

# **Project Overview for the ICANN New gTLD Program: 2026 Round Safeguard Assessment Request for Proposal**

9 December 2025



---

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 General Instructions

This document provides an overview of the Request for (RFP) for Safeguard Assessment for the New Generic Top-Level Domains (gTLD) Program: 2026 Round (the Program). This RFP overview provides background and pertinent information regarding the requirements for RFP respondents. The RFP comprises this document as well as other documents that are hosted in the ICANN sourcing tool (Jaggaer).

Indications of interest are to be submitted by emailing [2026-round-safeguard-assessment-rfp@icann.org](mailto:2026-round-safeguard-assessment-rfp@icann.org) no later than 23:59 UTC on 22 January 2026 with the following information, upon which access will be provided to the RFP:

1. Name of the organization.
2. Name of the contact.
3. Email address of the contact.

Responses to the RFP should be electronically submitted by **23:59 UTC on 29 January 2026** using ICANN's sourcing tool. Responses to the RFP 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](http://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 2026 round of new gTLDs 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 application window for the 2026 round of gTLDs is expected to open in April 2026.

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").

## 1.4 RFP Objectives

The objective of this RFP is to identify a qualified provider to conduct Safeguard Assessment as part of the String Evaluation Process of the New gTLD Program: 2026 Round. The purpose of the RFP is to invite prospective providers to submit proposals for ICANN to evaluate capabilities and expertise.

The RFP is public and announced on ICANN's website, and any entity may provide a response.

## 1.5 About Safeguard Assessment

The [Safeguard Assessment](#) is part of the String Evaluation phase of the New gTLD Program. This assessment is carried out by an independent panel of experts that determine whether an applied-for string requires specific Safeguard Public Interest Commitments (Safeguard PICs) as contractual obligations in the Registry Agreement. These Safeguard PICs relate to areas such as consumer protection, sensitive uses of strings, and regulated industries.

The panel will review all strings and variants using the ICANN [Safeguard PICs Framework](#), which was developed in response to the GAC Consensus Advice in the [ICANN46 Beijing Communique](#) and ICANN Board Resolution during the 2012 Round of the New gTLD program. The results of Safeguard Assessment will be published, so that applicants and the community understand the basis for the decision.

---

## 2 Scope of Work

The Safeguard Assessment provider will be responsible for conducting evaluations of all applied-for strings and variants to determine if they require Safeguard Public Interest Commitments (PICs). The Safeguard Assessment occurs during the String Evaluation phase of the New gTLD Program. The Safeguard Assessment Evaluation Panel is forecasted to begin the evaluation process around November 2026, assuming 2,000 applications are submitted. This is an estimated start date which is dependent upon the number of applications submitted as well as on the opening of the application window. ICANN expects to present the selected provider with more firm timelines after the application submission window closes and the number of applications and applicants are known. The Safeguard Evaluation Panel activities include:

### Project Management

- Manage the Safeguard evaluation process in alignment with the Applicant Guidebook (AGB).
- Track progress and ensure evaluations are completed on time and within the established service levels.
- Develop and maintain standard operating procedures for Safeguard Assessment.
- Provide regular updates to ICANN on status, issues, and risks.
- Ensure access to ICANN's TLD Application Management System (TAMS) to ensure panelists receive tasks, determinations are submitted electronically, and results flow back to ICANN through the system.

### Forming and Managing Evaluation Panel(s) to Assess Applications

- Recruit panelists with expertise in consumer protection, internet security, abuse prevention, and regulatory compliance.
- Develop an Evaluation Guide before receiving applications; This guide must instruct panelists and the panel manager on how to apply the Safeguard Public Interest Commitments (PICs) Framework.
- Train panelists on Safeguard Assessment requirements and ICANN conflict of interest policies.
- Conduct calibration sessions to ensure consistent application of Safeguard Assessment criteria across panelists.
- Assign and monitor workloads, ensuring quality and timeliness of evaluations.
- Ensure all panelists are trained to use TAMS, including task queues, forms, rationales (public, applicant, ICANN versions), and submission workflows.

### Conducting Panel Evaluations

- Review applied-for strings and variants to determine if they are already listed under the 2012 Category 1 Safeguards (which have specific strings listed).
- Review the strings to determine if they fall into any Safeguard PICs category based on the ICANN Safeguard PICs Framework.
- Review all application comments, and ICANN Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC) Early Warning and Consensus Advice (if any) in preparing final results and determinations.
- Use TAMS to record determinations, select the correct safeguard PICS category if applicable, and provide all three (3) rationales (public, applicant, and ICANN) with work product attachment.

### Managing the Evaluation Program

- Oversee daily panel operations and maintain communication with ICANN.
- Implement a quality control process to ensure consistent and fair results.
- Document procedures, methodologies, and rationales for determinations.
- Deliver summary reports highlighting outcomes and lessons learned.
- Retain all materials and documentation in compliance with ICANN Document Retention policy and provide relevant work products to ICANN upon completion of contract.

### Managing Conflicts of Interest

- Enforce ICANN's conflict of interest and code of conduct requirements.
- Identify and document potential conflicts for evaluators and advisors.
- Maintain a recusal and panelist substitution process to ensure impartiality.
- Periodically review conflict of interest disclosures throughout the evaluation period.

## 2.1 Safeguard Assessment Process and Framework

As part of the string evaluation phase, the evaluation panel will review all applied-for gTLD strings, including variants, to determine whether they fall into any Safeguard PICs string category. The process is based on the framework developed in response to the [GAC Consensus Advice](#) from the [ICANN46 Beijing Communique](#).

The framework groups applied-for strings into four (4) categories, each tied to different levels of risk and consumer protection concerns. The panel's role is to determine whether a string fits into one of these risk-based groups and, if so, which specific risk-based group it falls under. The respective Safeguard PICs will be incorporated into the Registry Agreement in accordance with the framework, if the string proceeds to contracting. As illustrated in Table 7-2 from the AGB, the Safeguard PICs Framework provides descriptions and lists examples of strings that may fall into each category.

### **Safeguard PICs Framework**

<b>String Group No.</b>	<b>String Group</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Required Safeguards</b>
1	Regulated Sectors/Open Entry Requirements in Multiple Jurisdictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• String is likely to invoke a level of implied trust from consumers</li><li>• String is likely to carry heightened risks of consumer harm</li><li>• String is associated to a generally open sector, but may require limited registration</li></ul> See the non-exhaustive list of strings identified by the GAC as falling within this group in the ICANN46 Communique. Examples: .kid, .degree, .audio, .town	1-3

2	Highly-Regulated Sectors/Closed Entry Requirements in Multiple Jurisdictions	String is associated with an industry where licensing or accreditation is required by local, regional, or national governments. This typically involves an assessment of qualifications, regular inspections, and ongoing government oversight  See the non-exhaustive list of strings identified by the GAC as falling within this group in the ICANN46 Communique. Examples: .cash, .bet, .abogado, .earth, .care	1-8
3	Potential for Cyber Bullying/Harassment	String's implied or actual meaning could result in gTLD being used to facilitate harassment or cyberbullying  Example strings identified by the GAC as falling within this group in the ICANN46 Communique: .fail, .gripe, .sucks, .wtf	1-9
4	Inherently Governmental Functions	String is associated with a function that is inherently in the domain of government such as military branches  Example strings identified by the GAC as falling within this group in the ICANN46 Communique: .army, .navy, .airforce	1-8 and 10

The panel should use this framework to:

- Compare the applied-for primary and variant strings and their intended use against the descriptions provided, taking into account relevant application comments received on the strings.
- Determine which of the four (4) groups if any the string falls into, which will require the inclusion of relevant Safeguard PICs in the applicable Registry Agreement in accordance with the framework.
- Document the rationale for each decision and upload it into TAMS.

Based on the assigned grouping, these commitments are binding obligations that become a part of the Registry Agreements. The inclusion of these PICs may be required to comply with applicable laws, implement appropriate security measures, provide contact information, possess necessary credentials, and report material changes to credentials, among other obligations.

### Safeguard PICs

Safeguard PIC	Safeguard PIC Text
1	Registry Operator will include a provision in its Registry-Registrar Agreements that requires registrars to include in their Registration

	Agreements a provision requiring registrants to comply with all applicable laws, including those that relate to privacy, data collection, consumer protection (including in relation to misleading and deceptive conduct), fair lending, debt collection, organic farming, disclosure of data, and financial disclosures.
2	Registry Operator will include a provision in its Registry-Registrar Agreements that requires registrars at the time of registration to notify registrants of the requirement to comply with all applicable laws
3	Registry Operator will include a provision in its Registry-Registrar Agreements that requires registrars to include in their Registration Agreements a provision requiring that registrants who collect and maintain sensitive health and financial data implement reasonable and appropriate security measures commensurate with the offering of those services, as defined by applicable law.
4	Registry Operator will proactively create a clear pathway for the creation of a working relationship with the relevant regulatory or industry self-regulatory bodies by publicizing a point of contact and inviting such bodies to establish a channel of communication, including for the purpose of facilitating the development of a strategy to mitigate the risks of fraudulent and other illegal activities.
5	Registry Operator will include a provision in its Registry-Registrar Agreements that requires registrars to include in their Registration Agreements a provision requiring registrants to provide administrative contact information, which must be kept up-to-date, for the notification of complaints or reports of registration abuse, as well as the contact details of the relevant regulatory, or industry self-regulatory, bodies in their main place of business.
6	Registry Operator will include a provision in its Registry-Registrar Agreements that requires registrars to include in their Registration Agreements a provision requiring a representation that the registrant possesses any necessary authorizations, charters, licenses and/or other related credentials for participation in the sector associated with the TLD string
7	If Registry Operator receives a complaint expressing doubt with regard to the authenticity of licenses or credentials, Registry Operator should consult with relevant national supervisory authorities, or their equivalents regarding the authenticity.
8	Registry Operator will include a provision in its Registry-Registrar Agreements that requires registrars to include in their Registration Agreements a provision requiring registrants to report any material changes to the validity of the registrants' authorizations, charters, licenses and/or other related credentials for participation in the sector associated with the TLD string in order to ensure they continue to conform to

	appropriate regulations and licensing requirements and generally conduct their activities in the interests of the consumers they serve.
9	Registry Operators will develop and publish registration policies to minimize the risk of cyber bullying and/or harassment.
10	Registry Operator will include a provision in its Registry-Registrar Agreements that requires registrars to include in their Registration Agreements a provision requiring a representation that the registrant will take reasonable steps to avoid misrepresenting or falsely implying that the registrant or its business is affiliated with, sponsored or endorsed by one or more country's or government's military forces if such affiliation, sponsorship or endorsement does not exist.

## 2.2 Scope of Work Timeline

ICANN anticipates that work related to the Safeguard Assessment will begin in November 2026 after String Confirmation Day. It is estimated that the process will take 180 days to complete once underway. The evaluation panel will need to review the following inputs before rendering their final recommendations:

- 134 Days- Post String Confirmation Day. This consists of 104 days for public comments and 30 days for application responses. The Applicant Comment Forum will remain open beyond 104 days, but only comments submitted during the first 104 days will be considered by the Evaluation Panel absent extraordinary circumstances
- 30 Days- Application Change Request due to input from Application Comments
- 104 Days- GAC Member Early Warnings
- GAC Consensus Advice<sup>1</sup>

## 2.3 Deliverables

The deliverables outlined below represent the high level and critical outputs expected from the Evaluation Provider. Final deliverables, including detailed formats, timing and acceptance criteria, will be confirmed and documented in the Statement of Work and contract between ICANN and the selected provider prior to the commencement of evaluations.

### Infrastructure & Process Development

Deliverables	Deadline/Milestones
Design, document and maintain standard operating procedures for conducting Safeguard Assessment in accordance with the AGB	Prior to receiving applications for evaluation.
Develop an internal review and quality control process to ensure scoring consistency and procedure compliance	Prior to receiving applications for evaluation.

<sup>1</sup> GAC Consensus Advice can affect the evaluation and can occur at any time.

Maintain templates for scoring sheets, research disclosures, and final determinations	Prior to receiving applications for evaluation.
Create and submit an Evaluation Guide before receiving applications. This guide must include how to apply the framework and how to document evaluations made under the framework in TAMS.	Prior to receiving applications for evaluation.

### Evaluation & Determination Process

Deliverables	Deadline/Milestones
Review all applied-for strings (including variants) and determine if they fall into any risk-based group using the ICANN Safeguard PICs Framework	Within six (6) months from the String Confirmation Day
Enter determinations in TAMS, select the applicable risk-based group number, and complete public, applicant, and ICANN rationales with required attachment	Within six (6) months from the String Confirmation Day
Panel Managers to approve, reassign, or escalate determinations in TAMS before ICANN review	Within six (6) months from the String Confirmation Day

### Communications and Reporting

Deliverables	Deadline/Milestones
Deliver a report for ICANN review summarizing all outcomes, lessons learned, and recommendations for future rounds	At end of evaluation period
Ensure all communication threads and outcomes are tracked and auditable within TAMS	Ongoing

### Panelist Management

Deliverables	Deadline/Milestones
Train panelists on evaluation criteria, scoring methodology, research guidelines, and conflict of interest standards	All Panelists must be trained prior to engaging in any panel-related activity
Complete ICANN Onboarding and obtain access to TLD Application Management System (TAMS) for panelists and provider staff	ICANN and Providers will agree on timing; will occur in coordination with Providers onboarding for this phase of the round

Train panelists on how to use TAMS, including reviewing application materials and uploading evaluation scoring	ICANN and Providers will agree on timing; will occur in coordination with Providers onboarding for this phase of the round
Assign panelists to evaluations	By start of each evaluation period
Manage workload, deadlines, and feedback to ensure consistency across all evaluations	Ongoing
Maintain and manage conflicts of interest and recusal process for any conflicted parties participating in an evaluation	Ongoing
Document engagement of any relevant experts consulted during evaluation and ensure proper disclosure in research report	As needed / ongoing
Maintain internal documentation and a knowledge base to ensure consistency across panel rotations and for new panelist onboarding	Ongoing
Facilitate calibration sessions across panelists (and panels if relevant) to align scoring judgements and improve consistency in evaluations	Prior to launch and as needed in evaluation period

### Compliance Management

Deliverables	Deadline/Milestones
Document the rationale for each determination (Safeguard PICs required: yes/no; If yes, which Safeguard PIC group) made on evaluation	Within six (6) months from the String Confirmation Day
Apply documented procedures equally and consistently across applications	Ongoing
Adhere to ICANN's Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines for Service Providers	Ongoing
Cooperate with an ICANN-designated Quality Control provider to ensure consistency of evaluations and adherence to documented processes. Respond to ICANN-generated suggestions for process improvements	Ongoing

## 2.4 Quality Control

To assure the community and all applicants that evaluations are objectively conducted and adhere to the processes in the AGB, evaluations and evaluators' work may be reviewed by an

---

independent quality control provider. This provider may request information on how an evaluation (or set of evaluations) was performed, how the scoring was determined, work papers, etc for completed evaluations. This is being done at the request of ICANN and is intended solely to determine if applications are being evaluated according to the established procedures. *The provider may recommend process improvements to ICANN that will be reviewed and may be passed on to evaluators.*

## 3 Selection Criteria

The decision to select a supplier as an outcome of this RFP will be based on, but not limited to, the following selection criteria:

1. Experience and Expertise
2. Time and Resources
3. Evaluation and Assessment
4. Panel Management
5. Methodology and Approach
6. Quality Control and Reporting
7. Information Security and Data Privacy
8. Conflict of Interest Management
9. Pricing
10. Reference checks
11. Financial Health

### 3.1 Key Requirements of Provider

The provider must be able to adhere to the complete list of business requirements as listed in the Jaggaer Portal. A summary of the key business requirements is set out below:

1. Provider must be a well established firm or organization with significant demonstrated experience in evaluating compliance frameworks, public policy, consumer protection, internet security or regulatory matters.
2. Provider must have the ability to recruit, train and calibrate evaluators, manage workloads across multiple applications, and maintain consistency and fairness across different panelists.
3. Collaboration with ICANN on the development of an Evaluation Guide. A clear documented process for applying the Safeguard PIC Framework and producing consistent, well reasoned determinations. Outline process for conducting research and documenting outcomes.
4. Proven ability to manage complex evaluation programs, deliver results on schedule, provide timely update and reporting to ICANN, and support transparency and accountability requirements.
5. The provider must have the ability to manage evaluation processes of international projects and organizations.

6. The provider must receive ICANN's approval before engaging any third-party firms / independent contractors (i.e., firms/contractors with whom you propose to subcontract) related to this project.
7. The provider must have the ability to maintain data security and integrity of the process, including by incorporating the principles of privacy and security by design into their work, to help ensure that privacy and security are considered throughout the project lifecycle, and that personal data is processed in a secure and compliant manner.
8. The provider must demonstrate a robust conflict of interest policy for the resources in place. Eligibility to serve as a provider will be based on an assessment of potential conflicts of interest. Should any applicant submit applications that would present a conflict of interest, the provider must have an established process for recusal and provide an alternative evaluator within a reasonable timeframe. Please refer to the AGB [Appendix 7](#) for Conflict of Interest and [Appendix 8](#) for Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines for Service Providers which apply to Evaluation Resources.
9. The provider must support ICANN in addressing any accountability mechanisms described in the AGB for evaluation results and to supply necessary information and documentation to ICANN, as needed, on an ongoing basis.
10. The provider and all employees and/or subcontractors are expected to complete ICANN-led provider onboarding prior to engaging in the contracted effort. This will include information on ICANN, its mission, the New gTLD Program: 2026 Round as well as any system and process training ICANN deems necessary. ICANN will do its best to contain training material relevant for the provider's contracted work. ICANN expects this to occur just prior to the start of provider's work.
11. The provider must give ICANN pricing on a per-application-evaluated basis. ICANN wants to understand the aspects of each respondent's pricing. Provider should include all components of their pricing in the pricing worksheet as discrete line items for ICANN's evaluation purposes. Final pricing for this work will be stated in an executed agreement on a per-evaluation price, which includes the price for the evaluations and any other accepted pricing components.
12. ICANN requires the provider to obtain reference checks. Providers should have relevant references available for ICANN to contact.

## 4 RFP Timeline

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

Activity	Estimated Dates
RFP published	9 December 2025
<b>Participants submit any questions to ICANN</b>	<b>7 January 2026 by 23:59 UTC</b>

ICANN responds to participant questions	20 January 2026
<b>Participant proposals due by</b>	<b>29 January 2026 by 23:59 UTC</b>
ICANN reviews proposals	26 February 2026
Final evaluations and selection	3 April 2026
Contracting and award	22 May 2026
Announcement of Provider	23 June 2026

## 5 Terms and Conditions

### General Terms and Conditions

1. Submission of a proposal shall constitute each respondent's acknowledgment and acceptance of all the specifications, requirements and terms and conditions in the RFP.
2. All costs of preparing and submitting its proposal, responding to or providing any other assistance to ICANN in connection with the RFP will be borne by the respondent.

All submitted proposals including any supporting materials or documentation will become the property of ICANN. If the respondent's proposal contains any proprietary information that respondent does not want ICANN to disclose or use other than for the purposes of evaluating the proposal, that information should be marked with appropriate confidentiality markings.

3. As a requirement for the provider, ICANN expects that respondent 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 respondent collects or processes on behalf of ICANN. Respondent 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. Respondent must never sell, rent, or share personal data they process on ICANN's behalf with third parties. ICANN expects that respondent will take all necessary steps to ensure the security and confidentiality of any personal data that they process on behalf of ICANN, including implementing appropriate technical and organizational measures to prevent unauthorized access, use, or disclosure. Compliance with these requirements will be a key consideration in the selection of a provider.

### Discrepancies, Omissions and Additional Information

1. Respondent is responsible for examining the RFP 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 RFP, 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 proposal, such matters must be addressed in respondent's proposal.

- 
2. ICANN is not responsible for oral statements made by its staff members, agents, or representatives concerning the RFP. If respondent requires additional information, respondent must request that the issuer of the RFP furnish such information in writing.
  3. A respondent's proposal is presumed to represent its best efforts to respond to the RFP. 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 proposal. The burden of proof as to cost credibility rests with the respondent.
  4. If necessary, supplemental information to the RFP will be provided to all prospective respondents receiving the RFP. All supplemental information issued by ICANN will form part of the RFP. 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 proposal, withdraw the RFP, make no award, to waive or permit the correction of any informality or irregularity and to disregard any non-conforming or conditional proposal.
2. ICANN may request a respondent to provide further information or documentation to support respondent's proposal and its ability to provide the products and/or services contemplated by the RFP.
3. ICANN is not obliged to accept the lowest priced proposal. Price is only one of the determining factors for the successful award.
4. ICANN will assess proposals based on compliant responses to the requirements set out in the RFP, 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 RFP 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 proposal offers the best value to ICANN.