineer who knows his way around a boiler but not around a pricing schedule. For the cleaning company owner who has built an excellent business on word of mouth and referrals and now wants to grow through public sector contracts. For the grounds maintenance contractor who won a small council job three years ago and wants to understand why she did not win the one she bid for last year.

It was also written for the contractor who has already submitted bids and lost them — who received thin feedback, made no changes, and submitted the same bid again and lost again. This book explains, clearly and specifically, why tenders fail and what to do differently.

The approach throughout is practical. Every concept is illustrated with a worked example. Every tool is a document you can use tomorrow. Part 8 follows a single fictional contractor — Bright Spark Electrical Services Ltd — through every stage of a real bid, from finding the opportunity on a portal on a Tuesday morning to managing the TUPE transfer of employees eight months later. The decisions Bright Spark makes, the problems they encounter, and the results they achieve are drawn directly from the real experiences of the contractors who have contributed to this book through their stories, their feedback, and their generosity in sharing what they have learned.

This book will not write your bids for you. It will not guarantee that you win every contract you pursue. What it will do — if you apply its principles consistently — is make every bid you submit stronger than the last, and make the next contract progressively more likely than the one before.

The public sector spends more than £300 billion per year on goods and services. A meaningful proportion of that money is available to small trade contractors who can demonstrate — in writing, to a deadline, to a structured specification — that they are capable of delivering. You are one of those contractors. This book shows you how to prove it.

Read it. Apply it. Bid.

How to Use This Book

Winning Work is designed to be used, not just read. It is a working manual as much as it is a guide — a book you return to at the start of each bid, tab to the relevant chapter, and use as a reference while writing, pricing, and assembling your submission.

If you are new to tendering

Read the book from the beginning. Parts 1 to 3 establish the foundations — what tendering is, whether it is right for your business, and how to make yourself ready before you pursue your first opportunity. Parts 4 and 5 cover the documents and the writing. Parts 6 and 7 cover pricing and risk assessments. Then read Part 8 — the complete walkthrough — as a single narrative before you submit your first bid. It will show you what the whole process looks like end to end.

Follow the 90-Day Tender Success Plan in Chapter 29. It gives you a week-by-week roadmap that takes you from the readiness assessment in Chapter 3 to your first submission, structured so that each step builds on the last.

If you have tendered before but not won consistently

Start with Chapter 27 (Why Tenders Fail) and Chapter 12 (Understanding How You Will Be Scored). These two chapters, read together, will almost certainly identify the specific gaps that have been suppressing your scores. Then use the model answers in Chapter 15, the method statement framework in Chapter 14, and the pricing discipline in Chapter 17 to address those gaps directly.

Read Part 8 for the detailed worked example of how a well-prepared bid comes together under real pressure and produces a result.

If you are an active tendering business building for scale

Focus on Part 9 — Building a Long-Term Tendering Business — and use Chapter 28 (Building Your Tender Library) and Chapter 29 (Creating Your Tendering System) to formalise and systematise what you are already doing. The win rate framework, the feedback log, and the monthly maintenance routine in these chapters are the tools that turn a capable bidding business into a consistently winning one.

Using this book on an active bid

When a tender lands, you do not need to re-read the whole book. Use the chapter list below as a map. The day the tender pack arrives, turn to Chapter 13 (Planning Your Bid) for the immediate actions and timetable. When you sit down to write, use Chapter 14 for method statements, Chapter 15 for quality responses, and Chapter 16 for evidence integration. When pricing, Chapter 17 first, then Chapter 18 for the pre-submission pricing review.

> ### A note on the action points
>
> Every chapter ends with action points. These are not aspirational suggestions. They are specific, practical tasks that, if completed, put the chapter's principles to work in your business. The chapters that produce the most value are the ones whose action points get done. Block time for them. Treat them as work, not reading.

The fictional businesses in this book

Part 8 follows Bright Spark Electrical Services Ltd through a complete tender for a Millbrook Housing Association contract. Both businesses are entirely fictional. The trades involved are electrical, but the principles — the bid structure, the cost model, the quality responses, the interview approach, the mobilisation process — apply equally to gas, plumbing, cleaning, grounds maintenance, painting, roofing, and any other trade that bids for public sector maintenance contracts. Where the worked examples reference trade-specific content (EICR testing, NICEIC accreditation), substitute the equivalent for your own trade.

The trade-specific guidance tables in Chapters 14, 19, and 20 provide equivalent content for the most common trades in public sector tendering.

Structure of the Book

Quick-Start Guide

If you want to start bidding immediately rather than reading cover to cover, this guide tells you exactly which chapters to read first based on where you are right now.

I have never submitted a tender before

- Chapter 3 — Tender Readiness Assessment. Do this first, today. It tells you where your gaps are.
- Chapters 4, 5, 6 — Insurance, policies, and accreditations. Address any gaps identified in Chapter 3.
- Chapter 8 — Set up your portal accounts and alerts this week.
- Chapter 29 — 90-Day Tender Success Plan. This is your roadmap from here to your first submission.

I have submitted tenders but not won consistently

- Chapter 27 — Why Tenders Fail. Read this before anything else.
- Chapter 12 — Understanding How You Will Be Scored. This changes how you think about every quality response.
- Chapter 15 — Model answers for the eight most common quality questions. Compare with what you have been submitting.
- Chapter 17 — Pricing. Check whether your cost model includes everything it should.
- Request feedback on your last unsuccessful bid and use Chapter 27's decoder table to interpret it.

I am about to start a live bid right now

- Chapter 11 — How to read the tender documents. Do this before opening any document in the pack.
- Chapter 13 — Planning your bid. The reading session, Response Plan, and timetable.
- Chapter 22 — The Millbrook reading session (Part 8). A practical demonstration of Chapter 11 and 13 in action.
- Chapters 14–15 for writing. Chapter 17–18 for pricing. Chapter 13’s compliance checklist before you submit.

I want to build a long-term tendering business

- Chapter 28 — Set up your tender library this week.

- Chapter 29 — The weekly routine and monthly review. Build them into your calendar now.
- Chapter 7 — Evidence bank. Start gathering post-contract data from every contract you deliver from today.
- Chapter 27 — Win rate tracking. Start recording your bid history and measuring your progress.

Whichever path brought you to this page, the next step is the same: take the first action. Not eventually. Now.

Contents

Chapter 1 — What Is a Tender?

The rules of the game before you start playing.

By the end of this chapter you will understand:

- What a tender is and why organisations use them
- The difference between public sector and private sector procurement
- The main types of tender — open, restricted and negotiated
- How framework agreements and Dynamic Purchasing Systems work
- What approved supplier lists are and why they matter

What Is a Tender?

If you have ever priced a job for a customer, you already understand the basic idea behind tendering. A tender is simply a formal, structured way for an organisation to invite businesses to submit a price — and a proposal — for a piece of work.

The difference between quoting for a domestic job and submitting a tender is one of scale and formality. When a homeowner asks three plumbers for a quote, there are no rules about how the quotes must be presented, no scoring criteria, and no legal obligations. When a housing association, council, or large commercial company invites tenders, they follow a structured process that is often governed by procurement regulations. Every bidder receives the same documents, works to the same deadline, and is assessed against the same criteria.

For you as a tradesman or contractor, this process can feel unfamiliar at first. But it is learnable — and once you understand how it works, it becomes a repeatable system for winning larger, longer, and more lucrative contracts.

Why Do Organisations Use Tenders?

Organisations use formal tendering for several reasons:

- Fairness and transparency — a structured process ensures all suppliers are treated equally and that spending decisions can be justified.
- Value for money — competitive bidding encourages suppliers to offer their best price and service.
- Legal compliance — public sector bodies are required by law to follow procurement rules above certain contract values.
- Risk management — thorough evaluation of suppliers reduces the risk of poor performance, financial failure, or non-compliance.

For you, this means that every tender you submit is assessed in the same way as every other bid. Nobody gets special treatment because of a personal relationship or a handshake deal. That is actually good news: if you put in a strong, well-evidenced submission, you are on a level playing field with contractors many times your size.

Public Sector vs. Private Sector Tendering

Tenders come from two broad categories of buyer. Understanding the difference will save you a great deal of time.

Public Sector

Public sector organisations spend taxpayers' money. Because of this, they are legally required to follow procurement regulations, which in the UK are governed by the Procurement Act 2023 (which replaced the Public Contracts Regulations 2015).

Above certain financial thresholds, public bodies must advertise contracts openly, follow defined timescales, evaluate submissions against published criteria, and give feedback to unsuccessful bidders. This makes the process more transparent and, for a well-prepared business, more predictable.

Public sector buyers include:

- Local authorities — councils, county councils, combined authorities
- Central government departments
- NHS trusts and health boards
- Schools, academies and multi-academy trusts
- Housing associations and registered providers of social housing
- Universities and further education colleges
- Emergency services — police, fire and rescue

Private Sector

Private sector organisations — commercial companies, property management firms, retailers, manufacturers — have more freedom in how they procure services. They are not bound by procurement regulations and can choose their suppliers however they see fit.

In practice, many large private sector organisations adopt similar processes to the public sector because they want the same benefits: fairness, value, and risk reduction. However, relationships and reputation often play a more significant role in private sector procurement than in public sector work.

For most tradesmen starting out in tendering, public sector opportunities are a good entry point. The process is structured, the documents are clear, and feedback is available when you are unsuccessful.

Types of Tender

Not all tenders work in the same way. You will encounter several different types, each with its own process and rules.

Open Tender

An open tender is advertised publicly, and any business can submit a bid. There is no pre-qualification stage — you download the documents, complete your submission, and return it by the deadline.

Open tenders are common for lower-value contracts. They give smaller businesses a direct route to bidding, but they also attract large numbers of competitors, which makes scoring well even more important.

Restricted Tender

A restricted tender has two stages. In the first stage, organisations submit a Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (PQQ) or a Selection Questionnaire (SQ). The buyer uses this to shortlist a manageable number of suppliers — typically between three and six. Only shortlisted businesses are then invited to submit a full tender in the second stage.

Restricted tenders are common for higher-value or more complex contracts. Getting through the pre-qualification stage is a skill in itself, and we cover it in detail later in this book.

Negotiated Tender

In some circumstances, a buyer can approach a specific supplier or a small number of suppliers directly and negotiate the contract without a competitive process. This usually only applies in limited situations — for example, where there is only one supplier capable of delivering the work, or in cases of genuine emergency.

As a growing contractor, you are unlikely to be involved in negotiated tenders initially, but they are worth knowing about.

Two-Stage Tender

Two-stage tendering is increasingly common in construction and major maintenance contracts. In the first stage, contractors bid on a limited basis — often on preliminaries and overheads rather than a full price. The preferred contractor is then selected to work alongside the client through the design and planning phase, before a final price is agreed in stage two. This approach gives both parties time to develop the project before committing to a final contract.

Framework Agreements

A framework agreement is one of the most valuable things a tradesman or contractor can get onto. Once you understand how they work, they become a priority target.

A framework agreement is an arrangement between a buyer (or group of buyers) and a number of pre-approved suppliers. The buyer goes through a full tender process once — usually every three or four years — to select their panel of approved contractors. Once on the framework, you can be awarded individual call-off contracts without a full tender process each time.

> **Why frameworks matter to your business**
>
> Recurring work — once on a framework, buyers can call on you repeatedly without re-tendering.
>
> Reduced competition — you are competing only against other framework members, not the open market.
>
> Longer term security — frameworks typically run for three to four years, giving you revenue certainty.
>
> Credibility — being on a framework tells other buyers you have been through rigorous assessment.

Framework agreements are used extensively across the public sector. Housing associations, local councils, and NHS trusts all use frameworks to procure everything from electrical testing to grounds maintenance to commercial cleaning.

Getting onto a framework is competitive — but it is not reserved for large companies. Many frameworks actively encourage bids from small and medium-sized businesses, and some are specifically designed for local or regional contractors.

Dynamic Purchasing Systems

A Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) is similar to a framework agreement but with one important difference: new suppliers can join at any time during the life of the system, rather than only at the start.

This makes a DPS an excellent opportunity for businesses that are not yet established enough to win a place on a traditional framework. If a DPS has been running for two years and you now meet the requirements, you can apply to join it and begin receiving work.

DPS arrangements are governed by procurement regulations and are used widely in the public sector for services including facilities management, maintenance trades, cleaning, and landscaping.

Approved Supplier Lists

An approved supplier list (ASL) — sometimes called a preferred supplier list or an approved contractor list — is a register maintained by an organisation of businesses that have been assessed and approved to carry out work on their behalf.

Unlike frameworks, approved lists are not always governed by strict procurement regulations. Organisations create them for their own convenience, to ensure that any contractor they use has been checked for insurance, accreditations, financial stability, and compliance with relevant policies.

Once on an approved list, you may be invited to quote for jobs directly, or called off a rota alongside other approved contractors. The key advantage is that you have already passed the assessment stage — so when work becomes available, you are in a position to receive it without having to go through a full application process each time.

We dedicate a full chapter to getting on approved supplier lists later in this book, including a step-by-step guide to the application process and the common mistakes that get applications rejected.

Key Terms at a Glance

The world of tendering comes with its own vocabulary. Here are the terms you will encounter most often:

Tender	A formal invitation to submit a price and proposal for a contract.
ITT	Invitation to Tender — the document pack issued to bidders containing all requirements.
PQQ / SQ	Pre-Qualification Questionnaire / Selection Questionnaire — used to shortlist bidders before the ITT stage.
Framework	A panel of pre-approved suppliers who can be awarded contracts without a full re-tender.

DPS	Dynamic Purchasing System — like a framework, but open to new applicants at any time.
Call-off	An individual contract placed under a framework or DPS.
ASL	Approved Supplier List — a register of vetted contractors maintained by a buyer.
Evaluation criteria	The factors against which bids are assessed and scored.
TUPE	Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) — regulations that may apply when staff transfer between contractors.

Chapter Summary

Tendering is a formal, structured process through which organisations invite businesses to bid for contracts. It differs from informal quoting in its scale, its rules, and the rigour with which bids are assessed.

Public sector buyers are legally required to follow procurement regulations, which means their processes are transparent and predictable — and every bidder is assessed on the same basis. Private sector buyers follow similar processes voluntarily, but relationships play a larger role.

The main types of tender — open, restricted, negotiated, and two-stage — each have their own rules and timescales. Framework agreements and Dynamic Purchasing Systems offer the greatest long-term value to a growing contractor, providing recurring work without the need to re-tender each time. Approved supplier lists serve a similar function for smaller-scale, more frequent call-offs.

In the next chapter, we will look honestly at whether tendering is the right move for your business right now — and how to make a clear-headed decision before you invest time in your first bid.

Action Points — Chapter 1

- Write down three types of organisation in your area that use formal tendering (e.g. your local council, a housing association, an NHS trust).
- Visit Contracts Finder (www.gov.uk/contracts-finder) and search for contracts in your trade. Note how they are structured and what information is provided.

- Look up whether your main target buyer operates a framework agreement or approved supplier list. Their website procurement section is the first place to check.
- Make a note of any tendering terms in this chapter that were new to you. You will encounter all of them in the chapters ahead.