

FEATURE

Challenging times



With a range of distinguished speakers focusing on the importance of sustainability within procurement, the SOPO Scotland Annual Conference provided valuable information, writes *GO* Features Editor **Morven MacNeil**.

The Scottish public sector has successfully challenged the order of thinking with regard to procurement. However, the hard work has only just begun. Scottish public sector procurement has taken some major leaps forward over the last 12 months but the agenda is expanding to recognise the impact good procurement and efficiency can have on matters of wider concern such as sustainability, collaborative working, the third sector and local businesses.

The Society of Procurement Officers in Local Government (SOPO) Scotland Annual Conference, entitled 'Sustaining the Challenge', which took place recently at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre, addressed some of the issues around the 'strategic fit' of procurement with the overall objectives of organisations, stakeholders and suppliers.

Speakers included Rory Mair, CEO of COSLA, who discussed the importance of procurement as part of the overall strategic objectives of local authorities. Dorothy Cowie and Nikki Bell examined the objectives of the National Procurement Centre of Expertise and how wider collaborative working will

impact on successful outcomes.

A number of speakers also looked at different aspects of the sustainability agenda, and SOPO CEO Peter Howarth took a look at some of the emerging issues from EU legislation and case law, with particular regard to sustainability.

Mr Mair, who also sits on the Public Procurement Reform Board, explained to delegates how procurement is part of a wider strategic agenda. He said: "Government has told us to forget all the individual policies and practices we have – they want to see a Scotland that is safer and stronger, healthier, smarter, greener and wealthier. They don't care what part of the public sector you work for, the output of your work has got to be that you are fitting their remit."

He went on to add: "Everybody has a responsibility to say 'are there ways I can go about my individual job, which in the past have been adequate, but have to be changed now?', because on top of being efficient at procurement as individuals, we have to ensure that the procurement practice of our organisations actually delivers."



Pictured are Rory Mair, Chief Executive of COSLA (left), and Nicol Thornton, Conference Chair (right)

Mr Mair also stressed the importance of the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 and how efficiency savings should be achieved: "One of the things we have to do is to use the freedom of a new spending review in meaningful ways and allow the benefits we get from better procurement practice to translate into services; for example, more services for vulnerable communities, more protection for the staff we employ and more development opportunities for everybody. So your ability to make a difference to the older understanding of local government is significant, and it is a requirement that we do that to make the most of the strategic opportunities that have been given to us by the new spending review."

Maf Smith, Scottish Director of the Sustainable Development Commission, told delegates that

procurement officers are in charge of spend and can make a big difference to sustainability: "You all, as controllers of 'the spend', can make a difference. You, in terms of the products and services you provide for your organisations, can make the better choices which will deliver sustainable development."

Summing up, conference chair Nicol Thornton, head of procurement at the London Fire Brigade and a member of the SOPO National Executive Committee, said: "We are working to a very different agenda today than we were five or six years ago. We are more diverse and strategic and we have to get that message across." ☞

Further information

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