



# Information Gathering to Inform your RFP

# Module 2: Information Gathering to Inform Your RFP

## In this module, you will:

- Gather critical information and conduct market research to inform your RFP drafting
- Engage stakeholders and end-users to learn from prior service delivery
- Understand the needs of those who will receive your service or use your product and the ability of vendors to meet those needs

## 2.1 Best Practices

Now that you have a good understanding of your timeline and the makeup of your project team, you are ready to start gathering information to inform how you write your RFP!

When writing a results-driven RFP, the steps you take to gather information before writing are fundamental to building your understanding of the context your RFP falls within, the problem your government is aiming to solve with the RFP, and your vision for a successful outcome.

In this section, we will help you identify the needs of those who will receive your service or use your product and the ability of vendors to meet those needs. If you have previously contracted for this service or product, this is also the time to assess the impact of prior service delivery and the opportunities for improvement in your service model.

As part of your information-gathering process, you will speak to stakeholders, including:

- *End-users or program recipients*: individuals who will benefit from this service or product and will have the best sense of their needs and what a successful service or product would look like. These could be external end-users (e.g., families attending an early childhood program) or internal end-users (e.g., police officers using mobile data computers in their patrol cars).
- *Front-line staff and supervisors*: individuals delivering services or managing programs who can offer insights into how service delivery currently operates and opportunities for improvement.
- *Administrators in other departments*: auditors, inspectors or finance staff who may have previously explored the cost, effectiveness, performance, or compliance of vendors previously delivering services.
- *Vendors or providers*: organizations who have offered this service in the past or could in the future and may be able to give you a better sense of the potential capacity and expertise of the marketplace. A benefit of vendor engagement can also be informing the marketplace of the direction the government is headed in terms of planned service delivery (e.g., funding a new community program, or dividing one large citywide contract into smaller opportunities to bring more vendors in).

- *Subject matter experts:* representatives from associations or community-based non-profits who could provide you with broader context about your RFP, help you understand community needs, or share information about the marketplace.

Depending on the complexity of the RFP and how much time you are able to allocate, this information-gathering stage could range from a few weeks to six months.

## Understanding Your Users to Better Direct and Deliver Services

For routine government services or software products (e.g., library custodial services or a new public transit app), it may feel unnecessary to spend time thinking about the recipients of your service or product. However, there is still a population benefitting from the service or product! For library custodial services, for example, the service recipients might be users of your city's libraries. Consider how proper cleaning and maintenance of facilities could impact the experience of these users – a parent/tot book group needs clean rugs to gather on, visitors and staff need clean bathrooms, and individuals with underlying medical conditions need public spaces to be cleaned and sanitized periodically. For a new public transit app, as another example, your target population is all of the individuals who will be using the app. Different sub-groups of individuals using the app likely have different needs, such as those whose primary language is not English or those with limited technology experience.

Take steps to understand the needs of those using or benefitting from the service or product. What qualitative and quantitative data have you previously captured or could you capture about their needs?

## Looking at Past Performance to Understand Previous Effectiveness

If you are issuing an RFP for an existing service that your government provides, you will want to spend sufficient time understanding the effectiveness of your service delivery model.

First, look back at the prior RFP process to procure this service. How successful was the previous procurement? Maybe you did not receive as many proposals as you hoped. Maybe the vendors found the RFP confusing and had numerous questions. What can you learn about how to improve the RFP this time around from looking back at the last one?

Second, spend time with stakeholders to assess what's working and what's not working about how current vendors are providing this service. Internally, consider: what data do you have about whether these vendors are meeting your goals? What are common complaints from service recipients, program managers, or inspectors?

Your current vendors will also have valuable insights about performance! They can probably tell you what works well about the current scope of services. You might ask them: what outcomes have been difficult to achieve? How could the City work with them in a more effective, more collaborative way? You might also observe the service offered in person, or create process maps to improve your understanding of service delivery.

Third, think about what has changed since your current model of service began. How have the needs

of the population receiving your service changed? Have external disruptions, such as a public health crisis or economic downturn, meant that the population requiring your service has changed? Have increased or reduced investments meant that the larger service landscape has changed regarding what other similar services are being provided to your recipients?

## Conducting Market Research to Understand what Vendors Can Offer

Before drafting your RFP, take steps to understand the pool of potential vendors, the services they are able to offer, and whether your budget is feasible. This can be a moment to be curious about what other cities or states are doing - or if any new solutions have emerged since the last time you procured for the service or product.

| KEY CONCEPT: MARKET RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES |   |
|--|---|
| 1  | <b>Internet research</b> can be a great starting place, which you likely know well already! Use internet research as a first step to understand what similar programs exist and what firms or organizations might be able to meet your needs. Since many governments publicly post their RFPs online, you may be able to find good examples of RFPs for similar services. Internet research can also be a starting point to understand the demographics of service recipients, and historical injustices related to the program or service context.   |
| 2  | <b>Speaking with associations or peer cities</b> can be an easy way to understand what best practices exist in contracting for a specific service or product. Your peer cities, counties, or states have likely experienced some of the same challenges you have. Don't be shy about picking up the phone or sending an email!  |
| 3  | <b>Vendor interviews or focus groups</b> can help you understand what products and services are out there, how they work, and who they serve. Vendors bring valuable expertise! You might learn that the product or service that best meets the needs of your target population is different than the one you planned on soliciting.  |
| 4  | <p><b>Requests for Information (RFIs) and Concept Papers.</b> An RFI is an informal solicitation of ideas, solutions and/or recommendations to assist in the development of a scope of work for an RFP. An RFI does NOT result in a contract being awarded, but is used instead as a fact-finding activity to gather information about the marketplace. You can use an RFI to get feedback or advice from expert vendors to strengthen an upcoming solicitation. Because it is shared widely with your vendor pool, it can be an easy way to give all vendors the chance to hear about an opportunity and give feedback.</p> <p>Similarly, a Concept Paper can be a tool used pre-RFP to announce your RFP vision and plan to the vendor community. This can be especially helpful for new or substantially redesigned programs or services, or when you have changed your RFP process. In a Concept Paper, you often will share your proposed programmatic approach, goals and objectives, and RFP components. There will then be an opportunity to hear feedback and suggestions from vendors, stakeholders and researchers prior to writing the RFP. You might find it useful to pair the release of your Concept Paper with a vendor meeting to explain the new concept or approach you are taking.</p> |

Check with your local procurement expert; in most jurisdictions, it is OK for the government to have conversations with potential vendors as long as you operate transparently, include numerous firms or organizations in the discussions, and these conversations happen before the start of RFP drafting. You should never discuss specific conditions of the RFP, nor should you allow potential vendors to draft or revise RFP language. For example, it is inappropriate to show a potential vendor the draft scope of work, submission requirements, or evaluation criteria before you release an RFP.

## Information Gathering in a Social Service Context

If you are working on an RFP for social or human services, you should take additional steps to understand the needs of the population receiving your services, and how the target population will be matched with and referred to services.

First, understand the target population receiving your services. Who are the intended recipients of your services? What socioeconomic and demographic data do you have about this population? What qualitative data have you previously captured or could you capture about their needs? Your goals in understanding the target population are to:

- Move from a broad population definition to more specifically defining the target population.
- Give your proposers a clear picture of this population using local data or statistics
- Describe the specific challenges the population faces, incorporating the voices and perspectives of the population when possible.
- Be able to call the proposer's attention to any key sub-populations (e.g., LGBTQ+ homeless youth within a broader homeless population) with specific needs, challenges, or disparate outcomes that may require more specialized offerings.

Second, think about how you are identifying service recipients and referring or matching those individuals to services. When exploring who actually receives your services, you might find that your program is not reaching those most in need of support, or that your service delivery has not met the needs of historically marginalized communities.

Third, if you are continuing an existing social service or community program, explore whom the program or service actually served. Did some individuals end up on a waitlist? What was the program's recruitment or referral process? Did the service you offered match recipient or user needs? In the next module, you will use the information you have gathered about your target population to closely inform your problem statement.

## Synthesizing What You Have Learned

You will gather quite a bit of useful information throughout these activities. The next planning prompt encourages you to synthesize and organize what you have learned so that, in the next module, you can use this research to inform your understanding of the problem your RFP aims to solve.

## 2.2 Example

Imagine that you work in a Department of Community Services that holds contracts with three service providers who prepare and serve a healthy lunch to seniors on weekdays at six senior centers. You are planning to issue a new RFP, since these contracts will expire in the next year. You want to investigate how well services are being delivered and whether they meet the needs of your target population. Here are the activities that your research process might include:

### *Understanding previously delivered services*

- Hold an initial meeting with staff who directly supervise the contracted meal providers. Understand how they currently measure the performance of these vendors, what works well about the current model for this meal program, and where there have been problems.
- Speak with each of the three providers. What is working for them? Do they have any ideas for improvement, efficiency, or better meeting the needs of the seniors in this program? What contract requirements have been difficult or costly for them to meet? What could make the collaboration between the government and the vendor more effective?
- Explore overall satisfaction with the meal provider and program by dropping in on lunch one day and speaking directly with staff and seniors. You might ask questions such as:
  - ⇒ Do the meals served consistently meet the county's health and nutritional standards?
  - ⇒ Do the meals served arrive on time each day?
  - ⇒ Do the meals taste good? What would make them better?
  - ⇒ Is the right amount of food provided on each plate? Are there often meals left over? Do you have to turn seniors away due to lack of meals?

### *Understanding your target population*

- Gather data about the demographics of the seniors regularly receiving these meals. Are the seniors receiving this service the ones that this program aims to target?
- What groups of seniors might be eligible for this program but aren't showing up? Why might that be?
- How are seniors referred to this program? How is the program advertised?

### *Conducting market research*

- Understand what the landscape of potential service providers looks like. Are there many other catering businesses locally that could provide these meals? Do you anticipate there might be other organizations out there interested in delivering these services?
- Speak with other county governments who offer similar meal service programs.
- Assess the program's entire budget to identify if the budget matches the full set of resources required. Ask if the prices your county pays seem reasonable compared to similar meal programs run by peers.

# MODULE 2: WORKBOOK

## 2.3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gather your team and brainstorm answers to the questions below. Your answers to these questions will help inform the creation of a project team and project plan in the next section.

1. What data and information can you collect about current service delivery? Does vendor performance data exist? Would it be appropriate to observe service delivery in action? Is there anything that program managers or vendors might be resistant to sharing honestly?

2. Who are the intended recipients of this program or product? What are their needs?

3. What level of market research feels appropriate given your gaps of knowledge and timeframe? Would a Request for Information (RFI) or focus group help enrich your understanding of the market and potential solutions?

4. Additional notes:



## 2.4 PLANNING PROMPTS

After conducting market research and understanding the effectiveness of current service delivery, it is time to synthesize and organize your findings. We suggest you organize your findings in a table similar to the one below. We have filled in the first row as an example, with a potential finding from our senior meal services example.

| RESEARCH SYNTHESIS  |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| Research discovery  | Implication/impact  | How we will address in the RFP  |
| <p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>Vendor A has trouble delivering meals on time because they deliver meals to two senior centers on opposite ends of the county.</i></p> | <p><i>Example:</i></p> <p><i>Because of this, clients at one senior center often must wait 30-40 minutes for lunch, which has led to a drop in clients at that senior center.</i></p> | <p><i>Example:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Add a performance metric to capture data about on-time meal delivery.</li> <li>- Allocate contracts differently so that providers are serving senior centers closer in distance.</li> </ul> |
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