



Attractive refurbished furniture in Government of Flanders' offices

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Introduction

The Agency for Facility Operations (AFFO) is the central purchasing body for the Government of Flanders administration. Because circular public procurement is addressed in the Government of Flanders' coalition agreement, the AFFO has an exemplary function. They aim to demonstrably be the most circular facility service provider in Flanders by 2028. A Flemish policy on public procurement underlines the circularity and sustainability ambitions for the region. Furniture is amongst the prioritised product categories in this policy. Because AFFO is –among other things- responsible for building management and maintenance, office furniture is part of their core business. Furthermore the shift to working from home and changes in office space sizes and locations, have led to a large volume of redundant furniture. The high storage cost and

large environmental impact, added to the suitability of the product category for this circular procurement pilot. The administrator-general of the AFFO initiated this pilot project and offered his full support to the executing staff. The AFFO decided on refurbished office furniture for their Interreg NSR ProCirc pilot. Taking into account there was some prior experience with successful refurbishment projects for offices in Ghent and Brussels, as well as a request for support from local authorities. Furthermore, the potential economic advantage was considered. Elimination of end-of-use furniture can be a costly affair. In addition, the Belgian market was deemed ready to supply the required quantities and service.



Procurement process

In the pre-tender phase, inspiration was sought from Rijkswaterstaat's (The Netherlands) tenders and external consultancy was acquired (SBS Belgium). The Government of Flanders' Department of Environmental & Spatial Development provided expert advice on circular criteria that could be included in the tender. There is long-standing cooperation between this department and the AFFO in the field of sustainable public procurement.

The tender was launched in a competitive procedure with negotiation leading to a framework agreement that is also open to local authorities. The circular ambition of the project was explained in the tender documents and minimum requirements were included. Furthermore, reporting requirements and sustainability criteria were included for new materials used for the refurbishments: use of sustainable wood, low formaldehyde emissions for board material and use of durable, ecological textiles.

Only one company, Nnof, submitted an offer. After the negotiation meetings, an addendum agreement document was drafted. This contains stipulations about a credit system and online store, minimum requirements for accepting end-of-use furniture, refurbished products to supply and the requirements for the growth trajectory. This methodology allowed the market to come up with circular solutions in cooperation with the client, through open dialogue in the negotiation rounds.

The end-of-use furniture is picked up from the offices of the Government of Flanders and local authorities by Nnof and a non-profit organisation. These items then become Nnof's property in exchange for credits. The Government of Flanders and local authorities can then use these credits to buy refurbished items from the online store that is created as part of the contract. Nnof was also allowed to sell the collected items they refurbished to third parties. This approach was chosen to give a second life to as many of the items as possible.

This credit system does not fit the traditional accountancy approach, which meant that the internal Finance Department and Finances Inspection staff needed to be convinced of the benefits of this way of working. The refurbished furniture itself, however, was immediately welcomed by staff, organisation wide.

Results

2020

- *CO₂-emissions avoided:* 27,626 tons of CO₂-eq. emissions were avoided through the implementations of the framework agreement.
- *Waste avoided:* 21 drawer units were reused as is, at least 30 other furniture pieces will be reused.
- *Virgin materials avoided:* 329 refurbished furniture items were acquired, constructed of 5427.91 kg of reused materials and 1572.50 kg of virgin materials. Therefore ca. 77% of the weight in virgin materials was avoided.

2021

- *CO₂-emissions avoided:* 308,329 tons CO₂-eq. emissions.
- *Waste avoided:* 1,123 pieces of furniture got a second life without any interventions, at most a light polish. This is 53% of all furniture that Nnof delivered in 2021 on the framework agreements. Of these, 1,047 pieces were office chairs.
- *Virgin materials avoided:* Nnof delivered 2,125 reused and refurbished pieces of furniture in 2021. This consisted of approximately 86,944.05 kg reused and 7,419.77 kg new materials. Roughly calculated this means that over 92% of the furniture consists of reused materials.



Lessons learned

- Importance of effectively communicating the circular framework agreement, its benefits and involved mindset shift to all potential buyers, as these contracts are open to many entities.
- Contrary to popular belief, refurbished furniture might not always have a lower acquiring price than new furniture. This depends on project specific context, such as the possibilities to scale up and automate the process, and the amount of manual labour that is required. Reuse with minor repairs or refreshment however, should be cost-effective and can compensate for more expensive items in the project. The true price, including environmental and societal cost, would be reflected in life cycle cost.
- When opting for refurbishment of end-of-use items, the warehouse cost for storage needs to be considered, as these items might not be reused immediately.
- If the market is mature enough, include reporting on environmental data in the tender.
- In growth trajectories, AFFO asks candidates to set goals to reach, one year after the contract has been awarded. This allows businesses that are at the start of implementing circularity, to compete as well.
- Multidisciplinary procurement teams are an important way forward to more innovative and sustainable procurement.