

Expression of Interest for the ICANN New gTLD Program: 2026 Round Independent Objectors

Expression of Interest

9 March 2026



1 Introduction

1.1 General Instructions

This document provides an overview of the Expression of Interest (EOI) for Independent Objectors for the New Generic Top-Level Domains (gTLD) Program: 2026 Round (the Program). This EOI provides background and pertinent information regarding the requirements for EOI respondents.

Indications of interest are to be submitted by emailing 26r-independent-objectors-eoi@icann.org with the following information, upon which access to the EOI submission portal will be provided:

1. Name of the individual
2. Contact email address

Responses to the EOI should be electronically **submitted by 23:59 UTC on 20 April 2026** using ICANN's [sourcing tool](#). Responses to the EOI will not be accepted via other means. ICANN will only accept responses provided in English.

1.2 About the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)

ICANN's mission is to ensure the stable and secure operation of the Internet's unique identifier systems. To reach another person on the Internet, you have to type an address into your computer - a name or a number. That address has to be unique so computers know where to find each other. ICANN helps coordinate and support these unique identifiers across the world.

See www.icann.org for more information.

1.3 About the New Generic Top-Level Domain (gTLD) Program: 2026 Round

The Program is a community-driven initiative that is enabling the continued expansion of the Domain Name System (DNS). Through the introduction of new gTLDs, including domain names in a variety of scripts and languages, the Program aims to encourage innovation, competition, and consumer choice.

Every computer on the Internet has a unique numerical address called an Internet Protocol address. The DNS makes the Internet more 'user-friendly' by allowing users to enter names, rather than having to remember a long string of numbers for the website they wish to visit. Top-level domains (TLDs) form the last part of a domain name, appearing after the dot. For example, in the domain name icann.org, the characters 'org' identify the TLD.

Through the 2012 round of the New gTLD Program, more than 1,200 new unique names like .futbol and .pizza, and names in other alphabets and languages were added to the Internet, which has helped to encourage innovation, competition, and consumer choice in the domain name industry. The Program gives businesses, communities, governments and other

organizations the chance to apply for new gTLDs tailored to fit their organization, community, culture, language, and customer interests.

The Program is being implemented by ICANN in line with community-developed policy recommendations contained in the Generic Names Supporting Organization's [Final Report on the new gTLD Subsequent Procedures Policy Development Process](#) (“Final Report”).

The New gTLD Program: 2026 Round will offer even more domain names in longer lengths and different scripts. These are an important part of the expansion of the DNS because they allow speakers of non-Latin-based languages to access the Internet using their own language or writing system.

The [New gTLD Program: 2026 Round Applicant Guidebook](#), which constitutes the essential roadmap to the Program and lays out the requirements to lead readers through application submission and evaluation processes, was published on 16 December 2026. The application window for the New gTLD Program: 2026 Round is expected to open on 30 April 2026.

1.4 EOI Objectives

ICANN seeks to identify three individuals to serve as Independent Objectors, including one that will act as Chair, to file Community and Limited Public Interest objections and appeals and participate in mediation, where appropriate, as part of the Program. An individual may be affiliated with a firm but will be ultimately responsible for the processes described in this EOI. Individuals from the same firm shall not be selected. The EOI is public and announced on ICANN's website, and anyone may apply.

1.5 About Independent Objectors

The Program includes an objection process, which affords certain parties an opportunity to advance arguments against identified applications for new gTLDs on different grounds. Objections may also be filed by Independent Objectors (IOs), who do not act on behalf of any particular persons or entities, but solely in the best interests of the public who use the global Internet.

To mitigate possible conflict of interest issues that may arise from having a single panelist serving as the IO, there will be a standing panel of three IOs, one of whom will act as the chair. Neither ICANN nor the ICANN Board has authority to direct or require the IOs to file or not file any particular objection.

If an individual IO determines that an objection should be filed, that IO will initiate and pursue the objection in the public interest.

IOs may file objections against highly objectionable applications to which no objection has been filed and only on the following grounds, notwithstanding the regular standing requirements for such objections:

- **Limited Public Interest:** Based on the claim that the applied-for string and/or one or more applied-for allocatable variant string(s) is contrary to generally accepted legal norms of morality and public order that are recognized under principles of international law.

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- **Community:** Based on the claim that there is well-substantiated opposition to an applied-for string and/or one or more applied-for allocatable variant string(s) from a significant portion of the community which the string may be explicitly or implicitly targeting.

Objections and appeals for both grounds shall be administered by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC). The objection filing window for objections lodged by IOs will begin at the same time as all other parties, on String Confirmation Day, but will be open for seven additional days beyond the end of the objection filing window for the general public. String Confirmation Day is expected to be in Q4 of 2026, and the filing window for IOs is anticipated to stay open for 111 calendar days. IOs will only file objections during the initial objection filing window. Should their objection not prevail, IOs may appeal the Panel Determination. IOs may also be involved in mediation and settlement with affected applicants, where required.

The IOs:

- Shall not object to an application unless at least one comment opposing the application has been made in the Application Comment Forum, in light of the public interest goal noted above.
- Must consider application comments when making an independent assessment whether an objection is warranted. The IOs will have access to application comments received during the comment period.
- Will not have their objection considered if another objection on the same ground has passed the Quick Look Review, absent extraordinary circumstances, which the IO will have to describe in a public rationale.

For more information, refer to the [New gTLD Program: 2026 Round Applicant Guidebook](#), and in particular the following sections:

- [Section 4.5 Objections and Appeals](#), and
- [Appendix 3 Materials Related to Objections and Appeals](#).

The IOs' funds comprise two separate elements, both of which are funded from the proceeds of new gTLD applications:

1. The **IO's fees**, i.e. the fees paid to the IOs for performing their work. Providers are requested to submit a proposal for their fees using a tiered approach based on the number of applications received. ICANN will make payments to the IOs accordingly.
2. The **IOs' budget**, i.e. the fees paid to the DRSP for processing objections and appeals and managing mediation. IOs will use this budget for filing objections and appeals as well as mediation fees, if applicable. The DRSP will issue invoices to ICANN, which will make payments directly to the DRSP. In extraordinary circumstances, IOs may request additional budget.

Once the number of applications is confirmed and shared with the public, ICANN will inform the IOs on the final IOs' fees, based on the applicable pricing tier, as well as the IOs' budget.

The IOs' tenure is limited to the time necessary to carry out their duties in connection with the New gTLD Program: 2026 Round application window. **The IOs will be expected to make an 18-month commitment starting around October 2026; the exact timeframe will be communicated in the third quarter of 2026.**

2 Scope of Work

ICANN expects the selected vendors to demonstrate the ability to deliver on the following, among others, in line with the [New gTLD Program: 2026 Round Applicant Guidebook](#) and the [ICC Rules](#):

- Review New gTLD Program: 2026 Round applications.
- Monitor application comments, objections, and other input related to potentially controversial applications.
- Perform research, where necessary.
- Coordinate with the other IOs and ICANN to ensure any conflicts of interest issues are addressed and no duplicate objections are filed.
- File Limited Public Interest and Community objections and appeals, where relevant, respecting the specified deadlines.
- Participate in mediation and settlement processes, where required.
- Develop detailed rationales outlining the reasons why each objection was filed for publication on the New gTLD Program's website.
- Engage with the applicant and the DRSP in case of requests for a three-person panel and/or consolidation of objections.
- Provide any additional written statements and/or evidence to the DRSP/Panel as required.
- Participate in virtual hearings where required.
- Communicate with ICANN on a regular basis on issues and updates.

Besides the above, the selected chair will be responsible for the overall coordination of the IOs' work. Such work includes but is not limited to:

- Ensuring that any conflicts of interest concerns are addressed in a timely manner in line with ICANN's "[Conflicts of Interest](#)" and "[Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines for Service Providers](#)" for the 2026 Round provided in the Applicant Guidebook and in collaboration with ICANN.
- Ensuring that no duplicate objections are filed.

2.1 Deliverables

Coordination and Communication

Deliverable <i>Expected deadline: August 2026</i>
Set up a governance structure with other IOs, including communication channels and frequency, how to address potential conflicts of interest issues, and how to avoid duplicate objections
Agree with ICANN on communication channels and frequency

Objection and Appeal Processing and Handling

Note:

1. The indicated timeframes are provisional and are subject to change.
2. It should be noted that all payments to ICC will be managed by ICANN.

Deliverable
<p>Ongoing <i>Expected timeframe: November 2026-March 2028</i></p>
Escalate any issues that might arise to ICANN
Ensure any requests by ICC are met within the deadlines
Ensure that ICANN is informed on any updates, including the filing of objections and appeals and additional costs that may be charged by ICC
Coordinate with other IOs and meet online on a regular basis
Support ICANN in addressing any accountability mechanisms described in the Guidebook for evaluation results and to supply necessary information and documentation to ICANN, as needed, on an ongoing basis
<p>In the 104 days following String Confirmation Day <i>Expected timeframe: November 2026-February 2027</i></p>
Review all New gTLD Program: 2026 Round applied-for strings, focusing on applications that may lead to Limited Public Interest and Community objections
Monitor and analyze comments and objections on such applications, as well as any additional input
Perform research where necessary
Start drafting objections and rationales explaining the reason why each objection was filed
Coordinate with other IOs
Raise any conflicts of interest issues as soon as possible
Other administrative tasks
<i>Chair only:</i> Ensure all conflict of interests issues are addressed in a timely manner in line with ICANN's policies and procedures
<i>Chair only:</i> Ensure there is no duplication of efforts
<p>In the 7 days following the deadline for the general public to file objections <i>Expected timeframe: February 2027</i></p>

File objections in line with ICC’s and ICANN’s requirements, ensuring there is no duplication
Document the rationale for each objection filed in line with ICANN’s requirements
<i>Chair only:</i> Provide ICANN with the list of objections that have been filed and the rationale for each for publication on ICANN’s website
Following the deadline for filing objections <i>Expected timeframe: February-April 2027</i>
Engage with the applicant and the DRSP in case of requests for a three-person panel and/or consolidation of objections
Provide any additional written statements and/or evidence to the DRSP/Panel as required
Participate in virtual hearings where required
Participate in mediation and settlement processes, where appropriate
Following the issuing of Panel Determinations <i>Expected timeframe: April 2027-March 2028</i>
Appeal to Panel Determinations, where appropriate, should objections they have filed not prevail

Compliance

Deliverable
Adhere to ICANN’s Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines for Service Providers
Adhere to ICANN’s Conflicts of Interest Process for Service Providers
Identify and disclose any potential conflicts of interest and recuse yourself from a case if neutrality could be questioned
Ensure fairness, objectivity, and lack of bias

3 Candidate Selection Criteria

The decision to select IO candidates as an outcome of this EOI will be based on, but not limited to, the following selection criteria:

1. Considerable experience and respect in the Internet community.
2. Strong understanding of global issues and international contexts.
3. Ability and willingness to mitigate any conflicts of interest.
4. Experience in mediation, arbitration, and/or tribunals.
5. Experience in international law.
6. Reference checks.

7. Pricing.

Although recommendations for IO candidates from the community are welcomed, the IOs must be and remain independent and unaffiliated with any of the gTLD applicants. The various rules of ethics for judges and international arbitrators provide models for the IOs to declare and maintain their independence, while ensuring compliance with ICANN's policies.

3.1 Requirements of Providers

Submission Requirements

Providers must submit the following:

- a. A curriculum vitae (max. 4 pages).
- b. A cover letter outlining their interest in the position, how their experience is relevant to the role, how they can guarantee their independence and transparency, and how they plan to address any potential conflicts of interest concerns (max. 2 pages).
- c. Their proposed fees as per the pricing sheet.
 - i. For the tasks performed in the 111 days following String Confirmation Day, providers are requested to indicate different flat fees based on the number of new gTLD applications that will be received.
 - ii. All proposed fees will have to be in USD.
- d. Indication whether they wish to be selected for the chair role.

Required Skills and Experience

Providers must possess the following skills and experience:

1. Experience in dispute resolution in international settings.
2. A track record of impartial work in international settings and no known conflict with any known potential applicants.
3. Demonstrated strong ethics and impartiality.
4. Detailed analytical and judgment skills required to accurately identify those (and only those) strings that would be in conflict with the public interest, as set forth in Community and Limited Public Interest objection principles.
5. Ability to objectively review and analyze comments suggesting that objections be filed, and ensure that such comments are fully and objectively considered when making decisions.
6. Excellent problem-solving skills.
7. Ability to gather information, perform a comprehensive analysis, and provide an expert opinion.
8. Ability to perform research and develop factually supported arguments against a particular gTLD application or string, or the ability to manage counsel in doing so.
9. Strong communication skills, including an ability to communicate effectively with individuals from various backgrounds and cultures.
10. Awareness of how decisions impact applicants, the public, and the Internet.
11. Ability and willingness to communicate regularly with ICANN and the other IOs to ensure compliance with procedures, provide regular updates, and avoid duplication of effort.

12. Providers must abide by ICANN's Conflict of Interest Policy as well as the New gTLD Program: 2026 Round Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines for Service Providers and the Conflict of Interest Process for Service Providers.
13. Fluency in English.

Preferred Skills and Experience

Providers should preferably have the following skills and experience but are still eligible to qualify if they do not:

1. Preferably familiarity with Internet governance and the DNS ecosystem and ICANN.
2. Preferred experience in international law, public policy, human rights and understanding of communities.

4 Timeline

The following dates have been established as milestones for this EOI. ICANN reserves the right to modify or change this timeline at any time as necessary.

Activity	Estimated Dates
EOI published	9 March 2026
Candidates submit any questions to ICANN	23 March 2026 23:59 UTC
ICANN responds to participant questions	6 April 2026
Candidate applications due by	20 April 2026 23:59 UTC
ICANN reviews applications	8 May 2026
Candidate interviews	18 - 22 May 2026
Final evaluations and selections	1 June 2026
Contracting and awards	29 June 2026
Announcement of providers	3 July 2026

5 Terms and Conditions

General Terms and Conditions

1. Submission of an application shall constitute each respondent's acknowledgment and acceptance of all the specifications, requirements and terms and conditions in this EOI.
2. All costs of preparing and submitting its application, responding to or providing any other assistance to ICANN in connection with this EOI will be borne by the respondent.
3. All submitted applications including any supporting materials or documentation will become the property of ICANN. If respondent's application contains any proprietary information that should not be disclosed or used by ICANN other than for the purposes of evaluating the application, that information should be marked with appropriate confidentiality markings.
4. As a requirement for the applicant, ICANN expects that the applicant will comply with all relevant data protection laws and regulations and will have policies and procedures in place to protect the privacy of any personal information that the applicant collect or process on our behalf. Applicant must respect data subjects' right to control their

personal information and ensure that their data is kept secure and used only for the purposes for which it was provided. Applicant must never sell, rent, or share personal data applicant processes on our behalf with third parties. ICANN expects that the applicant will take all necessary steps to ensure the security and confidentiality of any personal data applicant processes on our behalf, including implementing appropriate technical and organizational measures to prevent unauthorized access, use, or disclosure. Compliance with these requirements will be a key consideration in our selection of a vendor.

Discrepancies, Omissions and Additional Information

1. Respondent is responsible for examining the EOI and all addenda. Failure to do so will be at the sole risk of the respondent. Should respondent find discrepancies, omissions, unclear or ambiguous intent or meaning, or should any question arise concerning the EOI respondent must notify ICANN of such findings immediately in writing via email no later than 10 days prior to the deadline for bid submissions. Should such matters remain unresolved by ICANN, in writing, prior to respondent's preparation of its application, such matters must be addressed in respondent's application.
2. ICANN is not responsible for oral statements made by its staff members, agents, or representatives concerning the EOI. If respondent requires additional information, respondent must request that the issuer of the EOI furnish such information in writing.
3. A respondent's application is presumed to represent its best efforts to respond to the EOI. Any significant inconsistency, if unexplained, raises a fundamental issue of the respondent's understanding of the nature and scope of the work required and of its ability to perform the contract as proposed and may be cause for rejection of the application. The burden of proof as to cost credibility rests with the respondent.
4. If necessary, supplemental information to the EOI will be provided to all prospective respondents receiving the EOI. All supplemental information issued by ICANN will form part of the EOI. ICANN is not responsible for any failure by prospective respondents to receive supplemental information.

Assessment and Award

1. ICANN reserves the right, without penalty and at its discretion, to accept or reject any application, withdraw the EOI, make no award, to waive or permit the correction of any informality or irregularity and to disregard any non-conforming or conditional application.
2. ICANN may request a respondent to provide further information or documentation to support respondent's application and its ability to provide the products and/or services contemplated by the EOI.
3. ICANN is not obliged to accept the lowest priced application. Price is only one of the determining factors for the successful award.
4. ICANN will assess applications based on compliant responses to the requirements set out in the EOI, responses to questions related to those requirements, any further issued clarifications (if any) and consideration of any other issues or evidence relevant to the respondent's ability to successfully provide and implement the products and/or services contemplated by the EOI and in the best interests of ICANN.
5. ICANN reserves the right to enter into contractual negotiations and if necessary, modify any terms and conditions of a final contract with the respondent whose application offers the best value to ICANN.