

Request for Proposals External Oversight of the Better Cotton Assurance Programme - Consultancy

RFP n#: 2021-12-SA-EXOVASP
Location: Remote
Start date: 14 FEB 2022
End date: 01 JUL 2022



Better Cotton key contact:
Lucy Frazer
Standards & Assurance
tender@bettercotton.org

All applications must be sent by email, to Better Cotton's key contact, with the subject header: "Application RFP External Oversight of the Better Cotton Assurance Programme – RFP n# 2021-12-ASP-EXOVASP".

Questions, requests and applications sent after the deadline (28 January 2022) will only be considered in exceptional circumstances.

Description

Better Cotton is the world's largest cotton sustainability programme. Our mission: to help cotton communities survive and thrive, while protecting and restoring the environment. In challenging times, we are meeting the challenge head on. Through our network of field-level partners we have trained over 2.5 million farmers in 23 countries in more sustainable farming practices. A quarter of the world's cotton is now grown under the Better Cotton Standard. We have united the industry's stakeholders behind our efforts, and by 2030 our aim is to have trained 5 million farmers and doubled global production of Better Cotton.

Better Cotton's assurance system is designed to help support Better Cotton's vision and distinctive approach to market transformation. Better Cotton's approach to assurance is unique from many other standard systems in two regards. First, it aims to balance credibility with scalability and cost-

effectiveness, through combining third-party verifier assessments with other types of assessments. Better Cotton's approach combines third-party visits with licensing assessments by Better Cotton Country Teams, support visits by Implementing Partners (IPs), and regular self-assessments by Producers themselves. Second, the Better Cotton assurance model puts a strong emphasis on capacity building and continuous improvement. Producers are required to make ongoing sustainability improvements to maintain their licence, and assessments focus not only on compliance but also on identifying areas where further support or capacity building is needed. More information on the Better Cotton assurance programme can be found on the Better Cotton website [here](#)¹.

Better Cotton is committed to ensuring the continued effectiveness and integrity of its assurance programme through periodic system reviews. [Assurance System Reviews](#) occur at planned intervals at least every 3 years, or after significant changes have been made to the Assurance Programme.

Background

We are seeking proposals from skilled external, independent consultants interested in carrying out an *external oversight* review of the assurance model and its implementation. This review includes a detailed desktop analysis of assurance processes and assessment reports, as well as interviews with assurance teams and assessors from Better Cotton countries around the world.

These findings feed into the wider Assurance System Review, which supports improvements in the assurance programme and ultimately guides Better Cotton's strategic decisions on how the assurance programme can better support the success of the Better Cotton Standard System in reaching its goals, and the fulfilment of Better Cotton's mission.

Objectives

1. Facilitate improvements in the design and implementation of Better Cotton's assurance programme by providing an independent assessment of:
 - a. the consistency of assurance across countries implementing the Better Cotton Standard System
 - b. the competence of assurance providers
 - c. challenges and areas for improvement in the assurance programme at large
2. Provide a basis for Better Cotton to conduct further internal assessment, implement corrective actions, and review its risk assessment and management plan for assurance

¹ Available on the Better Cotton website at: <https://bettercotton.org/what-we-do/demonstrating-compliance-assurance-programme/>, the Better Cotton Assurance Manual here: https://bettercotton.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/BCI-Assurance-Manual-v4.1_February-2021.pdf and the Better Cotton Assurance Model System Review process document here: https://bettercotton.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Assurance-Model-System-Review-V5_Sept-2020_FINAL.pdf

Scope of Work

The consultant will be required to perform the following activities:

Component	Specific Activities
1. Desk-based analysis of assurance process and outcomes	<p>Review internal systems for managing assurance processes and outcomes, and making licensing decisions (focusing on credibility and scalability of systems) – monitoring consistency and adherence to protocols.</p> <p>Review a sample of verification reports from selected countries to evaluate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall quality including clarity of findings, completeness, and interpretation of evidence • Consistency across different assessors/ regions • Grading and evidencing of non-conformities • Determine whether each mechanism is fulfilling its functional role in the assurance programme • Effective follow up processes <p>Licensing Assessment and Surveillance Assessment reports will be based on a representative sample including assessments conducted by Better Cotton assessors and third-party verification visits (3PVs). Readiness Checks and PU Support Visit reports will also be based on a representative sample (different IPs/regions/countries).</p> <p>Conduct in-depth review of a couple of specific indicators across a sample of verification reports to identify inconsistencies and areas where further clarification/ guidance would be useful.</p> <p><i>Above activities to be performed for a sample of Producers/ reports in each country; sample size to be determined.</i></p>
2. Review Information on Verifier Performance	<p>Review performance metrics recorded for third party verifiers (3PVs) as well as shadow visit reports maintained at the country level to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify common strengths and weaknesses • Understand the level of consistency in performance across countries • Determine which the focus for the interviews with 3PVs as part of the “assurance provider and external assessor interview” phase.
3. Assurance Provider and External Assessor interviews	<p>Conduct desk based (remote) interviews with Assurance Providers² and External Assessors, specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sample of 3rd party verifiers • A sample of Better Cotton Programme Officers/ Coordinators in each country • Better Cotton Assurance Managers <p><i>A total of between 15-20 interviews are expected to be included in the scope of the project, allowing for 1 hour per interview and 0.5 hours to write up findings</i></p>

² Assurance Providers includes Better Cotton programme coordinators / officers, 3rd party verifiers (3PVs), and global assurance managers / coordinators.

	<p>Interviews are expected to assess:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well each individual understands his/her role in the Assurance Programme • How individuals approach the different components of Licensing Assessments and Surveillance Assessments (conducting interviews with farmers and workers, documentation review, interview with management, visual inspection of the farm, etc.) • How decisions on non-compliance and non-conformity grading are made • [For Assurance Managers] how licensing decisions are carried out
<p>4. Implementing Partner interviews</p>	<p>Conduct desk based (remote) interviews with representatives from Implementing Partners to assess:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How individuals approach the different components of Assurance Programme – set up phase, the Readiness Checks and the PU Support Visits (conducting interviews with farmers and workers, documentation review, interview with management, visual inspection of the farm, etc.) • How decisions are made to determine when a PU can be recommended for licensing • How Implementing Partners support Producers to achieve Continuous Improvement during the licence period <p><i>Roughly 10 interviews are expected to be included in the scope of the project, allowing for 1 hour per interview and 0.5 hours to write up findings.</i></p>
<p>5. Overall system review and recommendations</p>	<p>Based on findings from the desktop review and interviews, conduct an analysis of the overall performance of the Better Cotton assurance programme against its stated objectives, focusing on credibility, scalability, and accessibility (especially with respect to smallholder farmers)</p> <p>Identify strengths and weaknesses of the current assurance programme (both in structure of the model and/or through its implementation)</p> <p>Develop recommendations to further improve the assurance programme in the short, mid and longer-term, in order to better support Better Cotton in achieving its mission</p>
<p>6. Shadow assessment (optional)</p>	<p>Depending on budget and timing, an optional shadow assessment may be carried out to observe an on-site Licensing Assessment in practice and/or witness of remote verification processes.</p> <p>This could provide further opportunities for in-person interviews with assurance providers as well as field observation for a small sample of 1-3 verification visits. Possible countries where assessments will be taking place would be India, Mozambique, or Pakistan, for approximate duration of 3-4 days each visit (2 days remote, 5 days on-site with travel).</p> <p><i>Consultants are requested to prepare a cost and project proposal both including and excluding this optional set of shadow assessments (please note this could be on-site or remote). The final decision on whether to include this will be based on budgetary and timing considerations, in discussion with the selected consultant.</i></p>

Deliverables

The consultant will produce a final written report based on the components of the review. The report should contain:

- An executive summary of main conclusions and recommendations (max 2 pages)
- Detailed findings from the desktop review and interviews, including:
 - an assessment of the quality and consistency of assurance outcomes by verification type and region
 - key interview findings especially around roles and responsibilities in the assurance programme and challenges to effective implementation at field level
- An analysis of how the Better Cotton Assurance Programme is currently performing against its objectives; with a focus on credibility, scalability, and accessibility (especially with respect to smallholder farmers)
- Clear and well-evidenced recommendations for improving the design and implementation of the Assurance Programme in the short, medium, and longer term

High-level Timeline

28 January 2022	All applications must be submitted by email, headed "Application RFP External Oversight of the Better Cotton Assurance Programme – RFP n# 2021-12-ASP-EXOVASP" addressed to Lucy Frazer at tender@bettercotton.org .
31 January to 7 February 2022	Applications review & shortlisting / Interviews
By 08 February 2022	The successful applicant will be notified Unsuccessful <u>shortlisted</u> applicants will also be notified
14 February 2022	Start of the consultancy
By end of March 2022	Phase 1 & 2: Desktop research and review verifier performance <i>Estimating 10 days</i>
By end of April 2022	Phase 3 & 4: Interviews (30-minute interviews with around 30 stakeholders) <i>Estimating 6 days</i>
By end of May 2022	Phase 5: High level assessment <i>Estimating 10 days</i>
By end of April 2022	Phase 6: Shadow assessment (optional) <i>5 days for in-person, 2 days for remote shadow assessment</i>
By 01 July 2022	Final report / deliverables

Regular project coordination meetings to also be considered (kick off meeting, fortnightly project check in meetings and final deliverable close out meeting).

Required Skills & Knowledge

Skills, Knowledge and Experience
<i>Essential</i>
A good understanding of the Better Cotton Standard System and its intent, and an understanding of the mission and goals of the Better Cotton and the critical issues in cotton production it seeks to address
An understanding of Better Cotton's unique approach to market transformation and how this impacts the design and functioning of the Assurance Programme
Demonstrated experience designing, operating, or evaluating elements of similar sustainability standards organisations
Demonstrated experience carrying out interviews with diverse global stakeholders, with cultural sensitivity and professionalism
A strong understanding of assurance mechanisms in general, especially as applied in the sustainability standards space and with relation to smallholder producers
Fluent English: Better Cotton's language of operation is English
<i>Optional</i>
Familiarity with the requirements of the ISEAL Assurance Code
Familiarity with the Better Cotton Standard System in practice, i.e. through research, project delivery, etc.

In addition to skills, competencies and expertise, we will consider value for money and demonstrable commitment to the sustainability field to evaluate applications.

Application Requirements

Proposals responding to this Request for Proposals should be a maximum of 12 pages (excluding CVs), and include the following:

- Overview of relevant experience
- Proposed methodology and timeline
- Relevant recent experience
- Proposed project delivery team (role and experience)
- Capacity (including current commitment)
- References
- Detailed and transparent budget, preferably in EUROS, including time allocation and day rates.



- *(Consultants are requested to develop cost and time proposals for (optional) shadow assessments separately (please note this could be on-site or remote). Better Cotton will make a final determination on whether to include this component in the final project approach based on budget and timing, in consultation with the selected final consultant.)*
- *We expect proposals to be calculated based on a roughly similar number days per phase as indicated in the "High-level timeline" section of this RFP.*

We thank all applicants for their interest; however only shortlisted applicants will be contacted.

Better Cotton is committed to good practice and transparency in the management of natural, human and financial resources. All applications will be reviewed under the principles and subject to Better Cotton's policies on equal opportunity, non-discrimination, anti-bribery & corruption and conflict of interest.