Procurement File: The Foundation of Transparent Procurement Procedures

A procurement file is the complete written documentation of a procurement or award procedure. It comprises all documents relevant to the procedure, from needs assessment through publication to contract conclusion. For buyers, it is at once a central instrument of proof, a working basis and a legal safety net.

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Key facts at a glance

01 Procurement files document the entire course of an award procedure seamlessly and serve traceability and lawfulness.

02 In public procurement law they are mandatory; in the private sector they are recommended as best practice for risk minimisation.

03 Typical components are tender documents, bid opening documentation, evaluations, the clarification round as well as award and contract documents.

04 In practice, the scope ranges from a few pages for simple supply contracts to file folders with hundreds of documents for complex construction or investment projects.

05 Defective or incomplete procurement files are a common reason for reviews, objections and lost legal protection proceedings.

06 Digitalised files with a uniform filing structure and version control significantly reduce effort and error susceptibility.

Definition: Procurement File

The procurement file is the entirety of all documents that a public or private contracting authority creates, receives and archives in the course of a procurement project. It maps the entire life cycle of an award procedure and enables third parties to follow the course of and the decisions in the procedure.

Legal Context

In the public sector, the documentation obligation arises from the applicable procurement regulations and procurement standards; their specific design differs depending on the legal system and threshold values and must be examined on a case-by-case basis. Procurement standards often require that all submissions, communications and decisions be recorded with date and processor note. In private procurement law there is no general file obligation, but compliance requirements, group policies and potential future burden of proof always argue in practice for complete documentation. Buyers should conclusively clarify the applicable requirements before the start of the procedure.

- Check which procurement standard or internal policy applies
- Anchor documentation obligations in writing within the procedure team
- Assess evidentiary risks arising from missing documents

Distinction from Other Procurement Documents

Not every procurement document belongs in the procurement file. Where the procedure formally extends across tendering, bid, evaluation and award, the associated documents are included; ongoing operational documents such as purchase order processing or inventory management, by contrast, generally do not belong in it. A distinction must also be made from the contract file, which documents the execution and amendment phase after award. A clear handover documentation between the procurement file and the contract file is sensible, so that responsibilities remain unambiguous over the course of the project.

Components and Structure of the Procurement File

A fully maintained procurement file typically follows the course of the procedure. A predefined folder structure or file architecture is more important here than sheer volume, because it is what makes later review and traceability possible in the first place.

Preparation and Tendering Phase

At the beginning are the needs assessment, the functional specification and the decision on the procedure, including the choice of procedure type. This includes demand requisitions, market research, a risk matrix for the project as well as defined mandatory, desirable and optional criteria for evaluation. The tender documents themselves – specification, draft contract, suitability requirements, forms – are filed as a binding version with version numbering. Amendments up to the bid deadline must be documented with proof of communication to all bidders.

- Needs assessment and specification with approval notes
- Criteria catalogue (mandatory, desirable and optional criteria) including weighting
- Version control of all tender documents and supplements

Bid Phase and Evaluation

The core of the file is the documentation of the bid opening: date, attendees, bids received and their

formal completeness. This is followed by the evaluation – from suitability check through technical and commercial assessment to scoring according to the published criteria. Any clarification round with all questions and answers must be recorded in full, as it is often decisive in later reviews. A calculated supplier rating model or a data analysis in procurement for bid comparability also belong here.

- Bid opening record with receipt confirmations
- Evaluation sheets per bidder with comprehensible scoring
- Documentation of all queries and supplementary evidence

Award, Contract and Procedure Conclusion

The file is completed by the award decision, its justification, the communications to unsuccessful bidders and the signed contract. In public procedures, notification obligations and any objections or review procedures are added, which must also be documented in full. A closing note summarising why the award was given to which bidder is useful. This summary facilitates later lessons learned and the development of a preferred supplier programme.

Key KPIs and Quality Characteristics of the Procurement File

The quality of a procurement file can be measured. Established key figures capture both the procedure process and documentation quality and provide starting points for the continuous improvement of the procurement process.

Procedure Metrics

Typical metrics are the number of bids received per procedure, the average procedure duration from publication to award, and the share of economically advantageous bids per procedure. The abort rate and the frequency of cancelled lots also provide indications of specification quality and market situation. In connection with supplier evaluations, the performance record and on-time in full (OTIF) of the commissioned suppliers can subsequently be considered as supplementary indicators.

- Bidder and bid ratio per procedure type
- Lead time from tender to contract signature
- Share of subsequent amendments in the procedure

Assessing Documentation Quality

The quality of the files themselves can be captured via defined review points: completeness against a checklist, timeliness of notes, clarity of the decision justifications and findability in the filing system. Spot checks by quality management or internal audit – for example a few files per quarter – have proven effective in practice. Results should ideally feed into a supplier rating model of the internal procurement process or into internal process evaluations.

- Completeness checklist per procedure type
- Four-eyes principle before procedure closure

- Regular spot checks by third parties

Risks and Controls in Handling Procurement Files

Incomplete or sloppily maintained procurement files carry considerable risks: from objections and review proceedings to claims for damages and reputational damage. Systematic controls and clear responsibilities significantly reduce these dangers.

Typical Sources of Error

Common deficiencies are missing justifications for award decisions, incomplete documentation of the clarification round, subsequent changes to evaluation criteria or unclear versions of the tender documents. Verbal agreements without a written note or failure to inform all bidders about changes to the procedure also regularly lead to disputes. Weakness analyses and data analysis in procurement help to identify recurring patterns across multiple procedures and to address them in a targeted manner.

Control Instruments and Compliance

Effective controls start with the organisation's risk policy: a risk catalogue for award procedures, defined approval levels and the four-eyes principle for critical decisions are standard building blocks. Mobile approval (P2P) and electronic workflows can record signatures and notes in a traceable manner with timestamps. In addition, rules on vertical and horizontal collaboration, on confidentiality and, for relevant raw materials, on conflict minerals should be documented. Legal assessments – in particular in connection with reviews or procurement law questions – must always be examined on a case-by-case basis by qualified experts.

- Maintain a risk catalogue and risk matrix per procedure type
- Use workflows with timestamps and approval history
- Anchor a legal review of the evaluation before award

Digital Management and Current Developments

Procurement files are increasingly kept digitally. Electronic procurement platforms, structured data formats and automated records are changing not only the technology but also the requirements for procurement organisation and archiving.

From Paper File to E-Procurement

Electronic procedures are increasingly replacing the physical folder: bids are submitted via platforms, the bid opening takes place electronically with an automatic record, and communication runs via encrypted mailboxes. This reduces formal errors and creates continuous histories. Prerequisites are clear filing conventions, access rights and long-term, audit-proof archiving – retention periods differ depending on the legal domain and must be examined on a case-by-case basis.

- Audit-proof filing with a consistent folder structure
- Access and confidentiality rules for procedure participants
- Uniform naming and versioning conventions

Sustainability, Data and Supplier Strategy

Currently, sustainability requirements are becoming more prominent in tenders: CO2 price components in the evaluation, emission data from the supply chain and requirements on conflict minerals expand the scope of the assessment and thus the scope of the file. At the same time, structured procurement data is gaining importance as a basis for function cost analysis, market analyses and the further development of supplier ratings. Those who systematically evaluate file contents can translate insights into contract negotiations and into a preferred supplier programme.

- Define sustainability criteria including evidence formats
- Use insights from procurement files in contract negotiations
- Link procurement data with function cost analysis

Typical metrics

Metric	Typical value
Bid ratio per procedure	typically 3–5 bids *Lower values indicate overly narrow specifications or low market attractiveness*
Procedure duration until award	often several weeks to months, depending on the type of proc *Time between publication and binding award*
Degree of completeness of the file	> 95% of checklist items *Result of the internal spot check of completed files*
Review rate	in practice, a low single-digit percentage range *Share of procedures with an objection or application for review*

Practical Example

A medium-sized mechanical engineering company publicly tendered a major investment order for production equipment with public funding. Following an objection from a bidder regarding allegedly unequal information of participants, it emerged that a supplementary technical communication had only been sent to three of six bidders. The contracting authority could not prove that all bidders had been duly informed, as the dispatch confirmations were not filed in the procurement file. The procedure had to be partially repeated, resulting in several weeks of delay.

- Introduction of a binding file structure with dispatch confirmations for every bidder communication
- Four-eyes review of evaluation documents before every award decision

- Quarterly spot checks of completed files by the compliance function
- Transfer of evaluation results into an internal supplier rating model

Conclusion

Procurement files are far more than a formal duty: they secure the lawfulness of a procurement project, create traceability towards bidders and auditors, and provide valuable knowledge for future procedures. The effort pays off all the more the more structured the file is from the outset. Digital tools significantly lower the barriers but require clear conventions. Private buyers are well advised to use public standards as a benchmark, even where there is no legal obligation. Those who treat procurement files as a source of learning sustainably improve the quality, speed and compliance of their procurement.

Frequently asked questions

? What belongs in the procurement file?

In principle, all documents relevant to the procedure: tender documents including amendments, bids, the bid opening record, evaluation documents, documentation of the clarification round, the award decision and the contract. Bidder questions, suitability evidence and communications to unsuccessful bidders also belong to it. Ongoing operational documents such as purchase order processing typically do not belong to it.

? Who must keep a procurement file?

In public procurement law, keeping a procurement file is mandatory for contracting authorities; the specific requirements depend on the applicable procurement standard and the type of procedure. Private companies are not legally obliged to do so, but should keep comparable files for compliance and evidentiary reasons. Internal policies often set binding minimum standards.

? How long must a procurement file be retained?

Retention periods depend on the legal domain: in public procurement law, specific storage requirements apply, while in the private sector commercial and tax law retention periods for business records play a role. The specific periods differ depending on jurisdiction and document type and should be legally reviewed on a case-by-case basis. In practice, retention periods ranging from several years to more than ten years have become established.

? What is the difference between a procurement file and a contract file?

The procurement file documents the procedure up to the award and contract conclusion, i.e. tendering, bids, evaluation and award. The contract file starts afterwards and documents performance: amendments, variations, deadlines, acceptance and settlement. Both files should be kept clearly separate but linked with a handover note.

? Why are complete procurement files important for bidders?

Bidders who suspect violations of procurement principles can lodge complaints or initiate a review

procedure. A seamlessly maintained procurement file makes it possible to reconstruct the course of the procedure and justify decisions. This protects both sides: the contracting authority against unfounded objections and the bidder against non-transparent evaluations.

? How do you maintain a procurement file digitally?

A fixed folder or file architecture that follows the course of the procedure, with uniform naming and versioning conventions, has proven effective. Electronic procurement platforms automatically provide bid opening records and communication histories. Audit-proof archiving, defined access rights and regular completeness checks are essential.

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