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Closure

Some basics

It is likely that payments will have been made against observable milestones during the course of the project. Finalisation of the project will thus generally involve only the completion of the final milestone(s).

Once a client has 'signed off' on a project (or milestone), the consultant is entitled to consider the job (or part thereof) to be complete. It is therefore important that final acceptance ('signing off') does not occur without prior reconciliation of all outputs against those specified in the contract. The reconciliation should obviously take place early enough for remedial action or additional work to be undertaken if necessary.

The main factors to check during a reconciliation include:

- Have all deliverables specified in the contract been provided?
- Is the quality of the deliverables satisfactory?
- Is there a need to take into account any new circumstances to ensure that the deliverables are current and relevant?
- Were all outputs delivered on time, or as part of an agreed variation?
- Have all expenses incurred by the consultant been authorised and approved for payment?
- Overall, have the objectives of the project been met by the deliverables?

Where a collaborative relationship has been maintained with the consultant, and variations to the contract have been documented throughout, there should be little difficulty in agreeing on the final deliverables. If an issues log has been used throughout the procurement, reconciliation should not be a major chore.

Should difficulties nevertheless arise, consult your agency's legal adviser immediately.

Australian Government requirements

Considerable time can elapse between completion of a consultancy and subsequent requests for information arising from an audit of the procurement process, Freedom of Information requests, legal proceedings, etc. Because memories fade and personnel move on, corporate knowledge can be lost unless records are brought fully up-to-date while details are still fresh in one's mind. If needed later, the information can be found more easily on the relevant file.

Clause 7.2 of the CPRs also requires that documentation relating to a procurement be retained in accordance with the *Archives Act 1983*.

Risk management

The main risk at the end of a project is that a final output will be delivered by the consultant, and payment made, without a proper check that the deliverables specified in the contract have all been provided. An obvious mitigation strategy is therefore to conduct a thorough reconciliation of output received from the consultant against the outputs specified in the contract.

The reconciliation should take place with sufficient time to spare for additional work by the consultant, if required. Also, don't forget to include any contract variations in the reconciliation process.

Tips and traps

- One agency let a consultancy with very short timeframes. Material was to be prepared in stages for a manual, prior to printing and presentation at a training course. Asked by the consultant to **'sign off'** on the chapters of the manual as they were completed, the agency's contact officer did so, but subsequently requested substantial revisions after the manual had been sent to the printer. Because of the short timeframes involved, course participants did not gain access to the manual. The entity's own required training outcome was thus compromised, and the consultant was made to look less than competent. Apart from the contract management aspects of this case, it is important to recognise that **'sign off'** to a consultant really means final acceptance of the product in satisfaction of the contract.
- Sometimes, consultants request a **'sign-off' meeting**. Their expectation is that, unless any major issues are raised, the meeting itself constitutes sign-off by the client. Make it clear that you reserve your position until all documentation, including any reports, have been properly considered and finalised.

This text is taken from *Managing Consultants: A practical guide for busy public sector managers*, by Leo Dobes, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.