Request for Proposals - AI Strategy

RFP n#: 2026-1-FS-AISTRATEGY

Location: Remote – able to align with UK working hours

Start date: 23rd February 2026

End date: 27th March 2026

Technical Team: IT & Data

All applications must be submitted via this **form**.

You may submit questions to tender@bettercotton.org **–** RFP n# 2026-1-FS-AISTRATEGY" until 2nd February 2026, noting that the **final submission deadline for bids is the 9th February 2026.**

Questions, requests and applications sent after the deadline will only be considered in exceptional circumstances.

Important Submission Process Information:

After submitting your details through the **form**, you will receive a separate email to upload your supporting documents to a secure platform.

Description

The Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) is the world's largest cotton sustainability programme. Our mission: to help cotton communities survive and thrive, while protecting and restoring the environment. In difficult times, we are meeting the challenge head on. Through our network of field-level partners we have provided training on more sustainable farming practices to more than 2.9 million cotton farmers in 26 countries. More than a fifth of the world's cotton is now grown under the BCI Standard and our membership network includes more than 2,400 members.

More information about BCI can be found on our website: www.bettercotton.org

Background

We are seeking proposals from skilled individuals or organisations interested in helping us shape a strategy for how AI can be leveraged to accelerate impact and improve efficiencies. We need a strategy that is bespoke to who we are and what we are aiming to achieve. We're a relatively small organisation but are spread across multiple countries, time zones, and ways of working. With this relatively small team, we support hundreds of partners, thousands of members, and millions of farmers. We also manage the BCI standard and keep on top of a variety of risks and opportunities throughout our countries of operation and in the textile value chain.

We believe that AI offers genuine opportunities. We are also aware that not every idea will make sense for us. We need someone who can look at our strategic ambitions, our current systems, culture, and pressures and help us see where AI might create tangible value. The strategy you develop should give us practical next steps, a sense of what is likely to work in our context, and a roadmap that feels achievable rather than aspirational.

Our challenges include a proliferation of ideas for the use of AI, the resource limitations you'd expect from a non-profit organisation, and consideration of the environmental impact of AI. We also have a mix of expectations around how AI should (or shouldn't) show up in day-to-day work.

The right partner may suggest approaches we haven't considered, challenge our assumptions, and point out things we shouldn't do in addition to what we should be doing. We're looking for expertise that respects the scale and culture and uniqueness of a distributed organisation like ours and can deliver a value-enhancing strategy that is pragmatic and realistic.

Scope of Work

This project is expected to deliver a clear, actionable AI Strategy for BCI, along with the materials we need to communicate it across a globally distributed organisation. The work should be focused, time-bound, and realistic for a **five-week engagement**, with enough depth to guide decision-making without over-engineering the process.

In terms of outputs, applicants should be prepared to deliver the following:

1. AI Strategy Document. A written strategy that:
    a. Outlines where AI is likely to create meaningful value for BCI. Our AI Vision should connect organisational strategy, BAU processes and external pressures with the significant value adding opportunities that AI provides.
    b. Includes a section on how we can build internal capacity for adoption of AI. This would likely take the form some competency development programme for our staff.
    c. Describes principles and guardrails for responsible adoption, including a clear approach to maintaining transparency and building in adequate governance structures and processes
    d. Highlights opportunities worth exploring—and areas we should probably deprioritise.
    e. Explains the rationale behind recommendations in clear, human language
2. Strategy Visuals / Communication Materials

   a. A small set of visuals, diagrams, or narrative summaries that help us socialise the strategy internally.
3. Short, Medium and Long-Term Objectives. A structured breakdown of what we can (and should) do in:
   a. 0–6 months (quick wins, foundational steps)
   b. 6–18 months (more deliberate adoption, capability building)
   c. 18+ months (long-term ambitions and larger strategic bets)
4. Final Readout Session
   a. A walkthrough of the strategy and visuals, time for questions, and recommendations for immediate next steps.

Suggested Workstreams and Activities

1. Discovery & Current-State Understanding
In the first phase, applicants should form a practical view of BCI's current tools, data landscape, and operating reality. This may include:

- Interviews with a cross-section of staff
- A quick review of existing systems, datasets and processes, including a maturity / readiness assessment of these areas.
- A sense of organisational habits that may shape adoption.

We're not after a deep audit, just enough insight to ground the strategy in reality.

2. Use Case Exploration & Prioritisation
Applicants should help identify where AI may matter for BCI. We would expect:

- A shortlist of feasible early opportunities
- An honest look at trade-offs, dependencies, and risks
- An idea on likely environmental impact per use case
- Prioritisation that is thoughtful but not overcomplicated

3. Strategy Development
The strategy should reflect the specifics of a 300-person organisation spread across multiple time zones. It should strike a balance between ambition and what's manageable for a team of our size, including the financial and environmental implications of different choices. It should also consider our existing technology stack from an implementation perspective.

4. Road mapping Across Time Horizons
We would like a clear breakdown of short, medium, and long-term objectives, each one accompanied by indicative cost ranges, so teams can see what is achievable immediately versus what requires building capacity or investing in technology.

5. Communication Materials
Applicants should provide simple visuals or summaries that make the strategy easier to share internally—no need for high-gloss design, just clarity.
In addition to skills, competencies and expertise, we will consider value for money and demonstrable commitment to the sustainability field to evaluate applications.

High-level Timeline

2nd February 2026	Questions deadline All questions must be sent only to tender@bettercotton.org with the RFP Reference in the Subject line.
9th February 2026	**Applications deadline** All applications must be submitted via this **form**.
9th February to 18th February 2026	Applications review & shortlisting / Interviews
By 18th February 2025	The successful applicant will be notified Unsuccessful shortlisted applicants will also be notified
23 February 2026	**Start of the consultancy**
By 13 March 2026	DRAFT Strategy document
By 20 March 2026	Final readout to key stakeholders
By 27 March 2026	Final Strategy Document / Communications Materials

Required Skills & Knowledge

Skills, Knowledge and Experience
Essential
Demonstrable Experience in AI Strategy
Solid Understanding of Applied AI (Not Just Theory)
An understanding of the environmental impact of AI, and how to estimate it
Experience Delivering Short, Time-Bound Strategy Work
Strong Communication Skills
Familiarity with Global Ways of Working
Understanding of AI Governance, Compliance & Risk, including how to handle PII across multiple countries
Ability to Provide Indicative Costing
Fluent English: BCI's language of operation is English
Background in fields such as Data Science, AI, Computer Science, Information Systems, or similar
Optional

Sector Experience - Experience working in industries with similar scale, complexity,
A track record of honest, balanced, impartial, advice
Experience with specific tooling we have at BCI (e.g. M365, Azure, Salesforce, CoPilot)

Application Requirements

Please note that we have changed our RFP submission protocol, and this is now in two phases;

- **Phase 1: Initial details will be submitted on the form found in this link.**
- **Phase 2: You will receive an email with live links to upload relevant documents (please check your Spam and Junk folders)**

Proposals responding to this Request for Proposals should be a maximum of 10 pages (excluding CVs), and include the following:

- Overview of relevant experience
- Proposed methodology and timeline
- Detailed and transparent budget, in EUROS, including time allocation and day rates

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

BCI 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 BCI's policies on equal opportunity, non-discrimination, anti-bribery & corruption and conflict of interest.

Evaluation Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

Technical Evaluation Criteria

- Demonstrated understanding of this RFP
- Quality and clarity of the proposed approach and methodology
- Feasibility of the proposed activity plan and timeline, and appropriateness of time allocated to delivering each task
- Relevant professional experience of the proposed consultant(s)
- Quality and relevance of the sample work submitted

Financial Evaluation Criteria

- Quality and clarity of budget provided, and level of detail included
- Alignment of the budget to the activity timeline detailed in the technical proposal
- Value for money
- Adherence to the available budget

Questions & Answers For RFP 2026-1-FS-AISTRATEGY

1. **Question 1**

   Are you able to share an indicative budget? One of the key variables in this type of work tends to be the number of teams and domains involved, so any steer on the anticipated breadth of consultation would also be helpful.

   Answer

   Thank you for this question regarding the budget, as part of our competitive process we do not share the budget but do recognise the expertise required and ask that you provide your best offer to deliver the required scope.

   As a rough indication of team / domain numbers, you can estimate 6-7 teams across 4-5 countries.

2. **Question 2**

   The brief mentions a "proliferation of ideas" for AI use (a familiar challenge!) and we wondered how far have you already gone in identifying priority use cases? We'd be keen to build on the team's thinking to date.

   Answer

   Many teams have informally come forward with ideas; however, these are yet to be captured and consolidated into one place. A staff survey that is currently in progress has requested information on what these ideas are, and so this information will be available for the start of the work. What **we can share is** the ideas are mostly suggested with the intention of enhancing existing operational processes by reducing human involvement to a) speed up their execution and b) increase accuracy at scale.

3. **Question 3**

   The RFP is issued by IT and Data - could you tell us who the executive sponsor is, and which other teams would need to be engaged? We imagine programme and field teams would have perspectives too.

Answer

The executive sponsor for this work is Lena Staafgard, BCI's COO. At a minimum we'd like to engage with the teams that have put forward ideas in the survey mentioned in Q2. We would require engagement with global support teams, and as many of our country programmes as time permits.

4. **Question 4**

Has any formal AI experimentation and adoption already happened at Better Cotton Initiative? You mention Copilot - is this deployed, being piloted, or under consideration?

Answer

Copilot is enabled across our Microsoft 365 environment and is being actively used by a broad range of users within BCI for day-to-day productivity tasks. Copilot is currently the only approved AI tool for business use under our security and compliance framework.

We are also running a small, controlled pilot of Copilot for Microsoft 365 with a limited user group to evaluate advanced enterprise features. No organisation-wide rollout decision has been made.

5. **Question 5**

How will BCI define success for this engagement beyond delivery of the strategy document. For example, decision readiness, leadership alignment, or prioritised investment cases.

Answer

A successful delivery requires the outputs from the scope of work to be delivered on time, as per the agreed budget and to a high-quality standard. The quality of this deliverable will be determined by the relevance of the outputs to our organisational goals, by a comprehensive engagement with as many internal & external stakeholders as possible, and by the value potential and feasibility of the recommendations made. This also includes clear and unambiguous cases for each recommendation, incorporating cost estimation and value potential.

We have stated the need for a final readout session with some key organisational decision makers. This is intended to anchor the strategy with BCI leadership as we seek buy-in to the strategy.

6. **Question 6**

Are there specific organisational strategies, OKRs, or external commitments that the AI strategy must explicitly align to.

Answer

BCI's 2030 Strategy (available on our website) should provide the necessary information for the long-term goals of the organisation.

We also are preparing organisational OKRs for the next year and these can be supplied where needed at the start of the RFP work.

7. **Question 7**

Which senior stakeholders will ultimately sponsor and own the strategy post engagement.

Answer
Ownership of the strategy will lie with the Senior Digital Transformation Manager, whilst the executive sponsor will be our COO.

8. **Question 8**

Are there functional areas explicitly in or out of scope beyond IT and Data, such as Standards, Assurance, Membership, or Field Programmes.

Answer

All teams that have expressed an interest in contributing towards the AI strategy and/or provided use case suggestions will be prioritised for engagement with the RFP partner, such as our membership and Assurance teams. Regional teams based in our cotton producing countries are also included in this, and so time zone flexibility is required.

9. **Question 9**

To what extent should the strategy address AI use by external partners versus internal BCI operations only.

Answer

Both internal and external stakeholders are very much in scope. With limited time available further discussions will need to be held on how we prioritise our time spent on stakeholder consultation.

10. **Question 10**

Is the expectation that the strategy includes concrete pilot candidates, or remains at use case prioritisation and roadmap level only.

Answer

Our focus is on understanding what use cases are going to deliver value / ROI, and to prioritise these accordingly. We view recommendations on good pilot candidates from these use cases as a bonus.

11. **Question 11**

Has BCI already conducted any form of digital, data, or AI maturity assessment that can be reused.

Answer

Out of these areas, the only maturity assessment we have performed is for data. BCI conducts an annual data maturity assessment using the ISEAL Data Maturity Rubric. This assessment provides an organisation-wide view of our current state across data governance, capabilities, processes, and culture, and can be made available to inform and accelerate the development of the AI strategy. While it is not an AI-specific maturity assessment, it offers a relevant and reusable foundation for understanding our digital and data maturity.

12. **Question 12**

What is the current state of data quality and ownership across core systems.

Answer

Data quality and ownership across core systems are at differing levels of maturity, reflecting the organisation's system landscape and evolution over time. Data ownership has been established for the majority of core datasets, providing clear accountability. Data quality practices are currently applied in a system- and use-case-specific manner, with opportunities identified to further harmonise approaches over time. Record management practices are in place but remain an area of ongoing development, particularly in relation to consistency, lifecycle management, and alignment across platforms. Strengthening these areas is recognised as an important enabler for future digital, data, and AI initiatives.

13. **Question 13**

Are there known pain points or failure modes from prior digital or transformation initiatives that should explicitly shape recommendations.

Answer

From a digital transformation perspective, we began a long-term organisational effort to better utilise technology in support of BCI goals in 2019. Since then, we have been

addressing pain points with regards to data quality, tool proliferation and value/relevance, all against the backdrop of rapidly evolving needs from both internal and external stakeholders.

14. **Question 14**

Can BCI confirm the core systems currently in use, including M365, Azure, Salesforce, and any data platforms or BI tooling.

Answer

We use Salesforce for many of our membership processes, particularly for engagement and relationship management purposes. It is also used to digitise process workflows for other non-membership processes.

The BCP is our supply chain platform for documenting our Chain of Custody models, and this is built on the Chainpoint platform. Communication, collaboration and productivity is largely performed on M365, and our data warehouse is built on a customised SQL server instance hosted in Azure.

We are piloting some additional use case specific tools such as Mendix, Commcare and ODK.

15. **Question 15**

Are there constraints or preferences around use of cloud providers, vendors, or open source tooling.

Answer

We would prefer to minimise the adoption of new tools and vendors and utilise what we already have, but are open to recommendations that go against this if the case for change is strong.

16. **Question 16**

Are there existing AI tools already approved or in limited use across teams. Governance, risk, and compliance

Answer

Please see answer to Question 4.

17. **Question 17**

Are there existing governance forums or policies covering data, digital, or innovation that the AI strategy must integrate with.

Answer

Yes, we have various policies related to data and IT tools that will be supplied to the successful partner. These have not necessarily been written with future AI adoption in mind and so we are open to policy updates if required to facilitate AI adoption.

18. **Question 18**

How mature are current processes for handling PII across jurisdictions, and are there known regulatory sensitivities in specific countries.

Answer

BCI has established data privacy policies and defined processes for handling personal data across jurisdictions, including guidance on data communication and partner agreements covering consent management. Wherever possible, the organisation limits the collection of sensitive personal data and applies a data minimisation approach aligned with purpose and necessity.

Operating across multiple regions, Better Cotton recognises and accounts for local data protection regulations, including GDPR and equivalent frameworks, and incorporates jurisdiction-specific considerations into its data handling practices

19. **Question 19**

What level of risk appetite does BCI have for experimentation versus formal assurance.

Answer

At these early stages of our AI journey, we are more focussed on use cases that bring a high degree of assurance in meeting our needs. We are looking for a mixture of quick wins and medium-term projects. Whilst we would never say no to more experimental recommendations, they would likely not be considered as immediate priorities.

20. **Question 20**

Does BCI have a preferred methodology or benchmark for estimating environmental impact of AI use cases.

Answer

We recognise that efficiency gains in AI models and hardware can partially offset increases in absolute energy use. However, our primary preference is for AI systems with a low environmental footprint, with particular emphasis on the use of renewable energy.

We therefore prioritise AI models and providers that:

- Use renewable electricity for both training and deployment, demonstrated through on-site generation, power purchase agreements, or credible guarantees of origin;
- Report high data-centre efficiency, indicated by Power Usage Effectiveness (PUE) values close to 1.0;
- Disclose greenhouse-gas emissions in line with recognised reporting standards;
- Demonstrate strong energy efficiency in standardised benchmarks such as MLPerf Power.

21. Question 21

Should environmental impact be treated as a gating criterion for prioritisation, or as a comparative signal alongside value and feasibility.

Answer

We would prefer to see environmental impact as a comparative variable alongside value & feasibility to inform but not gate prioritisation. We also see environmental impact as the impact of the AI compute needs offset against the potential reduction in GHG emissions from something like reduced travel need (or any other likely offsetting). High Renewable energy use of suppliers and software providers is obviously something we'd be keen on, also we'd like to explore SLMs for their lower environmental footprint.

22. Question 22

Are there internal sustainability teams or data sources that should be involved during discovery.

Answer

No.

23. Question 23

What is the current baseline of AI literacy across staff groups, from leadership to operational teams.

Answer

To our knowledge, AI literacy at BCI is largely confined to conversational AI that are commonplace in our staff's work and personal lives (customer support, information retrieval, and basic automation). Our cyber security eLearning tool (Boxphish) also has occasional modules that focus on AI risks and data privacy best practice.

24. Question 24

Are there preferred formats for capability building, such as light-touch guidance versus structured training programmes.

Answer

An eternal constraint at BCI is staff time. As such we'd prefer light touch training, which can be more easily incorporated into busy calendars.

25. Question 25

Is there an expectation that the strategy includes role or capability implications for future hiring

Answer

We are open to this being one of the suggested outputs/findings.

26. Question 26

How many stakeholder interviews are expected or feasible within the five-week window.

Answer

We will ensure that high priority is assigned to these interviews from our workforce perspective, so that all required interviews can be conducted within the timeframe. The exact number is not possible to ascertain at this time, with the survey data mention in Q2 not being complete. We ask that you consider your own capacity in answering this question, and how you flexible you are able to be to accommodate staff in different time zones around the world.

27. Question 27

Will BCI provide a single point of coordination for access to staff, systems, and documentation.

Answer

There will be a dedicated Contract Sponsor who will be the primary focal point but other team members may also work with the successful supplier once the Contract has been awarded.

During the RFP stage and Contracting the BCI Procurement Team will lead as the Primary contact.

28. Question 28

What level of iteration and feedback is expected between draft and final strategy.

Answer

We are open to suggestions on the level of interaction during the development of the strategy. We would expect to have this clarified with all involved at the start of the project.

29. Question 29

Is there an indicative budget range BCI has in mind for near-term AI initiatives emerging from the strategy.

Answer

Please refer to the answer provided against Question 1

30. Question 30

How should cost ranges be expressed, for example order-of-magnitude versus implementation-ready estimates.

Answer

We would naturally prefer implementation-ready estimates, but understand the constraints of a 5 week timeframe. The priority for us is to consider as many use cases as possible as identified in the stakeholder interviews. If we must sacrifice cost accuracy for more use cases, then we are willing to accept that.

31. Question 31

Are there known funding or resourcing constraints in the next 6 to 18 months that should shape prioritisation.

Answer

The output of this RFP will be used as a case for obtaining future funding. Currently BCI is limiting the creation of new staff roles and so the main constraint would be there.

32. Question 32

Who is the primary audience for the strategy visuals and communication materials.

Answer

Initially we would need to build a strong case for investment in your recommendations, and so BCI leadership would be the priority. Secondly, we would need to inform and educate our internal workforce on our AI approach and policy/best practice. There is a possibility of communicating our approach to external stakeholders, but this is of low priority in the short term.

33. Question 33

Is the intent internal alignment only, or also board-level or external communication readiness.

Answer

Please refer to the response to Question 32.

34. Question 34

Are there internal change or communications teams that should be involved to ensure adoption.

Answer

Yes, we have an internal communications team.

35. Question 35

BCI has a vast network ranging from field-level partners to global corporate members. Does the organization prioritize AI use cases for internal operational efficiency (e.g., HQ/BAU processes) or for direct field-level impact and farmer support in the initial 0–6 month phase?

Answer

We aim to prioritise on factors such as strategic impact/value/ROI, complexity, cost and environmental impact. We do not expect to consider internal vs external use cases as an important factor.

36. Question 36

The RFP mentions M365 and Salesforce. Should the strategy focus primarily on maximizing the potential of these existing ecosystems (e.g., Microsoft Copilot integration), or is BCI open to exploring independent, bespoke AI solutions for specific challenges?

Answer

A guiding principle for the IT & Data team at BCI is to utilise our existing technology stack where possible, and this would still apply here. We are open to suggestions of alternative solutions however, if the business case is strong enough.

37. Question 37

The RFP highlights the importance of the environmental impact of AI. Does BCI have a preferred framework or specific sustainability metrics already in use for technology procurement that the proposed AI strategy should align with?

Answer

Please refer to the response to Question 20.

38. Question 38

Given the distributed nature of the organization, will the selected consultant have access to regional leads across different time zones for the discovery phase, or will there be a centralized task force for interviews?

Answer

Please refer to the response to Question 27.

In addition, BCI will provide the details of stakeholders that we've identified as suitable for interviewing during the discovery phase. These stakeholders will all be aware of this work, and will be contactable by the RFP partner to arrange an interview slot, conduct any follow up questioning etc.