Collaboration: Easier Said Than Done?

Learning from North Edinburgh Support Service (NESSie)- a third sector consortium working across Place

A Human Learning System Example of Practice

with support from Phronesis Partnership

May 2024

About NESSie

NESSie: **N**orth **E**dinburgh **S**upport **S**ervices

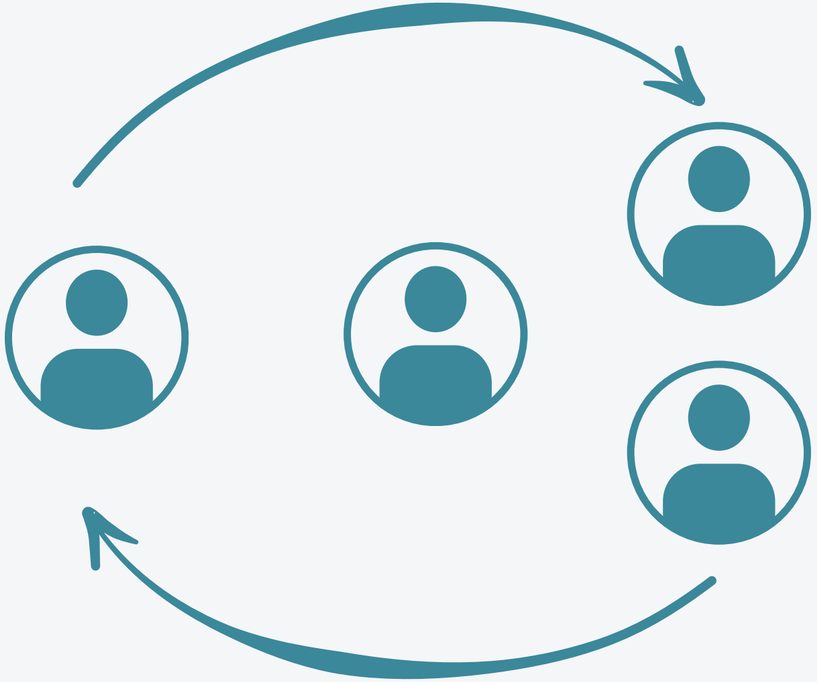
NESSie is a collaboration of four third sector organisations within North Edinburgh. Each organisation has a development worker within the NESSie collaborative.

They are experimenting with a liberated method of helping people in line with the principles of Human Learning Systems.

Central to this liberated method is:

Collaboration

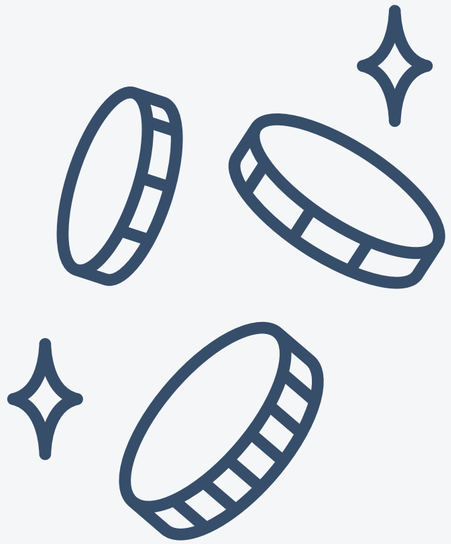
The Journey of the NESSie CEOs



The NESSie collaboration was built from catalysing cascading strong, personal relationships which orginated with everyone's relationship with one person.

These interconnected relationships coalesced and developed into a **collaborative group** that gave the space for the CEOs to grow alongside each other. This allowed the CEOs to tackle complexity and questions they faced individually in their own orgs but also apply it across all orgs, such as how to navigate a tricky funding landscape and how to collaboratively allocate funding across all orgs instead of just their own.

Collective Financial Decisions



NESSie organisations operate with no formal contracts with each other. NESSie financial decisions are made on an ongoing basis and work successfully by:

1. By Asking

What organisation is best placed to undertake the work?

Where would be most fair and equitable to allocate the funds?

2. By Ensuring

The funds are not allocated by a pre-determined agreement but constantly assessed and re-assessed via conversations and collaboration.

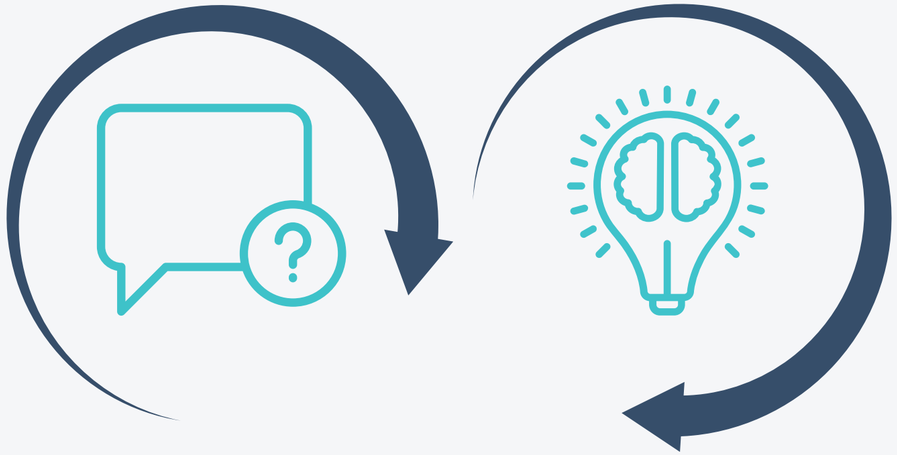
Cycles of Learning

How does NESSie collaborate? By conducting learning cycles and applying learning to their relationships. One example: **contracts.**

Understanding the System

How to ensure employment parity when each Nessie development worker is based in a different organisation?

When funding had been secured the practical issue of how to make the structure of 4 x Dev Workers working across 4 x orgs became very real. The CEOs spoke about what the priorities were for them. NESSie working as an approach independent of anyone one org but supported by all orgs became clear.



Co-Design

Use one org's T&C's for all Nessie Development worker contracts

All 4 CEOs were involved in discussion about possible options. All 4 orgs had different T&Cs. However the option that they kept coming back to was to use one orgs more favourable t&cs and adapt it to a separate NESSie contract which would be help by each org for their DW.

The co-creation stage took a lot of dicussion and honesty and was iterated a few times

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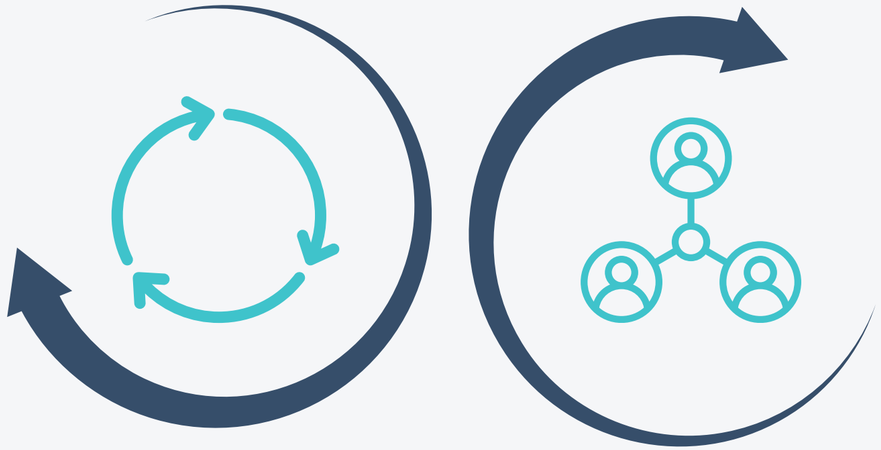
Experiment & Learning

T&C issues in a collaborative initiative are not easily resolved. There is ongoing work needed with 'host' org and T&Cs need revised regularly

The actions of adapting an existing set of T&Cs to create a 'NESSie Contract' was fairly straight forward, However, each of the CEOs had to implement that contract in their orgs. There were different issues & ripples felt in each org some of which were sensitive and difficult to resolve.



Embedding & Influencing

CEOs continue to work across orgs to innovate and address ongoing T&C challenges to maintain parity, trust, and values

The CEOs managed to implement the NESSie contract. As the year progressed other T&Cs issues had to be resolved including salary increase. The CEOs return to what their priorities are which is to do the right thing, ensure that NESSie operates as a collaborative with parity across all 4 orgs & they accept responsibility to take action and do what is needed for the collaborative.

Evidence from the NESSie CEOs

Debbi McCulloch, CEO Spartans Community Foundation

"I think there's a real sense of personal connection there along with professional connection. And I think gives us an opportunity to bang heads about other things. I walk into the NESSie CEO meeting, and I can hug every single one of them. There's not many places that I can walk in, and that happens"

Kate Wimpress, CEO North Edinburgh Arts

"All NESSie CEOs have got different spheres of influence and achievement. I think that's really important and quite unusual because that doesn't usually happen because you are usually bound up with people who are a bit similar to you. (NESSie) is bounding up with people who are not similar and I think that's critical."

John Hinton, CEO Move On

"....that has meant some challenging conversations (in Move On) but actually.....that's what we signed up to. A deep partnership like this does mean bounce back implication on the parents organisations.

Biddy Kelly, Managing Director, Fresh Start

"Doing something so different takes courage (it's risky) so having people on your team that you trust implicitly is fundamental – I am not sure I would have done this anyone but the three other CEO's in NESSie. NESSie ensures that we stay curious to what is coming up for the team and our people, the team are trusted to do what is needed, we are trusted by our funders and by the people we work for."

The Elements of Collaboration

Trust

Honesty between orgs, people, and community members built on **behaviour** that is constantly learned from, changed, and reciprocated

Values

Values of people, orgs, and community are aligned to make people's lives better

Relationships

Ego Free

Egos of CEOs, orgs, and people are left at the door - no fear of risk in learning or experimenting & failing

Parity

All NESSie orgs & development workers are equal & all recognise the complexity of their work, themselves & their communities

Shared Responsibility

Leadership within a collaboration means willingness to share responsibility and actively support decisions

The Difficulties of Collaboration

01
Finding Investors.

Finding funders who embrace the messiness of collaboration and understands collaboration takes time. The majority of funders still operated in a more rigid performance management paradigm insisting on predefined output and outcomes.

02
Others' unhappiness.

Competitiveness is inherent in funding processers and other people in other organisations just see the grass being greener.

03
Revisiting messy situations.

Some situations will never be resolved but instead need revisited often. This can be frustrating and requires a continued investment of time.

04
Balancing taking time vs action.

It takes time to build collaborations and especially any based on learning. Working in a different way does take time which adds to frustration about not making change as quickly as envisioned. Taking in action in the work becomes very important.

How the NESSie CEOs Are Succeeding

01
Honesty.

NESSie CEOs face their challenges and set backs head on with open discussion, acknowledgment of diverse perspectives, and a willingness to change behaviours when needed.

02
Embracing Complexity.

The NESSie team understands that while collaboration adds complexity to their work, it is the only way to successfully navigate the complex landscape of the work.

03
Solutions Focused.

Instead of pre-defined solutions or KPIs, the NESSie CEOs focus and help their team find immediate and impactful solutions that actually change lives. They are focussed on understadning what is the right thing todo and enabling it to happen.

04
Humble Relationships.

NESSie CEOs continue to learn from each other, their employees, and their communities as well as their work to grow together and across orgs rather than individually in a silo.

Humour While not technically a requirement, it helps that the NESSie CEOs all have a healthy dose of humour and are able to laugh and learn from mistakes, set backs, and challenges with a fresh sense of purpose

Learning Partner Observations:

As Learning Partners we have the privilege to work alongside the full NESSie Team. We have been with them for most of their journey. We are able to bring a different perspective from our experience working with them and from what we experience across other systems and organisations. Here are some additional thoughts we have specifically about the NESSie Collaboration:

Complexity

Working in a collaboration like NESSie is extremely complex not only because it spans a number of thematic systems, but also the work NESSie embraces is also largely centered within the **prevention and early intervention spectrum of acuity**. Working in this area involves many challenges and none more than measuring impact and quantifying the difference working in this way makes at Place scale.

Earnestness

Change in complex systems where multiple people, organisations, and relationships hold power and influence becomes more fragile and suceptible to delays because it is often easier to revert to the status quo. There is quite a lot of talk about change but significantly less earnest actions and behaviours that enable and encourage change.

Non-linearity

Working in a collaboration of four third sector organisations who are seeking to change the system and work with public sector partners to change the system is not a well trodden path. They are breaking new ground, so there is no set rule book or examples to follow. Change is not linear, not always visible, and is not easily forged. Actual change takes time, and can be seen in small increments before it can be measured on a large scale.

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