

“No feedback for my unsuccessful tender application” says AD Fire Safety Managing Director, Dan Burton

With over 15 years of experience in the Fire Service, Dan Burton is the Founder and Managing Director of AD Fire Safety, a small business based in Lincolnshire that offers risk assessments among other services to both public and private sector clients. We met Dan at an event in Wimbledon, where he shared with us his experience of applying for a public tender in his local area and the challenges he faced.

Style over substance favours big business

As with the majority of SMEs that have been in contact with our campaign, Dan expressed his frustration at the complexity and bureaucracy of the tender application process. He claimed that small enterprises like AD Fire Safety lack the time, money and resources to complete the necessary paperwork in such a way that maximises their chances of successfully obtaining a public contract:

“Bigger companies will often pay someone who’s qualified to write their tender applications for them. Whereas realistically...me, as a small limited company, I’ve got very limited experience in that sort of thing. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve got lots of experience in my field [fire safety], I’ve just got limited experience in writing tenders and how to go about it.

“Personally, I’ve looked online and you can pay people to write your tender application for you, which as I say, many of my bigger competitors do, but once they’re successful and get awarded the public contract, they end up being much less qualified than people like myself with 15 years of experience in the Fire Service.

“Plus, a lot of these larger firms hire people with much less experience in fire safety. Usually they’ve only worked on small UK Power Network projects and been through a two-week training course but are then somehow expected to carry out detailed risk assessments on public buildings like libraries and even schools. So basically, they tend to be fully qualified, but have no real experience.

This means the council doesn't get value for money and the public are stuck with a substandard service."

I asked Dan, since he'd evidently done his research, whether hiring a consultancy to write a tender application on his behalf in the near future would be within his budget as a small business. His answer was an emphatic "No!".

No small business is the same - tenderers should tailor their support

I picked up on an earlier point that Dan made regarding the difficulty he faced when writing the tender application himself. I was interested to know why he thought he was at such a disadvantage:

"Mainly getting the wording right. I have dyslexia and ADHD, which doesn't stop me from doing my day-to-day job and doesn't make me any less successful, it just means that writing a whole tender application would be a lot more difficult for someone like myself, compared to your average university-educated person and so on."

I asked Dan whether any support was made available for tender applicants struggling with neurodevelopmental disorders or learning difficulties:

"I can't say for sure that there isn't any support out there, all I know is that I couldn't find any.

"I also didn't receive any feedback when I found out that my tender application was unsuccessful. I'll probably try again, but the thought of making the same mistakes over and over again does put me off slightly to be honest."

When it comes to procurement, tenderers should keep the process local

Given his apparently disappointing interaction with the public procurement system at the local level, I asked Dan what improvements he would like to see made to the system to ensure that small businesses like his are treated more fairly and afforded more opportunities:

"I think that councils and local authorities, although it's right that they look at financial sustainability when deciding whether to award a contract, should be more focused on local

companies. Say I live in Cambridgeshire and I'm applying for a Cambridgeshire contract, then surely that should count towards a bid that I put forward. Because ultimately, they [tender applicants] would be supporting their local council and their local community. Yet unfortunately, some of these bigger companies that tend to be more successful in obtaining public contracts, are often based miles away which doesn't make sense to me."

"I also don't think that local authorities should focus so much on how much a company turns over. I understand why they do that. If they enter into a tender agreement with someone, then obviously they need to know that the company is financially viable, especially for more long term contracts. But as it stands at the moment, I'm a small limited company and therefore I have limited funds. But without these public contracts it's difficult for me to grow my business and increase turnover, which means I keep struggling to meet the financial requirements for public tenders. So it becomes a bit of a vicious cycle.

"It also means that as a small local business, I'm unable to provide my own community with quality fire safety services because of these financial requirements and therefore the contracts are often awarded to big companies based in a completely different county instead."
