



SPRING: INTO ACTION

Spring is poised to get an innovation party started in water, say Shaunna Berendsen and Steve Kaye.

Shaunna Berendsen likens the imminent launch of Spring – the water sector’s new Innovation Centre of Excellence – to creating a party and inviting others to come. As Spring’s client project director, she has been part of a small team which has been working flat out for months making the idea – which arose out of the water sector’s 2050 Innovation Strategy – reality. Come 20 December, a minimum viable product will go-live, effectively throwing open the doors to the party.

There is already quite a bit to celebrate. Spring could be game-changing for innovation efforts in water: welcoming new players in, sharing knowledge and best practice, hastening change, eliminating duplication and driving efficiency. Spring’s stated mission is to “connect, integrate and augment existing excellence within and outside the water sector, injecting innovation into the industry through learnings and best practices”.

It is targeting transformational change, aligned to the overlapping but distinct strategic innovation themes set out by Ofwat and the 2050 strategy. These include major challenges such as mitigating climate change through achieving net zero carbon; enhancing natural systems and the water environment; and ensuring infrastructure is resilient into the future. If the party goes with a bang, its implications could be felt well beyond water.

Pre-party

There has already been something of a pre-party in that the team has concertedly co-created Spring with a wide range of stakeholders and designed it through a series of collaborative work streams. The Innovation Strategy itself did a lot of the groundwork, asking the scores of its contributors to consider what they’d want to see from a Centre of Excellence, why, what their top priorities are and so on. Berendsen says when her team picked up the work, there were five functions identified to integrate into the MVP, some of which are challenging. For example,

she explains one function was to change the culture of the sector as far as innovation is concerned, which she points out is “not a tangible product or service”.

After that, the team engaged with over 80 organisations to understand their needs in more detail; before creating customer journeys and defining and validating user requirements; and engaging with specialist innovation organisations. The soft-launch of a skeleton website in Autumn set out the bones of what will become Spring’s service offering.

What’s on offer?

From 20 December, Spring will offer two main services, underpinned by two cross cutting ones. The principal services will be:

1 An Ideation and Collaboration incubator – this seeks to stimulate, create and nurture new ideas by facilitating clear lines of communication between water companies and potential innovators. There will be a single portal through which to connect which, Berendsen comments, will be a “massive benefit to the sector”.

2 An Innovation Adoption incubator – this will be concerned with taking promising ideas into practice, including through signposting innovators to practical assistance, for instance on funding and intellectual property management. This part, Berendsen says, is about “doing the innovation”.

More details are in the box. The key differences that Spring will make compared to what happens today feature: centralising points of contact and operation; demystifying the sector; offering a third party space to have conversations and explore options; facilitating the sharing of experiences and ideas; removing duplication and inefficiency; and speeding up change.

Berendsen says both the primary services are equally important, and that within them, there are elements that will become “the cornerstone of Spring”. She explains that things like the central submission portal, for instance, will be an “ever evolving beast that I believe will fundamentally change the sector”.

Underpinning the two primary services, Spring will also cover innovation skills and training, including by signposting stakeholders to existing offerings within and beyond the sector; and support the sector’s journey on open data. Berendsen explains

that Spring's proposition – covered in both the Innovation Strategy and its bid to Ofwat's Innovation in Water Challenge that successfully secured funding for the design phase – was that open data should underpin the sector's innovation work. Exactly how remains to be explored; Spring could become the home for any open data platform established, but equally could stand apart from it.

Everyone's invited

So who is Spring for? The obvious beneficiaries will be the water companies, in finding new and better ways of doing things, and the supply chain, in providing them. But Steve Kaye, chief executive of UKWIR (which Spring is an arm's length subsidiary of), makes the point that in being aligned with Ofwat's strategic challenges, Spring's work is centred around delivering benefits for customers, society and the environment too. As such, along with financial benefits, success will be measured against broader outcomes-based criteria. These are yet to be tied down with KPIs, but Kaye says will likely include carbon reduction and measures such as how much of an economic boost has resulted from the support provided to start ups.

Berendsen adds that direct access to Spring is for all types of innovators and that the initiative deliberately seeks diversity of thought. It's a party for everyone. The plan is to make as much functionality as possible available in the front end, and therefore freely available.

Asked where particular needs are currently in terms of facilitating knowledge sharing and connection – for example, is it water companies working with each other, or with the supply community, or academia, or internationally – she replies: "No one needs to take priority". The important thing, she says, is that everyone has access to a third party innovation space. She adds that there will likely be spin off benefits too from having a centralised view of innovation activity; what she calls "the power of collective feedback". She offers the example that Spring could offer a "safe voice" in feeding collective experience back to the regulator, in a way that would be more difficult and less powerful for an individual company to do.

Final preparations

In the weeks before the launch, Spring has been busy getting practical ducks in a row. It has appointed Salesforce as technology partner to deliver its platform; Berendesen says a brief investigation indicated it would be a "massive mistake" to try to do this in-house.

By mid November, the team had also submitted a circa £4m bid to the Transform stream of the second round of Ofwat's Water Breakthrough Challenge innovation competition. This would carry Spring through the remaining years of the AMP. Kaye says this funding is essential to get Spring off to a rapid start. "It would allow us to achieve the full vision for Spring," he says, rather than a scaled back version and a slower, more conventional start-up type start. "It would guarantee immediate impact," he asserts, noting Ofwat has been clear that it wants a fundamental acceleration of the pace of change and in Spring, "we're responding".

Kaye goes on to explain that the intention is not to continue to rely purely on water industry funding; Spring will look to increase funding from other sources over time, enabling the

innovation fund money to taper off. Kaye sees lots of options here, with potential funding sources in the supply chain and academia, as well as from innovation specialists like Innovate UK, and sectors like energy and agriculture where there are obvious synergies with water. "Spring provides the opportunity to create that nexus," he enthuses, noting also that some in the supply chain have already stepped up and provided seed funding contributions.

Indeed, in framing the organisational design of Spring, its founding team have been mindful of the benefits and opportunities that operating at arm's length from the water industry can bring.

Legally, Spring is a subsidiary of UKWIR and for practical reasons, there may be some resource sharing – for instance of IT and back office systems. The two organisations are also obviously complementary; Spring can do in innovation what UKWIR does in research, in tackling pressing common challenges centrally and efficiently. Kaye points out too that some UKWIR work might naturally flow into Spring, and therefore that the organisations should be aligned.

However, there was a keenness for Spring to operate in a more neutral space, to have wide appeal and encourage collaboration between as well as within sectors and geographies. So Spring has been created with its own board, brand and strategy, to enable it to act more independently and to be perceived as such. Kaye summarises this as "distant enough but connected enough to work in harmony". He suggests the way Spring has been co-created openly so far encapsulates its intention.

Post launch, "Spring "won't be everything for everyone," Berendsen stresses. It's a first take, is expected to be repeatedly iterated as it is refined and experienced, and the team will be wholeheartedly welcoming and encouraging users to provide constructive feedback. "We need people to come to the party," she urges as a closing comment. **TWR**

THE SPRING SERVICE OFFERING

The Ideation and Collaboration incubator will cover:

- Identification of opportunities and challenges – Driving strategic priorities by sharing information about the latest opportunities and challenges.
- Creating opportunities for collaborative projects – By giving water companies sight of supplier applications and an opt in/out for projects, innovators will be able to pitch directly to water companies and receive constructive feedback.
- Community library – Access to, and information on, communities of knowledge and practices to foster collaborations and expertise across the industry.
- Partnership brokerage – Connecting problem owners and problem solvers to partner on solutions to critical challenges.
- White space identification – Helping all types of innovators through the

ideation and collaboration journey and discovering untapped opportunities to collaborate.

The Innovation Adoption incubator will cover:

- Demystifying the sector – Signposts to accessible funding, standards and testbeds and providing clarity on IP rights and protections.
- Changing the narrative – Advocating for innovation in the sector and promoting the UK as being leaders in open innovation.
- Knowledge transfer – Sharing innovation including case studies and testimonials, removing institutional barriers to knowledge sharing and creating sector knowledge.
- Innovation fast-tracking – Mentoring innovators through the adoption journey, creating innovation baselines and identifying cross-sector areas of best practice.