



Part 1

Learning Partner role and work of the Centre for Public Impact

At the Centre for Public Impact in Europe (CPIE) we have listened to the stories of what it takes to develop the NESSie way of working to help capture the learning that is emerging from this new and liberated approach.

There is recognition that a [Human Learning Systems](#) approach is a means by which to achieve this: it provides an outline of **how** public service can be undertaken and organised differently.

As part of CPI we have worked with 150+ governments in 30+ countries, and have built an observatory of 500+ case studies chronicling how governments (national and local) around the world are seeking to achieve public impact. In all our work, we act as a Learning Partner to organisations, supporting them in building the capacity and structure to listen, learn, and adapt on an ongoing basis.

We put four principles at the heart of our learning partner approach to working with partners:

1. Embrace complexity
2. Relationships
3. Learning & Experimentation
4. Empathy

This report was commissioned by **NESSie partners, Fresh Start, North Edinburgh Arts, Edinburgh Spartans Football Academy and Move On** to capture the stories of what is making a difference and highlight the learning so far from the liberated approach they are developing.

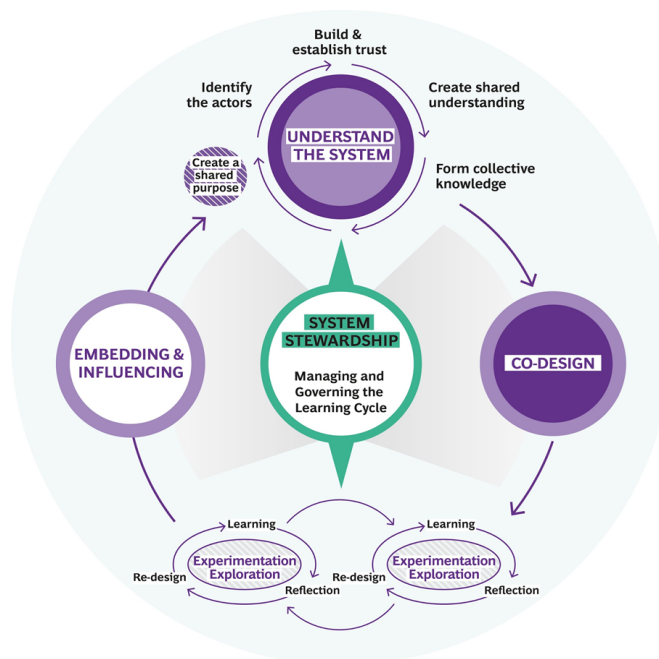
Learning as a Management Strategy

[Learning as a Management Strategy](#) is a way of doing management which prioritises collaborative learning, rather than traditional performance management, as a way to achieve system change.

One way to enact Learning as a Management Strategy is for people to frame their work in terms of a Learning Cycle. The model below outlines the approach being taken.



Outline of the learning cycle

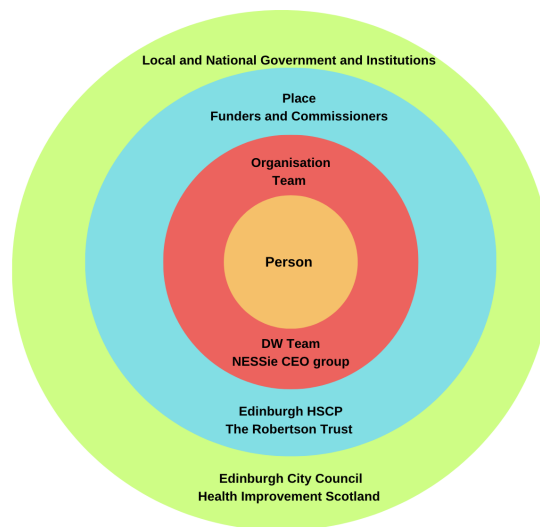


Learning Cycles can operate at different scales across the system.

For example; at the level of working with clients, **Development Workers** can frame their work with clients as Learning Cycles; **operational managers** can frame their management work as Learning Cycles; the work of managing the collaboration (**the NESSie CEO group**) can be a Learning Cycle at another scale in the system, as can the work of those who provide funding (**Capacity to Collaborate and The Robertson Trust**) which in this case is enabling protected space for learning at each scale below.

Learning as a Management Strategy really makes a difference to how services work for clients when the Learning Cycles at the different scales within a system are connected; when what is learnt from the "on the ground" scale creates learning which supports or challenges the Business as Usual of how the scale above works.

The management of the scale above responds to that challenge by creating their own experiments and explorations to address those issues. As with any model, this is of course a simplification of the more messy reality involved in providing and managing a service. However, it is a useful model to use to reflect on how people are collectively learning about what's working and not working in a service, how that learning is being understood by everyone involved and how it's being used to adapt how things work to meet the needs of clients.



NESSie as HLS System Scales

Part 2

Learning Report - Context and Overview

The North Edinburgh Support Service (NESSie) is an action research experiment founded by four, third sector organisations serving communities in North Edinburgh - **Fresh Start, North Edinburgh Arts, Edinburgh Spartans Football Academy** and **Move On**.

NESSie is one of 21 projects awarded funding through Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnerships's Capacity to Collaborate fund. The £350,000 Capacity to Collaborate fund is an experiment in trust based commissioning seeking to build on the learning that emerged in the first twelve months of the covid-19 pandemic.

During this time EHSCP responded to the rapid mobilisation of third sector organisations by removing administrative barriers to collaboration and through the distribution of funding and resources, extending trust and confidence to community partners to do what needed to be done to meet the needs of communities.



The projects funded by Capacity to Collaborate were awarded funding specifically for the activity of collaboration. This is a radical and intentional act to enable organisations the space and time to explore collaborative working, inform how future funding can be distributed in a more equitable way and move towards stronger, relational public services.

The NESSie way of working is an example of what can be possible when third sector organisations are enabled to centre the people and communities they exist to serve and when those who fund and commission services place trust in leaders and organisations to do the right thing.

About NESSie

NESSie is a collaborative, liberated way of working grounded in the principles of **Love, Care, Compassion and Dignity**, founded on trusting relationships and shared purpose at CEO level.

In their alliance, the four NESSie partner organisations are united in their commitment to improving the lives of people in North Edinburgh for generations to come. NESSie has adopted the Human Learning Systems approach which “starts with the belief that public service exists to support human freedom and flourishing”

There are no defined outputs or outcomes in the NESSie way of working, which initially presented a challenge when seeking in the funding needed to develop such an innovative approach. NESSie is an experiment exploring “what changes when public facing practitioners are freed from the constraints of conversations which centre on specific referral criteria and time limited interventions?”

Funders who were in principle supportive of the model found themselves unable to award funding to the work because of the restrictive nature of their own policies and procedures. *“One funder we approached loved our ambition and even wished us luck but were still unable to support us.”*

The Robertson Trust is a charitable foundation interested in learning about what conditions are required to enable good collaboration to emerge. They were the first to pledge financial support to the alliance. The proposal presented to the Trust by NESSie was assessed as having the strongest potential in addressing the trust’s key priority themes. All four partners had previously been awarded funding for their work in North Edinburgh.

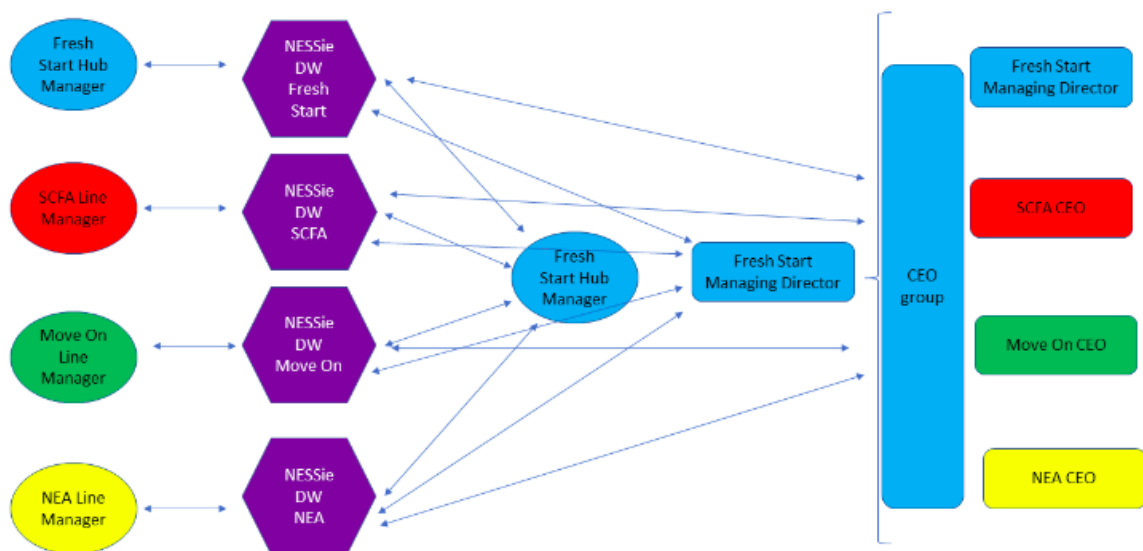


It took NESSie eighteen months to ensure that all Robertson Trust governance conditions were met and to secure the additional funding they needed to support the Development Worker (DW) roles.

Further seed funding was awarded to the alliance through EHSCP Capacity to Collaborate Fund which is, to date, the only public sector fund that has awarded funding to organisations specifically for the activity of collaboration and not for specified or defined output.

The grants awarded led to the creation of four Development Worker posts and ensures that the CEO group can protect and invest the time required for learning about their work together. Each partner is responsible for the employment of one DW. Fulfilling the grant conditions included assurance that the terms and conditions of employment across NESSie were fair and consistent.

Development Workers operate within three rules: **Work within the law; Work from a place of understanding; Work within a cost effective framework** and to bring a learning approach to their work helping to understand what it is that will make a real difference to people's lives and to share the learning from their work at different levels of the system.





Centre for Public Impact

A BCG FOUNDATION

"NESSie is a "No wrong door" approach, everyone is welcome. This means that when people do ask for help we are not listening from the perspective of a service specification and we can build relationships over time helping us to understand an individuals strengths and aspirations and how we can best meet their needs"

- NESSie partner CEO -

NESSie is what is possible when:

- Leaders are enabled to collaborate free from the constraints of restricted funding and competition
- Third sector organisations and those who fund and commission their work are curious about what we will learn instead of seeking prescribed outcomes
- There is no wrong door, referral criteria or time limit for people to access and receive support
- Community facing practitioners are given permission to enter into relationships with individuals from the perspective of understanding "What is it at this moment in time that will make your life better".

What are we learning at different levels of system scale ?



Person

The NESSie DW team came into role in October 2022 and have been working in the North Edinburgh community since early 2023.

Over the first six months, the team took time to understand themselves as a system and to learn about what it means to deliver a service with no criteria.

The team have benefitted from the support of Health Improvement Scotland in developing their own approach to learning. Unlike projects wedded to fixed outcomes, the NESSie approach is dynamic and will change over time to reflect learning and "what matters".



Team Scale

Development Worker Team
Operational Manager



Development Worker Team

"I've never worked in a team like this before where we support and challenge each other in this way. Everyone brings their different experiences and perspectives, we have a really strong team"

All four Development Workers were motivated to apply for the role because of their belief in the NESSie vision and the desire to be involved in something which they feel has the potential to lead to real and meaningful change for individuals.

The opportunity to take a complexity-informed approach to improving people's lives was a clear source of inspiration in attracting people to the role and, as is the nature of complex systems, messy in practice.

In practice, creating something new means doing something different and (very often) learning new behaviours. Learning new behaviours can be made even more difficult when you can't see or feel what those new behaviours are. Helping new teams to build momentum and confidence in creating a learning approach initially requires an investment of time from senior leaders and other system actors who understand the technical and relational support often needed by teams and practitioners engaged in change work.

"Having no criteria feels scary. People are vulnerable and you may be the one person they speak to. This is a massive responsibility to carry."

Enacting learning as a management strategy is what makes NESSie distinctly different from other services. Initially the DW team struggled to understand how their work was different. The team is now established as a self-managing team and have integrated learning cycles into their public facing work.

"99% of the community care grant applications we were submitting to the council for clients were being rejected which then required an appeal to be submitted.

The online application form included a tick box to indicate if the application was being submitted by an "approved partner", we learned that if this box was not ticked then the application would automatically be rejected.

In addressing this we now see a 99% approval rate and have significantly reduced the work required to access financial support for clients"



Operational management of NESSie

The operational management of NESSie sits in between the visionary leadership of the CEO group and the frontline learning of the DW team. Each NESSie partner employs a Development Worker, line managed and supervised by their own organisation, Fresh Start as lead partner has had the most operational oversight of the establishment of this new way of working.

The task of operational management in this context is to help to turn vision into practice and support the team in developing their practice as a self-managing team within a support service with no referral criteria, enacting learning as a management strategy.

*It's hard to direct people when you feel stuck between the vision and the practicalities and still trying to get it into a working model. This isn't a radical approach - **yet.**"*

"When we ask people what will make a difference to them right now ? Do we just give people what they have asked for without figuring out the whole story ?

In the first few months the DW team spent a lot of their time together learning, making sense of their work and building trust. As the team become more established in their approach it is possible that they will spend less time together as a team and more time within their host organisation. It is necessary to regularly review communication between line managers and organisational boundaries to ensure that there is consistency in understanding of the working model being adopted by the team and that needs of the DW team as a whole can be balanced.

Understanding of the Human Learning Systems approach at the operational level of the system is important in the integration of the NESSie way of working beyond the DW team and into the wider culture of the alliance organisations. The NESSie way of working is not isolated to the NESSie team. In Fresh Start *"people are asking different questions, they are curious, you can see that they are thinking differently about their work. "*

NESSie CEO Group





"NESSie is a different beast, an attempt to do things differently and we have all worked hard to be as open and honest as possible. It took a lot of work to get to where we are today. There is no one dominant voice. We are in this together and need to move at the same speed."

NESSie is only possible because of the drive and commitment of the CEO group and leaders of the alliance value the diversity of skills and thought their organisations bring to the table. There is a clear sense of purpose, shared values and high levels of trust within the CEO group.

"it's all about people and gives permission for innovation when there is no guarantee of success. For us the learning set is the biggest draw to the table."

Responding to the needs of the community during the COVID-19 pandemic provided the leaders of the NESSie alliance with a glimpse of what is possible beyond the constraints of the market conditions created through the paradigm of New Public Management.

The funding awarded to NESSie through the Capacity to Collaborate fund and by the Robertson Trust for the activity of collaboration has enabled sustained energy and learning by the CEO group and has held the space in which they have been able to work through difficult issues such as collaborative recruitment and terms and conditions of employment.

Learning from the DW team is shared with the CEO group at their monthly meeting and through quarterly collective sensemaking workshops. As these learning cycles have become more established the conversation has moved from understanding NESSie as a system towards making sense of the learning from the DW's public facing work and towards the mobilisation of system stewardship across the CEO group, who between them hold a significant number of key relationships across the city.

Developing the NESSie way of working has not been easy. It has required leaders to invest a considerable amount of time alongside "business as usual" and to listen without ego and practice empathy. The commitment of the group is sustained through their mutual belief that it is possible to create change.

NESSie Funders



"Edinburgh is an amazing city and this work is inspiring and I know that we are capable of doing even more."



Centre for Public Impact

A BCG FOUNDATION

The progress made in developing the NESSie way of working is only possible because there are people with the power to change the system who recognise the limitations of the dominant funding model and New Public Management; who are taking responsibility for improving public services for the people and communities they serve.

Collaboration for the purpose of strengthening relationships and is an investment of time that can feel beyond the reach of leaders of third sector organisations. Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership and the Robertson Trust are shining a light on what can be possible through funding the activity of collaboration, with the intention of using the learning which emerges to change the way money is distributed, tackle inequality and co-create a new narrative for collaboration.

Dr Linda Irvine Fitzpatrick is Strategic Programme Manager for Edinburgh Health and Social Care partnership. Linda believes that if we are really going to make sustainable change, we need to give ourselves permission to:

Renegotiate our identity - What are people holding on to that is holding them back ? What is preventing us from being truly innovative and doing what we feel is right.

To lean into discomfort -Being comfortable can be a barrier to change, even when we have permission to do things differently.

Funding the work of collaboration with no defined outcomes or outputs requires trust on the part of funders.

The Robertson Trust's advice to anyone who may be interested in experimenting with similar approaches is that it is not easy, it is possible and it requires patience and agility.

NESSie agenda for change



"People don't live their lives in a way that fits with the council way of working. We have to be a force for change ourselves and take action on issues that council and government can't get a handle on. NESSie can drive change from the ground up."



Councillor Stuart Dobbins is the SNP elected representative for the Forth Ward in North Edinburgh. He was elected to his role in the May 2022 local elections.

Stuart believes that the power of the collective voice that NESSie represents is greater than the voice of lone organisations when it comes to influencing change with local decision makers.

“Change at a council level comes about by councillors passing acts and this is why we need broad based agreements to help define council motions”.

The NESSie way of working is an opportunity for the active re-engagement of disenfranchised local people. “The point is we need people to participate in public life”.

What next for NESSie ?

Taking our learning wider, within Place.

The learning emerging from this new liberated way of working will be shared beyond the boundaries of the alliance and with other local organisations. Doing this will help to understand the patterns being noticed across place, build shared self-interest and momentum for change.

Our work to date has highlighted two areas on which we will be focussing our learning over the next iteration of our work.

The next NESSie learning report will capture our learning on Community Care Grants. This report will be shared with other organisations with the intention of gathering data at “place” level to understand if the issues highlighted in our practice are concerns shared within the local ecosystem.

This process of collective sense making will then inform any shared action in sharing the learning at different levels of system scale, such as Edinburgh City Council.

The second theme of work being addressed is access to GP surgeries, which NESSie is progressing in parallel to the CCG. We have already shared our initial learning with Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership who are supporting us to develop relationships with changemakers and decision makers in the NHS.

As the NESSie way of working evolves we will continue to refine our learning cycles and use these at different levels.



We believe that sharing these learning cycles wider provides inspiration and enables belief in that system change is possible and shows what can happen when you do things differently.

NESSie CEO Group

Acknowledgements:

Biddy Kelly - Executive Director, Fresh Start

Douglas Samuel - CEO, Edinburgh Spartans Community Football Academy

Debbie McCulloch - Deputy CEO, Edinburgh Spartans Community Football Academy

[Kate Wimpres](#) - CEO, North Edinburgh Arts

John Hinton - CEO, Move On

[Abigail Jackson](#) - Operations Manager, Fresh Start

Craig Anderson - Development Worker, Fresh Start

Jennifer Pullen - Development Worker, Edinburgh Spartans Community Football Academy

Anna Przybycien - Development Worker, North Edinburgh Arts

Dale Ross - Development Worker, Move On

Linda Irvine-Fitzpatrick - Strategic Programme Manager, Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership

Wendy Knowles - Funding Manager, The Robertson Trust

Cassy Rutherford - Learning and Communication Manager, The Robertson Trust

Karen McNeill - Improvement Advisor, Healthcare Improvement Scotland

Cllr. Stuart Dobbins - Edinburgh City Council

Harriet Hunter - Programme Director, Centre for Public Impact Europe

Toby Lowe - Visiting Professor, Centre for Public Impact Europe