

# Reimagining pensions

**With the launch of its Innovation Support Service, The Pensions Regulator has begun to position itself no longer as simply an enforcer, but an enabler of change. Sophie Smith takes a closer look**

For decades, the pensions industry has been rooted in tradition, with regulation centred on stability and security. Yet, the demands of a digital-first economy, shifting employment patterns, and evolving saver expectations have exposed limitations.

Against this backdrop, The Pensions Regulator (TPR) has begun to position itself not simply as an enforcer, but as an enabler of change. Its recent foray into innovation support – via hackathons, workshops, structured problem-solving and the launch of an Innovation Support Service – is set to push the industry out of its comfort zone.

## Repositioning regulation

TPR head of innovation and design practice, Marion Lean, makes it clear that the regulator is aiming for something

more ambitious than rhetoric with the launch of its new service.

“With industry’s help, we’re building an exciting new blueprint for innovation in workplace pensions. Buzzwords? No. This is a shared and real commitment to doing things differently,” she insists.

“One of the most powerful shifts we’ve made at TPR is moving towards designing our regulatory approach with the industry, and not just for the industry,” Lean explains. “That’s why our innovation events are built around co-design – which puts collaboration at the heart of problem-solving... We’re not here to tell people what to build. We’re here to create the space where the best ideas can emerge, be tested, and, if they work, scaled to benefit savers.”

This framing matters. For a sector often wary of regulatory burden, the

promise of collaboration rather than instruction is a notable change.

The influence of industry insight can be seen throughout the service, as Lean says: “All of the service offers have been designed in response to the needs of the industry, including the focus areas.

“As we are in the early stage of the journey, we are interested in hearing about innovation across the board as we learn about and develop approaches to specific subject support for industry innovators. As we develop the service we are interested to learn from innovators in industry (and outside of pensions) about what types of themes we can support through future events.”

Lean is also keen to emphasise that this is not a superficial exercise. “We’re not just running events for the sake of it,” she says. “We’re using them to test new approaches, hear different perspectives, and challenge ourselves to think differently”.

Still, questions remain. Can a regulator, by definition tasked with control and compliance, credibly act as a catalyst for experimentation, particularly in an industry where saver security is a front and centre concern?

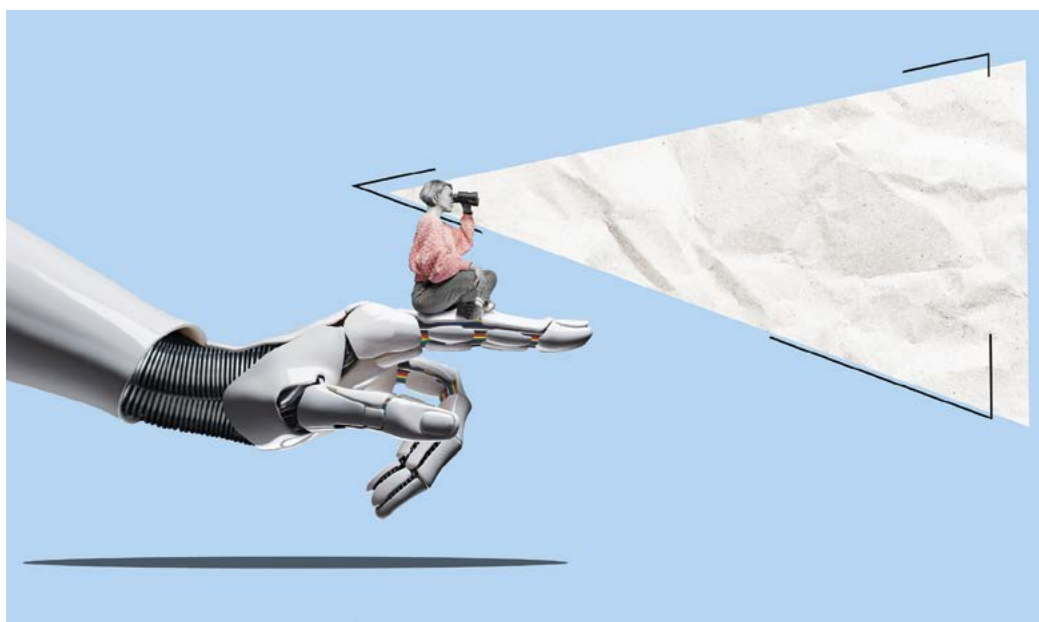
And can it do so without being accused of favouring certain approaches or firms?

## From hackathons to hard outcomes?

The ideas generated so far highlight the creative potential in the sector: A flexi fund for the self-employed, AI financial advisers, and joint pension visibility tools.

But while the hackathon model has generated excitement, the critical step will be scaling prototypes into viable, regulated products.

TPR’s stated ambition



is to create an environment where experimentation is not penalised but encouraged.

As Lean puts it: “We’re working to build the conditions for greater creativity, risk-taking and influence. That means giving people permission to try new things, to fail fast, and to learn quickly. We need to be brave enough to ask different questions, bold enough to try new approaches, and collaborative enough to work across boundaries.”

Such language is more commonly associated with fintech start-ups than regulators – and it represents a shift that will require careful management. For trustees, the message is clear: Innovation is encouraged, but accountability for member outcomes remains absolute.

### Guiding principles

And the importance of member outcomes has been made even clearer in TPR’s seven design principles.

Created in collaboration with industry at TPR’s recent event, the seven principles centre on saver needs, impact and evidence, inclusion, sustainability, transparency, responsible technology use, and continuous feedback and iteration.

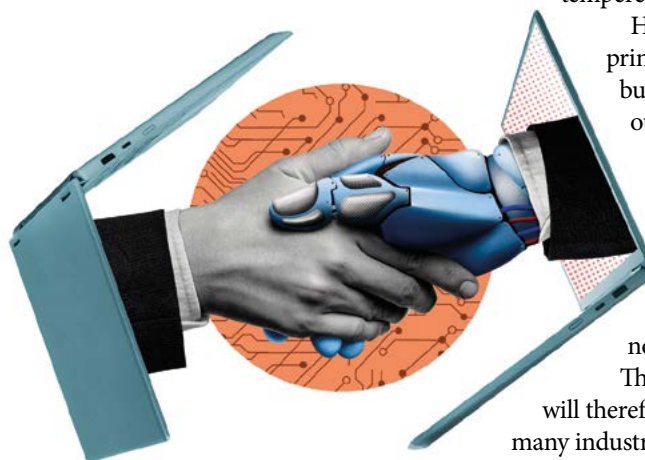
“These design principles aren’t just for TPR – they’re for the whole industry,” Lean stresses. “We want these principles to be a shared compass for the sector, guiding how we design, test, and scale ideas that can improve savers’ lives.”

On paper, the principles strike a sensible balance between ambition and caution. They acknowledge the promise of AI and digital platforms but also highlight transparency and trust – qualities often in short supply when financial services attempt radical change.

TPR is also alive to the need for continued evolution in future, as Lean admits that “principles on their own won’t change pensions. It’s how we use them, test them, and refine them with the industry that will make the difference.”

Translating such principles into

day-to-day decision-making is far from straightforward though. As schemes face pressure on costs, governance, and compliance, will these aspirations survive contact with commercial reality?



reassured by TPR’s willingness to endorse experimentation. One participant described TPR’s involvement as a “reassuring nod” that could embolden trustees to invest in innovation.

However, enthusiasm remains tempered by realism.

Hackathons and guiding principles are important, but pensions are judged by outcomes, not ideas.

Industry leaders know that innovation must survive the realities of legacy systems, complex governance, and an ageing saver base that is not always digitally literate.

The success of TPR’s initiative will therefore depend not on how many industry events it hosts, but on whether the projects it seeds deliver measurable improvements for members.

### A welcome step or symbolic gesture?

By offering early engagement with regulators, the service is intended to remove uncertainty and provide reassurance to trustees and providers exploring new ideas.

The hub offers a dedicated space for testing new concepts in a semi-sandbox environment, signposting the industry to easily engage with the regulator on ideas for innovation as early as possible.

For many, this is the clearest signal yet that TPR is serious about embedding innovation within its oversight.

### A warm, but cautious, response

Industry reception so far suggests that the appetite exists. “We have had a steady flow of applications since the launch in May,” Lean says.

“It has been really exciting to hear from the industry and, through our test and learn phase, develop ways of working to support the industry through these expert-to-expert discussions.”

Trustees and providers appear

### Promise meets pragmatism

The landscape is shifting and the regulator’s new posture signals that “playing it safe” is no longer the default expectation.

Schemes and providers will need to demonstrate that they can adopt test-and-learn approaches to meet members’ changing needs, while TPR must tread a fine line between encouragement and impartiality, ensuring its support does not morph into endorsement or bias.

“We want to help the industry become more creative, more confident, and more connected,” Lean says.

“We want to share what we’ve learned – and learn from others. And most importantly, we want to make sure that innovation in pensions is driven by the people it’s meant to serve: Savers.”

But the distance between innovation theory and practical pension reform is wide, and while TPR has set the tone, the industry carries the weight of execution.

 **Written by Sophie Smith**