

# How Assurity Consulting helped NIHI elevate the consumer voice.



## CASE STUDY

As part of its commitment to effective, evidence-based health interventions, the National Institute for Health Innovation (NIHI) looked to Assurity Consulting for assistance in embedding customer centric thinking into an already robust product development process. In a rapid-fire engagement, Assurity has helped NIHI appreciate Design Thinking while shifting its development approach from a project to a product mindset and establishing a strategy and roadmap for its SPARX digital health tool. Visit <https://www.sparx.org.nz/> for more information.

The National Institute for Health Innovation discovers, develops, tests, and delivers innovative approaches to today's most pressing health problems. The organisation's work is focused on preventing disease, improving people's health, reducing health inequities, and enabling the delivery of more effective and equitable healthcare. Supported by The University of Auckland and Auckland UniServices Limited infrastructures, NIHI provides researchers with complex project management, IT, data management and analytics support, delivery of commercial health projects and commercialisation/deployment of health initiatives.

## Situation

Designed as a virtual world where avatars interact with one another, SPARX was developed by NIHI and The University of Auckland academics. It has players, typically aged between 13 and 19, perform various activities designed to help cope with negative thoughts or feelings. The player meets a Guide who teaches skills to feel better, solve problems and enjoy life outside of SPARX.

Vanessa Ding, NIHI General Manager, says all the organisation’s products and services are built on a foundation of robust academic methods and research. “SPARX was developed with the help of young people and is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Back then, 12 years ago, users were very much front of mind, with involvement in testing showing improvements in mental health through traditional and robust research methodologies including a randomised clinical trial.”

However, she says the voice of today’s customer had quietened over time and wasn’t sufficiently prominent to keep up with changing customer-experience demands. “We needed a shift in how we were doing things. We sought better engagement with the people SPARX is made for, the people who are playing the game and their whanau and educators. We needed to move from a ‘research project’ mindset to a ‘product’ mindset where we bring together customers with key stakeholders who have the academic knowledge of therapeutic tools, with the end goal of making a more engaging, accessible experience for youth. This supports the goal of helping as many people as possible benefit from SPARX at a time when greater, more equitable access to support is required by rangitahi facing mental health challenges.”

She notes that customer demands have changed in the past decade, and new methods of application development – including Agile – have emerged.

**“We are in a unique and powerful position whereby we can blend clinical integrity and evidence-based features with approaches that respond to the changing user demands of a gaming experience.”**



## Solution

NIHI invited proposals from several consulting firms, including Assurity, on the recommendation of an associate familiar with its work for a large bank. “Assurity immediately stood out by understanding and empathising with the business problem in an engaging way. This was important because our team are experts at what they do, and wanted to work with consultants who valued that while iterating our approach in a constructive and collaborative way,” Vanessa says.

On top of that, she says Assurity pricing was appropriate for the task at hand and the value that it brought, making the selection a ‘no-brainer’. The consultancy proposed two workstreams, one introducing and embedding Design Thinking (and Customer-Centric thinking), and the other introducing Agile ways of working with a Design Sprint, product strategy and roadmap.

Delivered over the course of four weeks, the first workstream included a two-hour workshop discussing the Design Thinking approach and a half-day Experience Design Thinking session with the wider NIHI team to embed new ways of working within the organisation. This adds to and complements NIHI’s clinical and translational research expertise.

A two-week Design Sprint saw Assurity working alongside the NIHI team, engaging directly with SPARX customers, exposing their needs, ideas, and opportunities, and validating them with academic staff. This included the introduction of a product strategy and roadmap identifying Agile ways of iterating SPARX. Processes and tools necessary for design thinking were identified and assessed, with Agile coaching moving from project to product thinking.

Vanessa is impressed with the delivery and engagement. “Assurity’s consultant listened to understand, sharing their expertise while allowing our expertise to shine through. This empowered the team to feel like they are on a journey to improve outcomes for the youth of New Zealand,” she says.



## Results

The overall benefit of the engagement is best described as the empowerment of NIHI's SPARX development and product management team. By demonstrating the value of engaging directly with SPARX users on the one hand (including young people, parents, and school teachers) and academic stakeholders on the other, fresh insights were gained, contributing to future improvements on SPARX.

Introducing Agile methods means moving towards an iterative development approach, with more frequent updates introducing those insights as features or improvements. A product mindset means always keeping the user at the centre of all activities.

“The bottom line is that we’re looking to shift the dial on health outcomes. SPARX works; it is backed by rigorous research. By bringing in human-centric design, creating more engaging experiences for the user, we’re able to achieve a more powerful result,” says Vanessa.

What surprised the team, she adds, is that sometimes customer insights are quite simple and easily deployed. “It really is the little things – but until you go straight to the customer and ask, you cannot know. And the little things are what it will take as we move towards the ultimate goal of driving engagement, getting more young people playing the game and benefiting from better mental health.”

She says Assurity has effectively helped drive out barriers to accessing the game. “They’ve also become a trusted partner, helping embed small shifts in working, setting up our team for future transformation and growth,” Vanessa concludes.

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**Vanessa Ding** – General Manager  
National Institute for Health  
Innovation (NIHI)



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## At a glance

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**Company:**

National Institute for Health Innovation (NIHI)

**Industry:**

Healthcare

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**Requirements:**

Designed as a virtual world where avatars interact with one another, [SPARX](#) was developed by NIHI and The University of Auckland academics 12 years ago, aimed at teenagers to help them cope with negative thoughts or feelings through games and activities.

The team at NIHI recognized that the customers' needs have changed over the past decade, and new methods of application development – including Agile – have emerged.

The NIHI team sought to blend clinical integrity and evidence-based features with approaches that respond to the changing user demands of a gaming experience through the engagement of a consultancy firm.

**Solution:**

Assurity Consulting was selected, and the Design Thinking team implemented two workstreams to NIHI:

- One introducing and embedding Design Thinking (and Customer-Centric thinking),
- The other introducing Agile ways of working with a Design Sprint, product strategy and roadmap.

**Outcomes Achieved:**

Empowerment of NIHI's SPARX development and product management team by:

- demonstrating the value of engaging directly with SPARX users
- Introducing Agile methods and moving towards an iterative development approach, with more frequent updates introducing those insights as features or improvements; and a product mindset means always keeping the user at the centre of all activities.