

Demystifying Tier 1 Procurement: What SMEs Need to Know

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Why This Guide Matters



The sector is changing fast...

- New build
 - SMRs/AMRs
 - Fusion,
 - Fuel cycle expansion
 - Decommissioning
-all reshaping demand.

“Tier 1 organisations are under increasing pressure to demonstrate supply chains that are robust, diverse, and resilient.”



Why This Guide Matters

SMEs are essential....

- Innovation, agility, specialist expertise
- 4,600+ UK businesses already contributing at HPC

....but the landscape feels opaque

- Complex onboarding
 - Multiple portals
- High assurance expectations
- Hard to know where to start



What Tier 1s Actually Want (The Big Picture)

Across all Tier 1s, expectations are **remarkably consistent**:

The 5 universal foundations:

- **Safety culture** “A positive and mature safety culture is universally regarded as essential.”
- **Quality maturity**
- **Cyber & security readiness**
- **Transparency & honesty**
- **Clear communication & responsiveness**

These are the non-negotiables.



How Tier 1 Procurement Really Works

Common procurement pathways:

- Supplier portals (Coupa, Ariba, JOSCAR, Hellios, proprietary portals)
- Frameworks & long-term agreements
- Category-based buying (civils, M&E, digital, consultancy, manufacturing)
- Project-specific procurement cycles (new build, decommissioning, fuel cycle)

Where Tier 1s differ:

- Depth of assurance checks (desktop vs full audit)
- Complexity of onboarding & evidence requirements
- Openness to new suppliers vs reliance on established partners
- Technical thresholds (welding quals, cyber maturity, digital tooling, safety case familiarity)
- Engagement style (regular SME briefings vs opportunity-driven contact)



Procurement Differences by Programme

New Build (EPR, SMR, AMR):

- Large frameworks & long-term agreements
- High assurance, extensive documentation
- Early engagement essential
- Strong emphasis on scalability & capacity

HPC

Decommissioning:

- More open to new suppliers
- Smaller packages, faster cycles
- Strong focus on safety culture & behavioural maturity
- High-integrity fabrication & specialist services in demand

Oldbury

Fuel Cycle & Nuclear Medicine:

- Very high security & cyber thresholds
- Specialist technical qualifications
- Long qualification processes
- Niche capability often required

Fusion:

- Rapidly evolving procurement models
- Innovation & agility valued
- Early market engagement encouraged
- Less legacy process, more flexibility

ITER



What Tier 1s Value in SMEs

From the cross-company analysis:

The top traits of successful SMEs:

- **Clear communication**
- **Proactivity & responsiveness**
- **Strong quality systems**
- **Agility & flexibility**
- **Niche expertise / specialist capability**
- **Honesty about limits**
- **Understanding nuclear expectations**
- **Good documentation**
- **Collaboration & constructive challenge**

“The most valued suppliers are those who demonstrate strong proactivity and responsiveness... and robust quality systems.”



The Barriers SMEs Face

Tier 1s consistently highlighted the same pain points:

The big blockers:

- Incomplete or poor-quality documentation
- Overclaiming capability
- Misunderstanding QA, safety or cyber requirements
- Slow or inconsistent engagement
- Missing accreditations or insurances
- Security clearance delays
- Financial resilience concerns

“The most common issue is incomplete or poor-quality documentation.”



Routes to Market

There is **no single route** - but several consistent pathways:

How SMEs actually get in:

- Supplier portals (Coupa, Ariba, JOSCAR, Hellios, etc.)
- Meet-the-Buyer events
- Industry forums
- Direct contact with procurement leads
- Tier 2 partnerships
- Capability submissions & early engagement



“SMEs who make contact before opportunities are released are better positioned to understand requirements.”



Lessons from SMEs Who've Done It

The lived experience is powerful:

What SMEs told us:

- Be patient
- Build a rigorous organisation at the beginning
- Be audit ready
- Frameworks
- Build alliances
- Network
- Expect a steep learning curve

“Nuclear is hard to get into, but once you are in, you’re in”



What SMEs Should Do Next

The practical “starter checklist”:

1. Get your quality house in order (ISO9001, ISO14001)
2. Achieve Cyber Essentials (Plus if possible)
3. Capability statement
4. Who buys what?
5. Early engagement
6. Attend events
7. Don't hesitate to partner with complementary SMEs
8. Fill those gaps

“Invest in relationships and not just bids”



Final Message:

“Nuclear is open for SME’s – but preparation is everything”

- Capable SMEs
- Honest SMEs
- Quality driven SMEs
- SMEs who communicate well
- SMEs who are ready to learn and reach back

If you can demonstrate that, you will find opportunity!

