

The GovTech Procurement Playbook

A practical checklist for public servants writing their next tender — distilled from the GovTech 4 Impact World Congress 2026.

Procurement was one of the most recurring themes of G4I 2026, and one of the most underappreciated. Across sessions on AI, legacy modernisation, and digital sovereignty, the same conclusion surfaced repeatedly: **how a government buys technology determines what gets built, who can participate, how fast solutions reach citizens, and whether the public retains control of its own systems.** Procurement is not an administrative procedure. It is a strategic policy instrument.

This playbook distils the practical wisdom shared by Congress speakers into a checklist you can use before, during, and after writing a tender. It is not legal advice, and it does not replace your jurisdiction's procurement rules. It is a thinking tool — a set of questions worth answering before you go to market.

01/7

Procure outcomes, not problems

"If you are not procuring outcomes, you are procuring problems."

— Idoia Ortiz de Artiñano, CEO, GOBE Studio

The most common procurement failure is writing a tender around a fixed list of features rather than the result you actually want. Feature lists lock you into rigid contracts that cannot adapt as technology evolves or needs change. **Outcome-based specifications** give suppliers room to propose better solutions and give you the flexibility to evolve.

- Have we defined the public outcome we want, in plain language, before listing any technical requirements?
- Does the tender specify the result and success measures, rather than prescribing a fixed feature set?
- Have we avoided writing requirements that only one product or vendor could satisfy?
- Can the contract accommodate change as technology and citizen needs evolve over its lifetime?

02/7

Start with the problem and the citizen

Technology should never be the goal. It is a tool for improving society, measured by the public value it produces.

— Reflecting Fernando de Pablo, Digital Office Director, City of Madrid

A tender is only as good as the problem definition behind it. The strongest procurement starts not with a solution to acquire, but with a service failure or citizen need to fix. **If you cannot explain the problem in a sentence a non-specialist would understand, the tender is premature.**

- Can we articulate the specific service failure or citizen need this procurement addresses?
- Have we confirmed that technology, rather than process redesign, is actually the right intervention?
- Have we involved the people who will use or operate the solution in defining the requirements?
- Will success be visible to the citizen, not just to the institution?

03/7

Run the risk logic before you go to market

Understand what you need, what risks you are taking on, whether the solution is feasible, and whether citizens will accept it — before a contract is signed, not after.

— Reflecting Marina Manzoni, EU Policy Officer, European Commission

Risk management belongs at the start of procurement, not the end. Manzoni's logic is a discipline: institutions that go to market without a clear strategic mindset **tend to buy problems they cannot later fix**. Work through need, risk, feasibility, and acceptability deliberately, and document your reasoning.

- **Need:** Have we clearly defined what we need and why, distinguishing it from what is merely desirable?
- **Risk:** Have we identified the risks we are taking on, including data, security, ethical, and reputational risks?
- **Feasibility:** Have we tested whether the solution is technically and operationally achievable in our context?
- **Acceptability:** Have we considered whether citizens and staff will accept and adopt the solution?

04/7

Guard against lock-in and the “freemium” trap

A low-cost or free entry point can become deeply embedded in workflows — making future switching costly and difficult. Unlike private firms, public administrations often lack the flexibility to renegotiate once locked in.

— Reflecting Tiago Carneiro, Senior Digital Development Specialist, World Bank

Carneiro's warning is one of the most practically important of the Congress. Vendors may offer a **chatbot or lightweight AI service cheaply or free**. Once it gains users, absorbs your context, and embeds in daily operations, **it becomes hard to replace** and current low inference prices may be subsidised, meaning costs can rise sharply later. Procurement discipline has to start at the very first conversation with a vendor, not at contract renewal.

- Have we assessed the true total cost of ownership over time, beyond the initial or "free" entry price?
- Do we understand what happens to our data, context, and configurations if we leave this vendor?
- Is there a realistic, costed exit and migration path written into the contract?
- Have we avoided letting a low-cost pilot embed itself before a strategic decision is made?
- Are we protected against future price increases once a service is operationally entrenched?

05/7

Build internal capability. Don't outsource the thinking

Without internal capability to define, evaluate, and learn from what is being built, procurement becomes an abdication of strategic responsibility rather than an exercise of it.

— Reflecting Idoia Ortiz de Artiñano, CEO, GOBE Studio

Outsourcing delivery is fine. Outsourcing judgment is not. **If your institution cannot specify, evaluate, and oversee what it is buying, no supplier can compensate for that gap.** Treat procurement capability as a state asset that requires specialist knowledge, market engagement, and outcome-based thinking.

- Do we have the internal expertise to evaluate proposals and oversee delivery, not just sign contracts?
- Have we engaged the market early to understand what is genuinely possible before writing the tender?
- Will we retain enough knowledge in-house to learn from this procurement and improve the next one?
- Are we investing in procurement as a long-term capability, not treating it as a compliance exercise?

06/7

Procure for sovereignty and interoperability

Sovereignty is not owning the entire stack. It is making deliberate choices across governance, infrastructure, model selection, and procurement that preserve control.

— Reflecting Kelly Ommundsen (WEF) and Leanne Cummings (UK GDS)

Procurement is where sovereignty is won or lost. Governments that lock themselves into vendor-specific architectures — however capable — trade strategic flexibility for short-term convenience. Interoperability, open standards, and modular design are not technical luxuries; they are the mechanisms that keep your future options open.

- Does the solution use open standards and interoperable interfaces, rather than proprietary lock-in?
- Is the architecture modular, so components can be replaced or extended without wholesale replacement?
- Have we retained control over our data, and clarity on where it is stored and processed?
- Have we applied a multi-vendor or hybrid build-and-buy approach where sovereignty matters most?

07/7

Design for scale and the path to production

A pilot without a defined business purpose, a responsible owner, a committed budget, and a path to production is not an experiment — it is a delay.

— Reflecting Jaume Miralles, Government of Catalonia

Many procurements fund pilots that were never designed to scale. Build the path to production into the tender from the outset (integration, maintenance, training, and operational ownership) so a successful pilot does not stall, or arrive obsolete after a two-year delay.

- Does this procurement have a named owner accountable for outcomes, not just delivery?
- Have we budgeted for integration, maintenance, training, and operation — not just initial build?
- Is there a realistic path from pilot to production defined before the pilot begins?
- Where a mature solution already exists, have we considered adopting it rather than rebuilding?

The One-Page Pre-Tender Test

Before you publish your next tender, you should be able to answer yes to these seven questions:

1	<i>Can we state the public outcome and the citizen need in plain language?</i>
2	<i>Are we specifying outcomes and success measures, not a fixed feature list?</i>
3	<i>Have we worked through need, risk, feasibility, and acceptability?</i>
4	<i>Do we understand the true total cost of ownership and our exit path?</i>
5	<i>Do we have the internal capability to evaluate and oversee what we buy?</i>
6	<i>Does the solution protect sovereignty through open standards and modularity?</i>
7	<i>Is there a named owner, a real budget, and a path to production?</i>

This playbook was produced following the GovTech 4 Impact World Congress 2026, held in Madrid on 5–7 May 2026. It distils insights shared by Congress speakers and does not constitute legal or procurement advice. For more, visit g4i-congress.com