

INVERNESS MEETING TO DISCUSS BUSINESSES' PUBLIC CONTRACTS CONCERNS

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Highland businesses will have the opportunity to quiz local authority and public sector leaders at a meeting in Inverness next week about concerns that major changes to the way they buy goods and services will mean that local suppliers lose out to bigger outside competitors.

Central contracts are currently being put in place for materials and services common to all the public sector with the aim of driving down costs. However, the seminar, which is being organised by the Scottish Council for Development and Industry (SCDI) will hear concerns from some businesses in the Highlands that they will be unable to bid just to service the public sector in this region. Small businesses are also anxious about being squeezed out by bigger contracts.

The meeting will be addressed by Dorothy Cowie, the Director of Scotland Excel, the new body responsible for collaborative purchasing for Scotland's local authorities, and Ashley Gould the Head of Corporate Procurement at The Highland Council. Councillor Carolyn Wilson, Chair, of the Resources Committee at The Highland Council, and Heads of Procurement at Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Scottish Natural Heritage will also be in attendance.

The seminar is being hosted for SCDI by Scottish Natural Heritage at Great Glen House.

Gareth Williams, SCDI's Highlands and Islands Manager, said:

"The public sector in Highlands and Islands spends more than half a billion pounds each year, much of it in this region, making it one of the key drivers of the regional economy. We have organised this seminar to discuss the huge changes to the way that local authorities and other public bodies buy goods and services from their suppliers, and make sure that local businesses do not miss out.

"Big local spenders like The Highland Council and NHS Highland are under real pressure to save money and to use central hubs to procure more and more of their materials and services like vehicle hire and maintenance. This could mean that existing suppliers lose out when contracts are put out to tender again in the future.

"If local suppliers want to maintain or grow their sales to local agencies then they need to make sure they know about these changes and what they mean for their business. Sticking their head in the sand is just not an option, what local businesses need to do is get as much information as they can in order to compete with businesses in the Central Belt.

"Equally, we want to see contracts let out in a way that doesn't disadvantage local suppliers, and allows them to compete in their areas on the quality and value of the service they deliver. There may be ways to favour local suppliers, without infringing EU rules. For example by specifying minimum response times for purchasers or the use of 'fresh' produce.

"The seminar is already over-booked which tells you the level of interest in the area and SCDI will be doing everything it can to make sure that new procurement rules will help grow the Highland economy, not hold it back."

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