

Bidder Questions: Clear Answers for Fair Tenders

Bidder questions are written enquiries from companies wishing to participate in a tender or bid submission, addressed to the issuing procurement function. They concern technical specifications, contractual terms, commercial parameters or process issues and serve to resolve uncertainties before bid submission. The issuing buyer answers them – ideally uniformly to all bidders – and thereby supplements the tender documents. Professionally managed bidder questions improve the comparability of bids and reduce the need for clarification after contract award.

Key facts

- Bidder questions are written clarification questions from bidding companies relating to a current tender.
- In practice, the answers are usually made available to all bidders in anonymised form to ensure equal treatment.
- Binding deadlines for bidder questions and answers are part of the tender structure and are typically governed by the procurement directives.
- Changes to tender documents as a result of bidder questions are usually made by addendum, bulletin or a written response letter.
- A structured question-and-answer process reduces subsequent negotiations and claims.

Definition: bidder questions

Bidder questions are formal, usually written follow-up enquiries from potential bidders about a tender; they are raised between the release of the documents and the submission deadline and are answered by procurement.

Distinction from other coordination formats

Bidder questions should not be confused with the supplier meeting before the start of the tender or with a clarification round after the opening of bids. They presuppose a current, usually formal procurement procedure. In public procurement, they often have to be addressed directly to the contracting authority; in private procurement, they are routed via the responsible buyer or a portal.

Typical question topics

In practice, four topic areas dominate: technical specification (tolerances, standards, drawing revisions), terms and conditions and contract duration, the presentation of prices in the pricing sheet, and logistics requirements such as Incoterms DAP or agreed lead times. Questions on the verifiability of certificates, certificates of origin or customs preferences are also common.

- Technical: drawings, tolerances, material properties, test planning
- Commercial: pricing sheet, price corridor, payment terms

- Logistics: Incoterms, packaging, delivery call-offs, minimum quantities
- Compliance: certificates, evidence, disclosure obligations

Methods and approach in bidder question management

A clean process defines the channel, deadline, format and distribution of questions and answers – ideally documented in writing in the tender documents.

Question channel and deadline management

Question-and-answer forms sent by e-mail or via a procurement portal are standard, with a clearly defined submission deadline typically falling several working days before the bid submission deadline. The buyer collects the questions, prioritises them and obtains specialist answers from engineering, quality management or logistics. Verbal information should always be confirmed in writing, as otherwise it is barely provable.

Equal treatment through anonymised circulars

To avoid favouring individual bidders, the following approach is common in practice: all questions are collected, anonymised and sent to all participants together with the answers. Changes to the specification or pricing sheet are made as an official addendum with documented versioning. This keeps the competition comparable and minimises later complaints about unclear documentation.

- Collect and prioritise questions centrally
- Coordinate answers with the relevant functions (engineering, QM, logistics)
- Communicate anonymously to all bidders
- Document changes as versioned addenda

Integration into workflow rules (P2P)

In digitally mature procurement functions, the bidder question process can be mapped as a workflow in a procurement system: deadlines, escalation levels and approval paths are defined as workflow rules (P2P), and answers are stored in the Contract Repository or in the tender's project folder. This creates traceability and relieves the buyer when handling multiple tenders.

Key KPIs for bidder question management

Bidder questions can be used as a quality indicator for tender documentation: a large number of questions generally points to gaps or ambiguities.

KPIs from practice

Commonly used metrics are the number of questions per tender, the average response time and the proportion of questions that lead to an addendum. If the number of questions falls across several tenders for the same product category, this indicates better-prepared documentation. The rate of bidders who continue with the tender after receiving the answers is also a good health check.

- Questions per tender (rule of thumb: a downward trend = better)
- Response time in working days
- Proportion of questions with addendum character
- Participant retention after answers are provided

Use in negotiation management

Bidder questions provide procurement with valuable input for downstream negotiation management: questions about the pricing sheet or contract duration show where bidders see pressure points. These topics can be deliberately incorporated into negotiation preparation.

Risks and controls in bidder questions

Handling bidder questions involves legal and procedural pitfalls, particularly in public tenders but also in private tenders with many bidders.

Equal treatment and traceability

Anyone who withholds information from individual bidders or gives verbal commitments risks unequal treatment – in the public sector, this can even lead to formal complaints or review proceedings. To prevent this: all answers in writing, to all bidders, with a documented timestamp. In the event of an early closing of the bid submission deadline or material changes, a deadline extension is common and appropriate practice.

Hidden award intentions

Bidders occasionally use questions to elicit award intentions or competitive information – for example, how many competitors are bidding or whether a particular technology is preferred. The buyer should consciously answer such questions neutrally or decline them with reference to the procurement directives.

Avoiding subsequent claims

Unanswered or unclearly answered bidder questions can lead to claims for additional costs after contract award – for example, if a bidder claims to have understood a specification differently. A documented question-and-answer history protects procurement and also helps with later supplier evaluations and contract negotiations.

Current developments: digitalisation and sustainability

The bidder question process is increasingly migrating to portals and platforms – and is being expanded to include sustainability and compliance questions.

Portal-based question-and-answer communication

In modern procurement portals, bidders submit questions directly within the tender, and answers become visible to all participants. This reduces the buyer's manual effort and automatically creates a documented record. Such workflows are frequently implemented via workflow rules (P2P) or via a marketplace platform.

Expanded question profiles: ESG and supply chain

In the wake of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and growing supply chain due diligence requirements, bidders are increasingly asking questions about sustainability requirements, emissions data, certificates of origin or customs preferences. Change of control clauses and parent company guarantee requirements for group bidders are also coming into sharper focus.

AI support in drafting answers

In practice, AI tools are increasingly being used to classify question catalogues, suggest pre-formulated answers from previous tenders, or generate standard text modules for typical topics. The buyer remains responsible for the substantive review and approval.

Typical metrics

Bidder questions per tender: highly variable, typically 5–30

Frequent questions indicate unclear documentation

Response time: typically 2–5 working days

Short and reliable responses increase bidder retention

Proportion of questions resulting in an addendum: typically 10–30 %

Indicator of specification quality

Participant retention after Q&A: > 90 %

A declining rate may indicate excessive requirements

Practical example

A medium-sized mechanical engineering company issues a tender for a sheet-metal component under a long-term framework agreement. During the tendering phase, four bidders submit a total of 23 questions: on surface specification, the pricing sheet, Incoterms DAP and contract duration. The buyer collects the questions, coordinates the answers with engineering and logistics, and sends an anonymised question-and-answer list to all bidders. The binding answer on contract duration is documented as an addendum; the bid submission deadline is extended by three working days.

- Central capture of all questions via a standardised form
- Anonymised distribution of answers to all bidders to ensure equal treatment
- Technical review of engineering, logistics and pricing topics before releasing the answers
- Documentation of all answers in the Contract Repository as a reference for later negotiations

Conclusion

Bidder questions are not a tedious appendage of the tender but a quality lever: they reveal where the documentation is unclear and, through uniform answers, create a fair basis for comparison. Buyers benefit when they define deadlines, channels and distribution early and document them consistently. Equal treatment is not only legally relevant but also economically sensible – it increases comparability and reduces re-negotiation pressure. Those who map the process digitally and evaluate KPIs sustainably improve their tender quality. And those who identify the most frequent questions can formulate future tenders more precisely from the outset.

Frequently asked questions

When must bidder questions be asked and answered?

In practice, bidder questions are answered with a deadline specified in the tender documents, typically ending several working days before the bid submission deadline. The issuing buyer should define binding response deadlines and also adhere to them. In public procurement, the rules of the procurement directives and the applicable procurement regulations additionally apply.

Must answers to bidder questions be shared with all bidders?

Yes, if the answer is relevant to everyone – which is practically always the case for technical specifications or contractual terms. An anonymised question-and-answer list distributed to all participants is standard practice. Only purely company-specific questions, such as one bidder's licence status, may be answered by the buyer individually.

Which topics are suitable for bidder questions?

Typical topics include technical clarifications (tolerances, standards, drawing revisions), commercial matters such as the pricing sheet, payment terms or contract duration, logistics topics such as Incoterms DAP, and evidence of certificates or customs preferences. Questions on sustainability documentation, for example in the context of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), are also increasing.

What happens if a bidder question leads to a change in the tender?

In practice, an addendum or bulletin is then issued, versioning the amended documents and sent to all bidders. If the change is material – for example an adjusted specification or a new pricing sheet – the bid submission deadline should also be reviewed and extended if necessary.

Can procurement decline bidder questions?

Yes, for example if a question seeks information on award intentions, competitive information or internal company details that do not form part of the tender. The rejection should be justified in writing, objectively and comprehensibly and – like other answers – documented. In public procurement, the requirements of the procurement directives must be observed.

How many bidder questions are normal in a tender?

This depends heavily on the complexity and novelty of the product; there is no blanket figure. In practice, a very high number of questions often indicates unclear documentation. Anyone who evaluates the questions across multiple tenders can derive concrete improvements for the preparation of tender documents.