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CONTRACTOR EXPERIENCES WITH COMPETITIVE DIALOGUE IN A NORWEGIAN ROAD INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Competitive dialogue enables early contractor involvement (ECI) in complex public projects, yet contractor perspectives remain limited. This paper examines how the joint venture KSR (Contur & Risa) experienced and worked within competitive dialogue in the Norwegian road project Fv. 44 Bussveien (Stasjonsveien-Gauselvågen), and what lessons are transferable.

A qualitative single-case study used twelve semi-structured interviews and analysis of procurement and project documents. Findings are structured by competitive dialogue phases and linked to reported execution effects.

KSR operated as an integrated contractor-consultant team and invested substantial effort between dialogue meetings to mature and optimise solutions against the award criteria with client feedback. Reported outcomes include constructability and risk-reducing redesigns and stronger solution maturity at contract award. Collaboration routines were perceived to carry on into execution, supporting method optimisations, time/material savings, and fewer changes. The loser's fee was perceived as insufficient, though not determining.

Competitive dialogue provides an effective ECI when clients provide competent, actionable feedback and when the criteria are clear enough to steer supplier work. The competitive dialogue supported a lean design process. High transaction costs and limited compensation may nevertheless restrict participation and should be addressed in process and incentive design.

KEYWORDS

Early contractor involvement, public procurement, infrastructure, award criteria.

INTRODUCTION

Public infrastructure projects are increasingly characterised by technical complexity, many interfaces, and high uncertainty in ground conditions, traffic management, and stakeholder requirements. In such contexts, public clients seek procurement approaches that enable innovation, improve constructability, and support collaboration with the tenderers. Clients have to balance the sought-after collaboration with a need for competition between potential tenderers. Competitive dialogue is designed for complex procurements by allowing structured interaction between client and suppliers to develop solutions before contract award, while still complying with public procurement principles (Lenferlink et al. 2012; Wondimu et al., 2017). A notable difference between competitive dialogue and the more used competitive negotiated

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procedure is that the former allows detailing of project specifications during the dialogue, while the latter requires the final project specifications before negotiations can start. As a consequence, the competitive dialogue can start with much less detailed project specifications than competitive negotiated procedure. In Norway, public clients adhere to the European Union public procurement directives, where general principles on open competition, equality of treatment, transparency, and proportionality must be respected.

Lean project delivery principles encourage early involvement of all key contracting parties (Ballard, 2000; Forbes and Ahmed, 201; Sødal et al., 2014). Competitive dialogue can also be understood as a structured form of early contractor involvement (ECI), where contractor competence is mobilised earlier than in traditional design-bid-build arrangements and, in some cases, earlier than in conventional design-build tenders. Prior research has demonstrated that ECI can offer value by addressing challenges like unclear scope, poor documentation, lack of market responses, tight timeframes, price escalation through enhanced certainty, etc. (see for example Saunders et al., 2024). Still, this depends on organisation, incentives and evaluation criteria steering supplier effort, and how interaction is facilitated in practice.

This paper presents contractor-side findings from the project Fv. 44 Bussveien, Stasjonsveien-Gauselvågen in Stavanger, Norway, delivered as a design-build contract by the joint venture KSR (Contur & Risa), supported by COWI as design consultant. The case is used to examine how competitive dialogue works from the contractor's perspective across the procurement process and how the procurement process is perceived to influence execution.

However, while competitive dialogue is frequently promoted as a procedure that improves value creation and collaboration in complex projects, knowledge about how contractors organise and experience the process remains limited. There is a need for more empirical insight into 1) what contractors and their consultants do "between meetings" to mature solutions, 2) how award criteria and client feedback steer optimisation work and resource allocation, and 3) what trade-offs contractors experience regarding transaction costs, confidentiality, and compensation mechanisms such as loser's fees. Without such knowledge, both clients and contractors risk designing (or participating in) dialogue processes that are formally correct but practically inefficient – either by failing to generate meaningful improvements or by imposing participation costs that reduce competition and long-term market attractiveness. To address this gap, the paper investigates the following research questions:

1. How did the contractor joint venture (KSR) organise and conduct work during the competitive dialogue (prequalification, dialogue, and evaluation), including resourcing and "between-meeting" activities?
2. How did KSR experience the competitive dialogue process in terms of perceived benefits, challenges, and trade-offs (e.g., feedback, confidentiality, transaction costs, and compensation)?
3. What lessons can be drawn for improving future competitive dialogue/ECI procurements for both contractors and public clients?

This paper examines competitive dialogue as an ECI mechanism from the contractor perspective, focusing on process organisation, how criteria/feedback steer optimisation, and reported execution effects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

EARLY CONTRACTOR INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC PROJECTS

Miles & Ballard (1997) recommend ECI for better distribution of responsibilities and to make all the contracting parties responsible for production management. ECI is commonly framed as deliberate integration of contractor competence earlier in project development to improve decisions about constructability, risk, and value creation before key commitments are locked in

(Rahman and Alhassan 2012; Wondimu et al., 2018a). Syntheses of ECI research identify recurring benefits associated with improved collaboration, better risk handling, and improved performance – provided that conditions for meaningful involvement are present (Osuizugbo et al., 2024). Contractor-focused research similarly emphasises relationship and risk benefits, including improved cooperation and more appropriate risk identification and management when contractors contribute earlier (Rahman & Alhassan, 2012).

In public projects, ECI must be compatible with procurement rules and principles intended to ensure trust, transparency, and equal treatment (Anskaffelsesforskriften, 2024). This creates a tension between early openness (to mobilise competence) and procedural safeguards (to maintain fairness). As a result, ECI in public procurement is not one approach but many, varying by timing, degree of influence, and procurement procedure (Walker and Lloyd-Walker 2012; Wondimu et al., 2018a). Recent research also shows that clients and contractors may perceive ECI differently and that benefits depend on how involvement is structured and governed (Ishtiaque et al., 2025; Rahmani, 2021).

ECI MECHANISMS

There are multiple approaches for ECI (Wondimu et al., 2016a). These include collaborative project delivery models such as Alliances, Partnering, Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), the Best Value Approach (BVA), and Integrated Project Delivery (IPD) (Wondimu et al., 2018b; Wondimu et al., 2020). Collaborative project delivery models differ from transactional models by emphasising relational contracting, a win-win approach, a no-blame culture, trust, and long-term collaboration (Engebø et al., 2022a). At the core of all collaborative project delivery models is ECI (Lahdenperä 2012; Wondimu et al., 2025). These models encourage both contractors and clients to foster shared values, enabling contracting parties to support each other's success (Engebø et al., 2022b). By involving contractors early, these models seek to enhance decision-making related to constructability, risk management, and innovation. This early engagement allows more effective identification of project risks and opportunities, leading to improved project outcomes. As a result, collaborative models that integrate ECI are increasingly recognised as effective strategies for achieving improved performance and value creation in complex public projects (Shiferaw et al., 2023; Engebø et al., 2022a).

ECI mechanisms may encompass specific procurement procedures (procurement-based ECI mechanisms), such as competitive dialogue and competitive negotiated procedures, which are designed to involve contractors more deeply during the procurement (Wondimu et. al., 2018b; Machozi et al., 2024). According to Nwajei et al., (2025) it is a paradox that competitive procurement procedures are used in relational project delivery models, when the goal is to collaborate. These two procedures enable early contractor input on project requirements, design, constructability, and risk allocation, thereby contributing with valuable expertise before finalising key commitments. The legal framework for such procedures within the European Union is established by the EU procurement directives, which set out a range of procedures that public clients can employ to select their contractors. Among these, competitive dialogue and competitive negotiated procedures are particularly notable as they enable structured interaction and negotiation with bidders before awarding the contract, facilitating the integration of contractor knowledge and innovation into project development (Wondimu et al., 2025). Competitive dialogue can start with less detailed project specifications, while competitive negotiated procedure requires that the project specifications are finalized to start negotiations. Furthermore, the use of competitive dialogue and negotiated procedures supports the deliberate integration of contractor competence at earlier project stages, aligning with the broader objectives of ECI to promote improved collaboration, risk management, and value creation in public sector projects (Shiferaw et al., 2023; Wondimu et al., 2018c).

COMPETITIVE DIALOGUE AS A PROCUREMENT-BASED ECI MECHANISM

The competitive dialogue begins with a question for which there is no known (unequivocal) answer. The contracting authority uses the solutions submitted by the candidates to conduct a dialogue that results in an optimization of the request and the offer (Nagelkerke et al., 2009). Because competitive dialogue is designed for situations where the client cannot sufficiently specify the optimal solution in advance, it can contribute to implementing lean in the public sector (Wondimu et al., 2017). In practice, competitive dialogue is typically staged through phases (prequalification, dialogue, and then evaluation), and its effectiveness depends on how the process is designed and facilitated, including routines for feedback and handling of confidential information (Shiferaw et al., 2023). Competitive dialogue can be one way to involve the contractor early, and ECI can be one way to improve collaboration in design-build contracts. That said, competitive dialogue is only one of many possible procurement procedures that can be used for design-build. This possible connection between competitive dialogue and design-build is illustrated in figure 1 below.

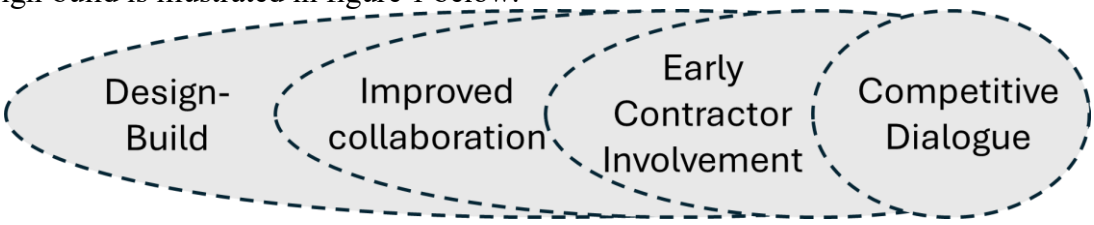

Figure 1: A possible connection between design-build contracts and competitive dialogue, which is one of many possible procurement procedures.

A defining characteristic – and challenge – is that suppliers must both collaborate and compete. The competitive context may limit openness, particularly when suppliers fear that sharing too much may weaken their competitive position (Rahman & Alhassan, 2012). At the same time, the procedure's value proposition rests on the client enabling meaningful iteration through competent engagement and actionable feedback, allowing suppliers to develop solutions that better fit client priorities and project constraints (Wondimu et al., 2020). Collaborative procurement research further suggests that results depend on the procurement strategy and how collaboration is operationalised across phases (Eriksson et al., 2019).

AWARD CRITERIA, MEAT, AND HOW EVALUATION STEERS SUPPLIER EFFORT

Competitive dialogue awards are generally made based on the most economically advantageous tender (MEAT), where price is evaluated together with quality/value dimensions (Anskaffelsesforskriften, 2024). Importantly, award criteria do not only measure performance; they shape supplier behaviour by steering where suppliers invest time and expertise during the dialogue (Ottemo et al., 2018). Ottemo et al. (2018) emphasise that clients decide both which criteria to use and how to weight them, and they also describe different evaluation systems (e.g., points, ratios, and price-adjustment systems).

In competitive dialogue, steering effects can be amplified because suppliers invest substantial resources to optimise proposals against criteria before submitting the final price. Consequently, criteria clarity and evaluation logic matter not only for fairness but also for efficiency: unclear weighting may lead to misallocated effort and reduced value generation, while clear criteria can focus solution development on what the client truly prioritises (Ottemo et al., 2018). This aligns with broader ECI research emphasising that governance and incentive structures shape outcomes (Wondimu et al., 2020).

TRANSACTION COSTS, CONFIDENTIALITY, AND COMPENSATION (LOSER'S FEE)

Competitive dialogue is widely described as resource-intensive for both clients and suppliers, implying high transaction costs related to solution development, documentation, estimation, and administration during procurement (Shiferaw et al., 2023). Because suppliers develop relatively mature solutions during the dialogue, concerns around confidentiality are central: suppliers may limit what they share if they fear that knowledge could benefit competitors, while clients must ensure equal treatment and avoid disclosing confidential information (Anskaffelsesforskriften, 2024; Rahman & Alhassan, 2012).

Given these costs, compensation mechanisms such as a loser's fee can be used to reduce participation barriers. However, compensation introduces a trade-off: too little compensation may reduce participation and solution diversity, while too much may weaken competitive discipline (Shiferaw et al., 2023). This tension is consistent with ECI literature highlighting that organisational and contractual arrangements influence whether early involvement produces the intended performance benefits (Farrell & Sunindijo, 2022; Wondimu et al., 2018c).

KNOWLEDGE GAP

Despite a growing body of research on ECI and competitive dialogue – including studies on Norwegian competitive dialogue practice, "room for maneuver," and experiences with award criteria – there remains limited empirical detail on competitive dialogue from the contractor's operational perspective, particularly regarding 1) how contractors organize and resource the dialogue (including "between-meeting" production), 2) how award criteria and client feedback concretely steer optimization decisions under confidentiality and high transaction costs, and 3) how compensation arrangements interact with supplier effort and participation incentives (Ottemo et al., 2018; Rahman & Alhassan, 2012). These gaps motivate the present contractor-focused case analysis.

RESEARCH METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study applies a qualitative single-case research design to develop an in-depth, contextualised understanding of how competitive dialogue is organised and experienced on the contractor side, and how the procurement is perceived to influence later execution. In line with case study logic, the research design links empirical data to the research questions and emphasises analytical (rather than statistical) generalisation (as described by Yin, 2018). The design follows a "single case" rationale where the case is treated as a bounded empirical instance that can illuminate mechanisms and practices under conditions of high project and procurement complexity (as described by Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021).

The case is Fv. 44 Bussveien, Stasjonsveien-Gauselvågen (Stavanger, Norway), which is delivered as a design-build contract by the joint venture KSR (Contur & Risa) supported by COWI as design consultant. The client is Rogaland County Municipality. The qualitative data was collected by combining a document study and interviews. Access to empirical data was gained since the first author worked part-time as a project engineer for Contur in the case project in parallel with writing his master thesis. The proximity to Contur raised the risk of potential bias, but the advantage of easy data access was considered to exceed the possible disadvantage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A structured literature review was conducted for two purposes, as suggested by Hunziker & Blankenagel (2021): (1) to map key concepts and prior findings related to ECI and competitive dialogue, and (2) to support the identification of knowledge gaps and inform the empirical data collection. The review process followed an iterative search-screen-select logic, beginning with

the identification of relevant keywords and building search strings using Boolean operators to refine scope (as described by Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). To extend coverage beyond database results, snowballing was used by checking reference lists (backward snowballing) and citations of key publications (forward snowballing), as recommended by Wohlin (2014).

DOCUMENT STUDY

A document study was used to strengthen contextual understanding of the procurement and to triangulate interview data. Document study is suited for systematic review and cross-checking of factual and procedural elements. It is commonly combined with interviews to enhance validity through source corroboration (Bowen, 2009). In line with Bowen (2009), the document study applied both superficial and in-depth review, depending on the documents' purpose and size.

Four core documents were reviewed: 1) tender/competition documents, 2) dialogue phase questions and answers, 3) the evaluation sheet, and 4) the contract (reviewed more superficially due to volume). The competition documents were used to establish the formal structure of the dialogue process, expected deliverables, and the operationalisation of award criteria, while the Q&A and evaluation material were used to trace how clarification needs and scoring related to contractor prioritisation and optimisation work.

INTERVIEWS

Enabling systematic coverage of predefined themes while retaining flexibility to probe emerging issues and clarify process details, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data source (as recommended by Jacobsen, 2022). Interviews are a central source of evidence in case study research when the aim is to understand experiences, decision rationales, and work practices (Yin, 2018).

In total, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors involved in the procurement. Respondents included roles from the contractor organisations (Contur & Risa, respectively), the design consultant (COWI), and the client (Rogaland County Municipality). The respondents were familiar with the first author's part-time work for Contur. Interviewees were purposively selected via an initial contact point in the contractor organisation to identify individuals with insight into the procurement. Interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Following the prescriptions of Jacobsen (2022), all interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and returned to respondents for review/approval to strengthen accuracy. Both physical and digital (Teams) interviews were used; digital interviews were applied where practical constraints made physical interviews difficult, consistent with methodological guidance on trade-offs between interview formats (Jacobsen, 2022).

The interview guide was inspired by prior Norwegian competitive dialogue research and then adapted to the specific case and research questions of this study.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was conducted thematically and iteratively across the three data streams. For the literature review, analysis primarily consisted of categorisation to support theory-building and the structuring of the manuscript (as suggested by Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). For documents, extracted information was organised to a) describe formal process requirements and b) validate and contextualise interview statements (as described by Bowen, 2009). Interview data were synthesised thematically and structured according to the phases in competitive dialogue, enabling comparison across respondents and linking procurement practices to reported implications for execution. The thematic synthesising was mainly done by the first author, but the interview data was discussed with the co-authors during weekly meetings. Throughout the analysis, claims were cross-checked across respondents representing the same party and against documentary evidence where applicable to reduce the influence of single-

informant subjectivity and to strengthen credibility (as recommended by Yin, 2018 and Jacobsen, 2022).

LIMITATIONS

The study's findings are based on a single case, and according to Yin (2018), they can therefore be analytically generalizable but not statistically generalizable. The case context (client-supplier constellation, project scope/complexity, and timing) may influence how competitive dialogue is organised and experienced. Therefore, it can be better to study one case in-depth instead of studying many cases superficially. The empirical material is also shaped by practical access and time constraints typical of master-level studies (as discussed by Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). However, the most relevant project documents and interview perspectives were included.

Several interview-related limitations apply. First, interviews cover a procurement process that occurred several years prior for some respondents, creating potential recall limitations. The time of study was selected to document the effects that the procurement procedure had on the project execution and on the project's final outcome. Second, interviews are interpretive and may reflect positive framing, strategic communication, or selective emphasis; this can be mitigated through triangulation across parties and documents, but cannot be eliminated (Jacobsen, 2022; Yin, 2018). Third, the mix of digital and physical interviews may influence interaction dynamics and depth; however, recordings and respondent transcript checking will support accuracy (Jacobsen, 2022). Fourth, the researcher's proximity to one organisation (Contur) may influence disclosure or interpretation; this was addressed by systematic cross-checking and documentary validation where possible (as suggested by Jacobsen, 2022).

RESULTS

Table 1: Phase-by-phase summary of contractor activities, interaction patterns, and outcomes

Phase	What KSR did	Interaction and governance	Illustrative outcomes	Reported effects
Prequa-lification	Formed KSR (Contur & Risa), clarified interfaces (who prices what), emphasised shared incentives and early trust-building toward a new client.	Client planned three suppliers (minimum requirement), but only two suppliers qualified/participated.	Early JV alignment reduced internal conflicts risk and supported integrated bid posture.	Enabled rapid joint working later and consistent contractor voice in dialogue.
Dialogue	Organised work as integrated contractor-consultant team; systematic "between-meeting" production; aimed to exceed expectations ("wow-factor"); iterated solutions against award criteria and client feedback.	Dialogue planned ~12 weeks with meetings + optional discipline "special meetings"; confidentiality handled carefully; client provided clear positive/negative feedback.	Major redesigns to reduce risk/cost and improve constructability (Karusellen elevation; culvert concept revision).	More mature concept entering execution; reported reduced risk scope and fewer changes later.
Evalu-ation	Delivered bid in two-folder system separating price from quality responses; targeted criteria strategically but noted uncertainty in sub-criteria weighting.	Competition price calculated as T1 − T2 − T3 − T4 − T5; max "deduction" 280 million; same client personnel evaluated due to contextual complexity.	Criteria monetisation is seen as informative, but some ambiguity remained (e.g., under-criteria weighting).	Contractor perceived evaluation approach as workable, supported by separation of solution vs price.
Exe-cution (effects)	Early heavy administrative staffing; continued optimisation of methods/solutions once site reality was known; preferred resolving issues informally before formal claims.	Weekly project leader meetings + regular progress/collaboration meetings; co-location (barracks side-by-side) supported low-threshold issue resolution.	Alternative bridge method avoided safety culvert by using MSS; culvert production in parallel across trades; improved traffic management.	Reported time/material savings and fewer change orders vs comparable projects; stable relationship sustained from dialogue.

KEY FINDINGS

High-intensity early work: The dialogue phase required substantial resources from contractor employees and external consultants, and one of the respondents from KSR reported that: *"The*

design consultant was heavily involved and billed many man-hours. The bid became expensive, but it was considered necessary to win the competition".

Optimisation driven by award criteria and enforced by feedback loops: KSR described systematic solution development between dialogue meetings, repeatedly testing concepts in meetings and revising based on client feedback and award criteria. The redesign of "Karusellen" (an underground roundabout requiring substantial mass transport and amounts of concrete) and Hinnasvingen kulvert (an underground concrete culvert for road traffic) are highlighted as key risk and cost reducers, enabled by challenging initial assumptions and maturing alternatives. One of the design consultants said that: *"I can't remember that we have worked so thoroughly in a design-build project in Norway before"*.

Loser's fee as partial, but insufficient compensation: The loser's fee was 200,000 NOK per week over an estimated 12-week dialogue period (2.4 MNOK total for the losing tender meeting requirements). The contractor viewed compensation as insufficient relative to bid costs, but not decisive for effort in this project; interviewees suggested compensation tied to incurred bid costs (e.g., partial reimbursement). One of the respondents from the client said: "*It is about balance, as the contractor should be somewhat compensated without taking away all the risk*". The contractor must accept to spend resources on the procurement process.

Reported execution effects: Mature procurement concepts and established relationships contributed to fewer changes and a less conflict-prone execution. Specific method optimisations (applying a movable scaffolding system (MSS) instead of building with a static scaffolding system with a safety culvert below) were reported to save materials. The efforts in the dialogue phase contributed to risk reduction and cost reductions for both the client and the contractor. Project completion was approximately ten months ahead of schedule.

DISCUSSION

The case supports the proposition that competitive dialogue can function as an effective ECI when it enables iterative solution development and frequent feedback loops. In this project, KSR's optimisation work (design and constructability changes) was tightly coupled to the award criteria and client guidance, which is consistent with ECI literature emphasising improved understanding of client needs and better use of contractor competence. From a Lean Construction viewpoint, this can be interpreted as shifting effort upstream to reduce downstream variation, rework, and dispute-driven delays – provided that upstream work produces genuinely buildable, mature solutions rather than premature designs disconnected from site realities. Wondimu et al. (2018) noted that competitive dialogue helps apply Lean principles in construction.

KSR's very positive assessment of the process is strongly linked to the client's ability to give clear and actionable feedback and to behave as an engaged dialogue partner. The interview findings also emphasise the importance of protecting confidential information, reflecting a known barrier in multi-supplier early interaction: suppliers may be reluctant to share methods or ideas if they fear spillover to competitors. According to a study by Wondimu et al. (2016b), trust and confidentiality are identified as essential success factors for ECI.

A central trade-off is that competitive dialogue appears to generate value partly because suppliers invest heavily in developing solutions. However, the transaction costs can restrict participation – especially if compensation is low relative to bid costs. The loser's fee in this case did not reduce effort, but the contractor still framed it as "meagre" compared to incurred costs and described internal budget increases as necessary to remain competitive in this procurement type. At the same time, the contractors are not supposed to make profit on the bidding itself, and they have to accept bidding costs as necessary to stay in business. This suggests that public clients may need to consciously balance 1) expected supplier work content, 2) clarity of evaluation criteria, and 3) compensation mechanisms if they want robust

competition and diverse solutions across projects and markets. These results are consistent with the conclusions presented by Ottemo et al. (2018).

The monetisation of quality criteria (competition price formula) provided strong steering signals, but the reported ambiguity in sub-criteria weighting indicates a potential inefficiency: when suppliers must decide where to invest scarce bid resources, unclear weighting can lead to misallocated effort and reduced value for the client. A practical implication is that competitive dialogue – because it encourages deep solution development – may require higher-than-usual clarity about what will be valued in evaluation, including the relative weight of sub-criteria.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper set out to understand how competitive dialogue support ECI when viewed from the contractor side, using the Fv. 44 Bussveien (Stasjonsveien-Gauselvågen) case. The results show that KSR approached the procurement process as an integrated joint venture team and treated the dialogue period as an intensive development process rather than a conventional tender process with several wasteful adjustments of the detailed tender. Work was organised systematically between meetings to mature and optimise solutions in line with the award criteria, while simultaneously managing competitive sensitivity and the cost of participation. Figure 2 illustrates a consequence of the difference between competitive dialogue (where project specifications can be made more detailed during the dialogue) and negotiated competitive procedure (where project specifications must be finalised before negotiations). The optimisations of the less detailed tenders in the competitive dialogue are much easier than the optimisation of the more detailed tenders in the competitive negotiated procedure.

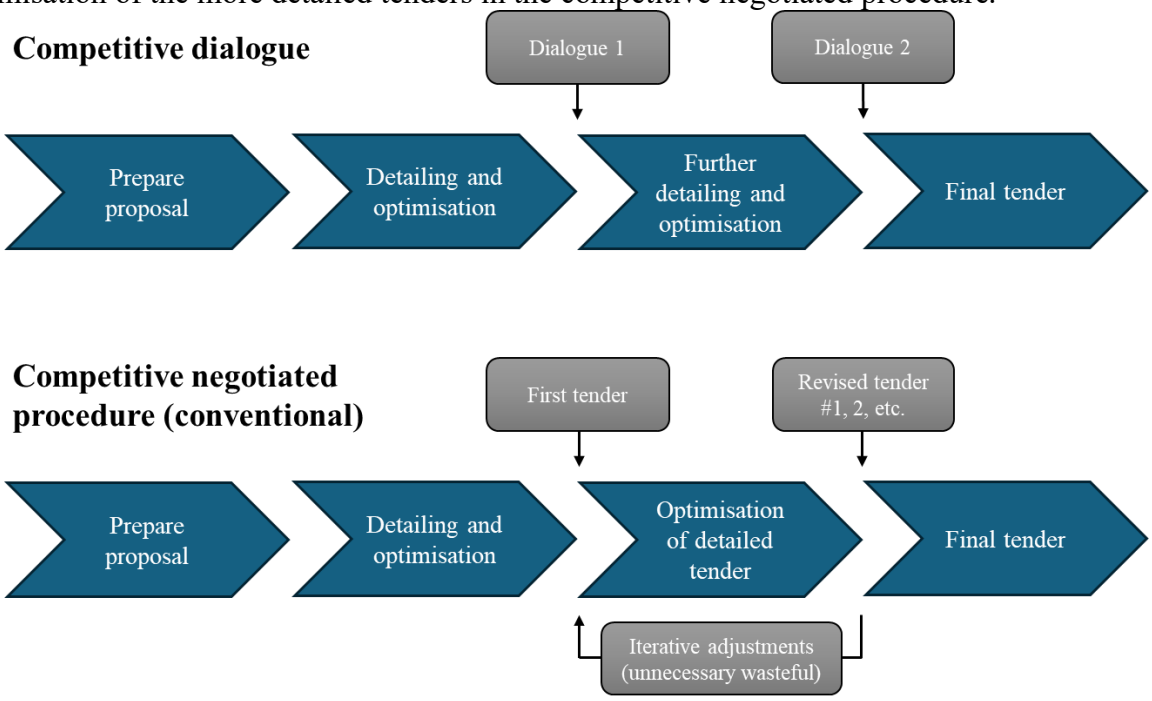

Figure 2: Comparison of the optimisation of tenders, which is easier in competitive dialogue (less detailed tenders) than in the competitive negotiated procedures (more detailed tenders)

Overall, the competitive dialogue was experienced as constructive. Respondents attributed much of the value to strong client engagement, frequent and clear feedback, and practices that supported confidentiality in a setting where suppliers must collaborate and compete in parallel. At the same time, the study highlights persistent tensions. Competitive dialogue required substantial resources and thus high transaction costs for the contractor, and the loser's fee was

perceived as insufficient relative to bid costs. In addition, some ambiguity in sub-criteria weighting created uncertainty about where to focus limited bid resources most effectively.

The case provides lessons for future competitive dialogue procurements. For contractors, the results underscore the importance of establishing shared incentives early – particularly when delivering through a joint venture – and of resourcing the dialogue phase deliberately, including tight integration of design competence to enable rapid iteration. The study further suggests that collaboration routines developed during dialogue can be carried into execution to support low-threshold problem solving, reduce escalation, and enable continued optimisation (for example, through co-location and frequent coordination at leadership level). For public clients, the findings imply that competitive dialogue works best with competent personnel able to provide actionable feedback, when award criteria (including sub-criteria logic) are sufficiently clear to steer supplier work, and when confidentiality is handled in a way that sustains both openness and fair competition. Finally, the case indicates that loser's fee matters: if transaction costs are perceived as too high relative to compensation, participation and competition may be weakened over time, even if this particular project remained attractive to the contractors involved.

The findings are based on a single project and should therefore be interpreted as analytically generalizable rather than statistically representative. Future research should test the observed mechanisms across multiple cases and client types to clarify which elements are robust – such as feedback practices, criteria clarity, and compensation models – and which are more context-dependent, including market conditions, strategic project importance, and project complexity. Future research should also explore the relations between Target Value Delivery and Competitive dialogue.

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