

How-To Guide



How to Write a Request for Information (RFI) that Vendors Want to Respond To

Authors: Colin Erhardt

Contributors: Kailey Burger Ayogu, Hanna Azemati, Elena Hoffnagle, Charley Kargman, and Hope Patterson

In this how-to guide you will:

- Gain confidence in using RFIs as standard market research tools ahead of select RFPs.
- Learn how to design and issue RFIs efficiently and approachably to maximize vendor and community participation, while complying with procurement protocols.
- Discover best practices in issuing RFIs to meet your government's needs.



HARVARDKennedy School
Government Performance Lab

**Procurement
Excellence Network**

Introduction

Government employees often fear that collaborating with prospective vendors or outside stakeholders crosses over a legal line and creates an unfair advantage. However, it is generally acceptable to communicate with potential vendors in a fair and open way before a formal solicitation has been released. Through a Request for Information (RFI), governments can solicit ideas from the vendor community, subject matter experts, and community stakeholders while maintaining a level playing field.

Yet a poorly designed RFI can result in responses that are not actionable or can create confusion in the vendor community by miscommunicating the RFI as a bidding opportunity. Intentionality in the design and writing of the RFI, approach for communicating, and analysis of responses can position governments to garner useful insights from vendors and stakeholders.

What is a Request for Information?

At the most basic level, a Request for Information (RFI) is a procurement vehicle to collect information about a potential service, program, product, or commodity from various vendors, industry experts, or community stakeholders. RFIs can capture valuable insights from these groups before a Request for Proposal (RFP) is issued to help close major information gaps without providing an unfair advantage to any given vendor in a future solicitation.

The table on the facing page highlights key differences between RFIs and RFPs.

RFIs can offer several benefits in the procurement planning process, including:

- ***Gathering broader stakeholder feedback:*** Through an RFI process, community groups or subject matter experts can tell governments about client population needs, industry or topic-specific performance metrics, and desired program elements. For example, in advance of procuring for early childhood services, issuing an RFI might allow a government to hear directly from early childhood, maternal health, and parenting experts in the community on what specific subpopulation has the greatest needs (i.e., low-income, single parents) and what types of services are most needed.
- ***Clarifying potential scope of work:*** Through an RFI process, governments can test whether their proposed scope of work is realistic and includes sufficient details to elicit a comprehensive response. Responses may also clarify additional support or information that vendors will

Procurement Dimension	Request for Proposal (RFP)	Request for Information (RFI)
Drafting Process	Governments often have strict rules governing which stakeholders can be engaged during the RFP development process as well as once the RFP is released to the public to promote equal treatment of prospective vendors.	There is much less scrutiny on those participating in the drafting process and typically governments can be in touch with respondents to ask clarifying questions or request additional information.
Content/Compliance Requirements	Prescribed RFP templates are often provided by the central purchasing office or agency lawyers with formal requirements and boilerplate provisions.	RFI may be as short as a few pages; the document typically includes an introduction articulating the goals and purpose, some background on the issue at hand, a limited set of optional questions, and instructions for how to submit responses.
Respondent Questions	Proposal questions include both mandatory forms and specific requirements that are tied to evaluation criteria to assess each proposal; all questions are required and failure to respond could mean a potential vendor is found unresponsive.	Some questions may be optional, allowing respondents to focus on questions most relevant to their area of expertise or knowledge; responses don't necessarily need to be formal.
Response Timeline	Governments often have specific rules for how long an RFP must be open before it closes.	Timeline varies depending on the complexity of the information request but may be as short as a few weeks.

require from the government to successfully contract for and deliver services. As an example, issuing an RFI regarding a new, complex IT system could help validate if the initial government-defined requirements are feasible based on available offerings from the vendor community.

- Identifying a likely marketplace:** Through an RFI process, governments can assess whether there are existing vendors capable of delivering on the proposed scope of work and which vendors might be interested in providing a particular service, program, or product. For example, a government trying to solicit vendors to build electric vehicle charging stations could use an RFI to understand the capacity of local manufacturing entities to provide this service.

- **Collecting information on innovative practices:** Through an RFI process, vendors or providers can speak to innovations in the field. For instance, a government may be trying to procure new data tracking devices to support staff repairing street signs. However, the last procurement was from ten years ago, and its specifications are outdated. An RFI offers the vendor community a direct path to share what has changed in product capabilities in recent years.
- **Increasing interest for a future procurement:** Through an RFI process, governments can use an RFI to signal that a contracting opportunity is forthcoming, which can increase both the quantity and quality of proposals. As an example, a government might need to procure a very complex social services program array. Issuing an RFI may help to determine if the procurement schedule and funding approach seem reasonable while also alerting vendors to start the planning necessary to prepare their responses prior to the official RFP release.

Characteristics of an Effective RFI

Responding to an RFI should be much easier for vendors than responding to an RFP! The following tips highlight key considerations for effective RFIs.

Do

- Make responding as easy as possible, which can be as simple as submitting a Google Form or sending an email response!
- Use simple, accessible language with content organized in a logical fashion to create a pleasant experience for respondents.
- Build in appropriate time for respondents to provide tailored responses as well as more general feedback or insights. A rule of thumb is to give at least a month for responses.
- Make questions broad enough that respondents will feel comfortable sharing insights.
- Follow any government-specific rules about communicating with vendors, including making clear that the RFI itself will not result in an awarded contract and that responding to the RFI will not give firms an advantage during any subsequent RFP.
- Plan sufficiently ahead of a procurement to leave enough time for the RFI responses and insights to help shape a resulting RFP. We recommend you issue an RFI at least three months before the planned release of your subsequent RFP.

- Advertise the RFI widely to draw responses from a diverse range of vendors, experts, and potential end users. Depending on the type of service or product you are hoping to procure, consider outreach beyond the vendor community to trade groups, universities, and other stakeholders who may have helpful information to guide your planning.

Don't


- Require physical hard-copy submissions. This requirement will significantly decrease the number of responses.
- Use jargony procurement verbiage that respondents may have trouble understanding.
- Create a laundry list of narrow questions. Remember, respondents are providing their expertise for free with no direct financial incentive beyond the chance to inform the subsequent solicitation, so creating a user-friendly experience is not only kind but will result in more submissions!
- Expect vendors to share trade secrets or specific price information, especially since this is not a formal solicitation.
- Use language that could make respondents think the RFI is an RFP (or other solicitation type), which includes listing evaluation criteria or mentioning a proposal selection process.

Deciding Whether to Issue an RFI

RFIs are most useful when the government could benefit from broader perspectives from additional stakeholders. RFIs are more common in certain fields or commodities, such as information technology, where vendors are used to responding to inquiries. RFIs are often used to narrow in on the goal of a product or service or to refine a government's understanding of the challenge within a particular subject area or community.

RFIs are not the only market research tool to utilize. RFIs can, and often should, be paired with other activities, especially in case a government only gets a few responses to the RFI. For example, a more sophisticated market research activity such as industry days or prototype competitions may be more appropriate for a complex new service or product for which the government has many open questions. On the other hand, if a government understands the service or commodity well, simple internal research or speaking with 1-2 subject matter experts may suffice.

Below is a spectrum of market research activities varying in level of effort:

Effort	Technique
<p>Low</p>  <p>High</p>	<p>Internet research to discover what firms exist and what solutions they offer.</p> <p>Academic research literature and expert interviews to develop evidence base.</p> <p>Speaking with associations or peer cities to understand best practices in contracting for a specific service or product or to identify example RFPs from other jurisdictions.</p> <p>Vendor interviews, focus groups, engagement with end users and frontline staff, surveys or town halls to understand what products, services and firms are out there, how they work, who they could serve, and how they could work more effectively.</p> <p>Requests for Information (RFIs) to solicit ideas, solutions and/or recommendations to assist in the development of an RFP.</p> <p>Analyze outcome data that is either readily available from existing contract performance or that requires additional work to collect and synthesize.</p> <p>Industry days to seek input concerning current industry practices from members of the vendor community.</p> <p>Concept Papers to announce your RFP vision and plan to the vendor community. By pairing with a vendor meeting, you can further explain the new concept or approach you're taking.</p> <p>Prototype competitions with vendors where competing teams develop prototypes during early stages of a project.</p>

RFI Scenario Quiz

Read through the following statements and determine whether it applies to a current or upcoming procurement for your government. Sum up the points. If you score at least 3 points, you should consider issuing an RFI.

- We have never procured for this product or service before or are seeking to try a novel contracting or service delivery method (3 points).
- We have received many unsolicited inbound information requests from the vendor community regarding this product or service, but we are unable to ask follow-up questions due to procurement rules (1 point).
- This potential program/service could benefit from broader input from key stakeholders, such as subject matter experts and community members with lived experience (2 points).

- Funding parameters require that we conduct an extensive information gathering stage before awarding a contract (2 points).
- We are likely to rebid a major array of services or programs in a few years and could benefit from learning about what needs to change to meet our outcome goals (3 points).
- We have had a contract in place for over ten years because of the proprietary nature of the product or service; however, we hear rumblings there may be a major technological development in this space that we should know about (3 points).

Preparing for an RFI

On the next page are some activities to check off your list before your RFI goes out on the street.

Reviewing RFI Responses

Once you receive all RFI responses, it is important to dedicate staff time to thoroughly reviewing and synthesizing insights. Don't let all your hard work go to waste! This review may include organizing responses around specific themes based on your original strategy assessment or summarizing content into a briefing document for internal stakeholders. A briefing document could include:

- A high-level summary capturing questions asked as well as key takeaways and synthesized themes
- An overview of the number of responses and types of entities that responded
- An appendix that lists all responses to allow the procurement team to dig deeper on specific insights
- A list of outstanding questions or topics that weren't fully answered by the RFI responses received and suggestions for how to close those knowledge gaps

Governments can also decide the level of detail to share back with the vendor community, such as publicly posting aggregate findings on a government website. However, the original RFI should clearly communicate how the government plans to use or publish any submitted content, including a process for how respondents may highlight specific content that they do not want shared publicly.

Activity	Key Preparation Questions
Conduct a strategy assessment for the purchase	<p>What are the procurement objectives?</p> <p>What are the problems the service, product or program intends to solve?</p>
Identify the critical information you need to gather	<p>What information are you missing or uncertain of that is needed to write a high-quality, results-driven RFP?</p> <p>What information could be obtained through an RFI?</p>
Hold internal discussions with program and contracting staff	<p>What are the main department needs for this service?</p> <p>What prior experiences of staff are relevant?</p> <p>What challenges have resulted from contracting out similar work?</p> <p>What can be learned from prior evaluations of contractors, change orders, amendments, and other course corrections?</p> <p>What relevant insights can be drawn from existing data (such as about the size, characteristics, and outcomes of a program's target population)?</p>
Brainstorm, draft, and finalize RFI content	<p>What are the most crucial topics or inquiries the RFI could include?</p> <p>How can you narrow this list further to ask respondents only about the most important topics?</p>
Prepare your RFI outreach strategy	<p>How will you advertise and promote the RFI?</p> <p>What community organizations or external stakeholders could be partners in getting the word out?</p> <p>What language will you include clarifying that this RFI is not an RFP?</p> <p>How can you leverage traditional media, social media, procurement platforms, and other government partners?</p> <p>How can you get this RFI on the radar of diverse vendors that have not traditionally participated in public sector procurement processes?</p>
Conduct a final check	<p>Will vendors and other key stakeholders be comfortable answering the questions posed in the RFI?</p> <p>Are there any questions you can deemphasize or remove to streamline the information requested?</p> <p>Could this RFI be confused as an RFP?</p> <p>Is the response timeline reasonable? Are you inadvertently asking for confidential information?</p>

RFIs in Practice

To demonstrate these principles in action, let's look at a couple of examples from three different governments.

City of Boston, Massachusetts

[A Boston city department worked with the GPL](#) to prepare for a complex IT procurement related to project management software. Since this was for a new service, the city had limited insight into whether the vendor community could meet their specific requirements.

To learn more about the service, the city issued an RFI that collected responses via a simple Google Form. In the RFI, they shared a draft Scope of Work and solicited feedback as to whether city requirements were described in sufficient detail for a complete RFP response. The city also got input on other draft RFP content such as the pricing structure and whether certain components were standard for the industry.

As a result of the low burden of responding via Google Form, the city generated significant vendor engagement. Partially due to the RFI, the resulting RFP received 13 total proposals (double the typical response rate for similar IT products).

City of Glendale, Arizona

[Glendale worked with the GPL](#) on the procurement of afterschool education programs. The city had limited insight into whether community organizations would be interested in partnering with them on a new model, while maintaining a competitive bidding process.

The city issued an RFI to confirm the feasibility of its planned business model, in which the city provided facilities free of charge and covered utilities/landscaping costs, while a community partner provided free or low-cost afterschool programming to youth. The RFI helped to collect information about proposed programming, preferred locations, organizational capacity, funding sources, and desired contract length.

In the end, the RFI generated insights that allowed city officials to better tailor the RFP document to match what was realistic for community organizations. Furthermore, the city used this experience to create a custom RFI template available for all city agencies to use in future procurement planning processes.

State of New Hampshire

A state human service agency was for the first time trying to procure community-based voluntary services. The agency didn't want to simply rely on government staff to design an approach and viewed it as critical to gather input directly from the community. This included broad strategic questions on the specific needs of families involved in the child welfare system, the best available services to keep families together safely at home, the capacity of local service providers to deliver new services, the interest of out-of-state service providers to work with the state, and how to best match families to appropriate services.

[The state partnered with the GPL](#) to issue an RFI with a clear strategic vision from the agency, open-ended questions for community input, an easy-to-navigate response template, an informational conference for respondents, and a coordinated press strategy.

This intentionality resulted in significant local and regional press coverage for the RFI. Ultimately, it received 38 responses from 50 organizations across the child and family service system, which broke records for responses to RFIs in the state.

RFI Template

This [RFI template](#) was developed to support governments in developing RFIs that will gather valuable information from stakeholders to inform program design and procurement decisions. While this template offers general best practices and guidance, you should work closely with your Contracting and Legal teams so that the RFI you draft conforms with your government's requirements.

Conclusion

We hope this RFI how-to guide helped you appreciate the value of RFIs as a standard market research tool and equipped you to design effective RFIs to inform your high-priority procurements.

For additional support in procurement planning processes, please see the GPL's [Guidebook: Crafting a Results-Driven Request for Proposals \(RFP\)](#). Modules 1 and 2 of this publication offer additional best practices and exercises to assist your team in preparing for future procurements.

The **Procurement Excellence Network** is an initiative of the Government Performance Lab designed to help public sector leaders use government procurement as a tool to improve resident outcomes and advance equity. The **Government Performance Lab**, housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are able to provide experiential learning as well.

The Government Performance Lab is grateful for support from Bloomberg Philanthropies.

© Copyright 2022 Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab