The School Buying Reset 2026: What the Procurement Act 2023 Really Changes for Schools and Trusts

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The Procurement Act 2023 does not remove compliance — it gives schools greater flexibility, transparency and scope to engage the wider market with confidence. Here's what that actually means in practice.

This is Part 2 of **The School Buying Reset 2026**.

In Part 1, we explored why procurement can no longer be treated as a purely administrative task. The financial and operational pressures facing schools in 2026 mean that how we buy now has a direct impact on school resilience and pupil outcomes.

The good news is that the procurement landscape has changed in a way that can help — if schools know how to use it.

The Procurement Act 2023, which came into force on 24 February 2025, represents the most significant reform to public procurement in over a decade. It replaces the previous Public Contracts Regulations 2015 and introduces a more flexible, transparent and UK-specific approach.

But what does this actually mean for schools and trusts in practice?

What the Act Actually Changes

The Procurement Act 2023 was designed to make public procurement simpler, more transparent, and better able to deliver value for money while supporting wider government priorities.

For schools and multi-academy trusts, the key practical changes can be summarised as follows.

The important point is that the Act does not make procurement less important; it makes active, well-planned procurement more valuable.

1. More Room to Design the Right Buying Process

For relevant procurements, the Act introduces a competitive flexible procedure. This gives schools and trusts more scope to design proportionate, structured processes that are better suited to their specific needs, while still meeting the Act's requirements.

It supports earlier market engagement and a stronger focus on outcomes rather than rigid procedural steps.

2. A Stronger Transparency Culture

The Act requires greater transparency throughout the procurement lifecycle. This includes earlier publication of opportunities, more information about contract awards, and clearer visibility of what other schools and trusts are buying.

For school leaders, this creates better opportunities to benchmark, compare and learn from others in the sector.

3. More Opportunity to Engage the Wider Market

The Act encourages earlier and more open engagement with suppliers.

It also introduces dynamic markets, which can create more flexible routes for

approved suppliers to join relevant markets over time. They are not a shortcut around competition, but they can support a more open and adaptable supplier landscape where used appropriately.

4. A Broader View of Value

The Act continues the move away from price-only buying.

Schools can give proper weight to value, quality, outcomes and wider benefits where these are relevant, proportionate and clearly reflected in the specification and award criteria.

This supports a more rounded approach to assessing what represents genuine value for money.

5. More Proportionate Thinking for Lower-Value Buying

For lower-value purchases, schools should still use proportionate, fair and well-documented processes.

The key practical point is not that lower-value buying becomes a free-for-all, but that schools should avoid overcomplicating smaller decisions while still keeping a clear audit trail and demonstrating value for money.

What Hasn’t Changed

It is important to be clear: the Procurement Act 2023 does not remove the need for compliance.

Schools and trusts remain public bodies and must continue to demonstrate value for money, fairness, and proper use of public funds.

The Act gives schools more tools and more responsibility.
It rewards proactive, well-planned procurement rather than reactive, box-ticking approaches — but it still requires clear governance, proper documentation, and sound decision-making.

Practical Implications for Schools

So what should school leaders and business managers actually do differently?

- Test the market more actively before committing to a formal process.
- Write clearer, outcome-focused specifications that allow suppliers to propose better solutions.
- Use proportionate approaches for lower-value purchases without unnecessary bureaucracy.
- Document decisions clearly so the school can show why a route was chosen, how suppliers were compared and how value was assessed.
- Build internal confidence and clear processes so teams can take advantage of the new flexibility responsibly.

The schools that will benefit most are those that treat the Act as an opportunity to move from reactive buying to strategic procurement.

What Comes Next

In Part 3, we will examine the hidden costs of over-relying on frameworks — and why moving beyond default approaches can deliver significant benefits without increasing risk.

Join The School Network

If you want to follow the full series and receive practical tools, templates and additional resources, we recommend joining **The School Network**.

The School Network exists to help schools move from supplier search to supplier strategy.

This series is designed to help schools take that first step — from reactive supplier search to confident supplier strategy.