SFEDI®

Specifying the Standards

A short guide for commissioners



For anyone who procures or funds business support, including combined and local authorities, mayoral strategic authorities, Growth Hubs and devolved governments. It reflects version 1.9 of the SFEDI Business Support Standards.

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In brief

The SFEDI Business Support Standards describe the knowledge, behaviours and skills that a business support professional needs to deliver business support services effectively. You can write them into a tender or programme specification so every provider knows the quality you expect, and so you can check they deliver it. They're free to use.

This guide shows you how. Two companion guides cover the rest. How business support professionals can show they meet the Standards explains qualifications and Specialist Certification. Matching the Standards to roles and priorities helps you pick the right Standards for your programme.

This guide isn't legal advice. Check the final wording with your procurement and legal teams.

What are the Standards?

In this guide, a business support professional means anyone who supports businesses in their work, such as an adviser, mentor, coach, consultant or trainer.

There are 8 Core Standards that every business support professional should meet, whatever their job. They cover the key essentials of the role, such as building a relationship with a client, working out what a business needs, and referring it to other help.

There are also 27 Specialist Standards for particular kinds of work, such as finance, net zero, mentoring or account management. You choose the ones that fit your programme.

Every requirement has a code, such as C4.3 or S10.7. Codes never change, so a tender that uses them today will mean the same thing in future.

8
Core Standards for every business support professional

27
Specialist Standards to choose from

Free
to quote in tenders and contracts

Putting the Standards in a tender

1. Decide which roles your programme needs, such as business information and enquiry staff, advisers, specialists or mentors.
2. Pick the Standards for each role. The Core Standards apply to every business support professional, and you add Specialist Standards for the specialist work. The companion guide on roles and priorities has tables to help.
3. Say in the specification which Standards each role must meet and how providers will show it.
4. Accept equivalents (see below).
5. Check certificates when the contract starts and whenever staff change.

Staying within procurement law

The Procurement Act 2023 says you can't ask for a particular qualification without also accepting equivalents (section 22(4)) [1]. So whenever you name a SFEDI qualification or certification, add "or equivalent". Ask providers who use a different qualification to show how it matches the Standards' codes. SFEDI's guide Showing equivalence to the SFEDI Business Support Standards has a free template for this.

Keep requirements in proportion to the job and the contract [1]. A volunteer mentor doesn't need the same as a senior business support professional on a large growth programme. If you want to reward a stronger team, you can score it in the award criteria, because staff qualifications and experience can count where they make a real difference to quality (section 23(5)) [1].

In Scotland, most public bodies follow Scottish procurement law rather than the Procurement Act 2023 [2]. The same approach still works, but check the rules that apply to you.

Model wording

Copy and adapt these. Fill in the parts in square brackets.

Workforce competence

> "Business support professionals delivering this service will need to meet the Core Standards (C1 to C8) of the SFEDI Business Support Standards. Those delivering the [growth] strand will also need to meet [S10 Growth, Productivity and International Trade]."

Evidence and equivalents

> "Suppliers will need to show how each business support professional meets the specified Standards through a SFEDI Awards qualification, SFEDI Specialist Certification, or an equivalent qualification or certification. Where a supplier relies on an equivalent, it will need to map it to the requirement codes of the specified Standards."

Time to get there

> "Business support professionals who don't yet meet the specified Standards will need to do so within [12] months of starting on this contract. The supplier will need to provide a development plan for each one and report progress at contract reviews."

Award criterion

> "Workforce quality ([x]% of the quality score). Describe the team who will deliver the contract, which of the specified Standards each business support professional meets and how, and your plans for anyone who doesn't meet them yet."

Client outcomes

This wording is about how business support professionals work with each client. You'll still measure the supplier against the outputs and outcomes in your contract, and these client records give the supplier evidence for them.

> "Business support professionals will need to agree with each client at the start what success looks like, review progress at agreed points, and record outcomes and impact in line with C5 Measure and evidence impact of the SFEDI Business Support Standards. The supplier will need to use these records as evidence for the outputs and outcomes it reports under this contract."

Checking certificates

Ask providers for the certificate numbers of the business support professionals named in their bid. You can check each one with the certificate checker on the SFEDI website. It covers SFEDI Awards qualifications and SFEDI Specialist Certification.

Anyone who holds the previous SFEDI Awards Level 5 or Level 7 in Professional Business and Enterprise Support Services already meets the Core Standards.

Questions

Can we use the Standards for free?

Yes. They're published under a Creative Commons licence (CC BY-ND 4.0). You can quote them in tenders and contracts as long as you credit SFEDI and don't change the wording.

Will the Standards change during our contract?

New Standards and requirements may be added, but existing codes are never changed or reused. Anything you've specified keeps its meaning.

What if our priority isn't covered by a Standard?

Talk to us. New Specialist Standards can be added where a place or sector needs one.

Talk to us

The Business Support Team can help you word a specification or plan how to develop your own business support team. Email support@sfedi.co.uk or visit www.sfedi.co.uk/for-commissioners.

Sources

1. legislation.gov.uk, Procurement Act 2023, sections 22 and 23
2. DWF, Understanding the Scottish cross-border public procurement regulations (January 2026)

SFEDI is the standards setting body for business support. It developed national standards for business support between 2007 and 2010 and updated them in 2013. It now sets the SFEDI Business Support Standards and recognises the professionals who meet them.

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