

# LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



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## LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

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# **What is *North East Solidarity and Teaching* (N.E.S.T.)?**

Bridget Stratford – Ellie Mahoney

This paper explains how students can be used to help with the integration for the refugee populations within their local communities. North East Solidarity and Teaching are used as an example of this being carried out successfully, as they have produced a timetable of activities to encourage the integration of refugees and asylum seekers into the North East of England. This has reduced social isolation within the migrant population in this area and created a community of people that are able to communicate and respect one another's background and cultures.

**Keywords:** integration of refugees and asylum seekers, student volunteering.

## **1. Introduction**

*North East Solidarity and Teaching* (N.E.S.T) is a Newcastle University Students' Union Go Volunteer project managed completely by student volunteers. It is a project which educates and empowers the refugee and asylum-seeking community in the North East.

With approximately 300 students running sessions seven days per week, N.E.S.T provides a tailored ESOL curriculum and a holistic community integration programme, which supports around 250 refugees and asylum seekers of all ages and backgrounds. Volunteers and learners alike have described N.E.S.T as an extended family that helps each other to grow. They have said that relationships between learners are encouraged and fostered in order to decrease social isolation among the refugee community. N.E.S.T is a home that removes the label of refugee and instead allows a person to become a human with hope for the future. It represents the spirit and the soul of the North East of England, not just in its name, but in all that it does and everyone that it touches. N.E.S.T provides everyone who comes through its doors with an opportunity to become part of a family. They are treated as someone with individual needs and their own goals and ambitions.

Founded in August 2016, N.E.S.T began as a small project called the “Homework Club”, which involved eight students from Newcastle University travelling to a neighbourhood near the university where many recently settled refugees live, to spend two hours on a Saturday to support one family of Syrian refugees. The project has since expanded, moving to Newcastle University as increasing numbers of students have been inspired to get involved and more learners have attended.

N.E.S.T aims to bring in aspects of collaborative care and a multidisciplinary approach to tackling social isolation and community integration. N.E.S.T provides a holistic care package to refugees and asylum seekers who attend which is designed to not only improve their own standard of living and quality of life but also to empower them to be independent, integrated and valued members of the local community. This is achieved by having a social aspect to the sessions before, after, and during the break in our longer sessions, where learners and volunteers are encouraged to socialize without the education constraints of the classroom. In turn, this helps the learners practice their conversational English whilst learning vocabulary and cultural differences that are not in the usual classroom syllabus.

The project has raised over £43,000 and currently has £24,000 worth of grant applications awaiting decisions. It also receives referrals from regional councils, job centres, colleges, and charities. The project has a vast support network of national stakeholders including local MPs, organisations such as Newcastle City Council and national bodies such as The Refugee Council and the UNHCR.

## **2. Literature review**

Platts-Fowler and Robinson (2015: 478) outline integration “as a situation in which a group may maintain its own identity but become part of a wider society to the extent that the host population and refugees can live together in an acceptable way”. Research shows that in order for a forced migration population to feel welcome in a potential settling place for them, they have to be accepted despite their cultural differences (Platts-Fowler and Robinson 2015). It is inherent that their existing skills are used and appreciated by the host

community so that both parties are changing to progress into a highly skilled and economically thriving society. This is supported by Coley et al. (2019), who state that integration is necessary from all sides of the relationships or will be otherwise unsuccessful as a result of one party refusing to change their ways. At N.E.S.T the focus is on integrating refugees and asylum seekers in a way that is helpful to their situations and needs. For example, childcare is provided so that parents who may be unable to attend English lessons, are able to.

Hayes et al. (2008: 1) define social inclusion as “inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power”. This definition strongly relates to what refugees and asylum seekers often face due to being shunned by their communities or being unable to communicate with those around them. In order to combat this, there has to be an element of teaching from those who are local in order to socially integrate. There also has to be a power balance, where those at risk of social inclusion are given a voice to use in their communities. This voice has to first come with being able to use the common language of the region, a service which N.E.S.T aims to provide to the forced migrant populations and therefore empowering them within the local community.

Research demonstrates that increased cultural diversity within cities is a strong predictor of economic performance, especially in creative industries. By integrating our learners into communities in the North East, we are improving their chances of gaining employment and contributing to the economy. Community integration works both ways and breaking down stigma and educating around the topic of forced migration is a hugely important step to reducing racial and religious discrimination. Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore (2017) agree as they highlight that anxieties occur when people are displayed as different to what they are used to in the comfort of their own geographical space. Investing in creating cohesion between different populations within the North East generates a warm and vibrant region which boasts strong roots in diversity and attracts business and tourism. Through N.E.S.T students who form a large percentage of the population are also integrating into local communities, learning about the culture of the North East and bridging the perceived gap between socioeconomic status groups.

### 3. Structure of N.E.S.T.

#### 3.1. What sessions does N.E.S.T provide?

N.E.S.T runs unique sessions 7 days a week, most of which are based at Newcastle University. Each session has a different aim to increase English language skills, improve integration and reduce social isolation amongst the refugee community. These sessions include:

##### 1. *N.E.S.T Create (Tuesday)*

Create began in October 2017 and is a set of creative art and cooking sessions, encouraging the natural progression of English language through dynamic and interesting mixed ability sessions, as well as promoting friendship and a community atmosphere. Sessions, made up of 20-30 learners, allow learners to express themselves and work towards projects over a number of weeks.

##### 2. *N.E.S.T Conversation (Wednesday)*

In 2016-2017 the Conversation class would attract around 10-15 learners each night but has since expanded to around 25-35 learners per session. It has evolved from a low-key role play and Q&A session to a high energy English Language games night. Learners from all backgrounds, including Syrian and Sudanese learners, work and laugh together, increasing social inclusion and encouraging a development in English ability.

##### 3. *N.E.S.T Outreach (Thursday and Friday)*

Outreach sessions are a service where N.E.S.T takes the one-to-one English teaching to the Nunsmoor Centre in a suburb of Newcastle, where the previous English Conversation group took place. This rebranding encouraged more learners to join and make it a more accessible session to parents as it was during the day.

##### 4. *N.E.S.T Community (Saturday and Sunday)*

This is the largest service, running between 11am and 1pm on weekends, and typically supports 60-90 adult learners and 10-30 under-18s with the support of 30-50 student volunteers. This huge increase from last year demonstrates the continued popularity and

importance of these sessions. N.E.S.T Community sessions originally used a one-to-one teaching format. However, as numbers grew, needs of the learners were assessed and multiple different classrooms were introduced. These allowed us to provide the most relevant education and encourage learners to help each other. These classes include a grammar class, a beginner's class, a conversation class, a fundamentals class and IELTS support.

#### 5. *N.E.S.T STEM (Saturday and Sunday)*

During the N.E.S.T Community sessions of 2016-2017, childcare was provided for two Syrian families while the parents attended the usual Community sessions. After receiving more funding in 2017, N.E.S.T was able to improve safeguarding and training, and the service was expanded after referral pathways from multiple organisations were introduced. It currently runs alongside Community sessions, in order for parents to continue to receive English acquisition at the weekend. After the introduction of a nursery beside the STEM sessions, N.E.S.T supports over 30 children and babies with a variety of needs. Originally the sessions were designed to introduce basic science and technology topics as most of the children were fluent in English due to being at school. However, as children arrived that did not speak English, it too became a needs-based programme which taught English as well as dealing with the emotional needs of the children.

#### 6. *N.E.S.T Explore (Sunday)*

Explore began in January 2018 and has become one of the most popular and in-demand services that N.E.S.T provides, taking groups of learners on trips throughout Northumbria, the region where Newcastle lies. These trips help introduce learners to free facilities, such as the city library and its resources. Explore also runs larger scale trips, such as the 74-person visit to Bamburgh, a historic seaside town near Newcastle, with a tour of Bamburgh Castle and a boat trip around the Farne Islands to see seals. The project has multiple benefits, including educating learners on Northumbria and its culture, as well as encouraging them to interact with new people, aiding their integration into the community. Volunteers are able to gain new experiences, enhance their skillsets and take on increased

responsibility. As Explore has progressed, we have realised that it has also improved relationships between the volunteers and learners.

#### 7. *N.E.S.T Beyond Barriers (General/Online)*

It is N.E.S.T's online digital platform for teaching English. Lessons are uploaded so that learners can continue to learn outside the lessons. Beyond Barriers was in its early stages in 2017 and the progression in quality of the filming produced is rapidly advancing. In 2018/19, the focus has been on promoting N.E.S.T, making videos about trips and sessions. This has aided volunteer recruitment and funding support. (See Appendix.)

In 2017, due to funding by Newcastle City Council, N.E.S.T took on a large-scale expansion, improving existing facilities, resources and teaching to create a better service and expanding the sessions we provide to respond to increasing need and widen our impact. Since the 2018 LESLLA conference, N.E.S.T have added three sessions:

#### 8. *Magic Mondays (Monday)*

Some of these sessions are designed to increase vocabulary and reading competency whilst others help to aid community integration by increasing employability skills with employability workshops, such as how to write a CV. We have collaborated with academics within the university who provide basic literacy English books for our learners to encourage them to not only improve their oral skills but also their reading skills; this will help to improve their vocabulary as well as their confidence in their English abilities.

#### 9. *N.E.S.T Football (Thursday)*

Inspired by a fantastic football game on Tynemouth Beach which was enjoyed by volunteers and learners of all genders, ages and backgrounds, N.E.S.T football sessions were introduced where both learners and volunteers can play together. This has been very popular, and we hope to work towards creating a league.

#### 10. *N.E.S.T Basketball (Friday)*

Basketball is the most recent addition to the N.E.S.T timetable and has been a fast-growing project. It started with only a few learners and

volunteers but now has approximately 30 regular learners and 10 regular volunteers. These sessions are an escape from the usual classroom environment that N.E.S.T provides and encourages a healthy and fun way to learn English.

### 3.2. Leadership model

N.E.S.T currently has over 30 students in leadership roles that range from working with learners to marketing and creating social media presence. The Project manager oversees the entirety of the project and ensures its progression and sustainability. Below the project manager there are two main sections to the model. The section that manages the actual sessions and the section that deals with the administration of the project. The administration team collect figures of volunteers and learners whilst also dealing with social media outputs. The Operations coordinator supervises the day-to-day running of the project and aids the project leads who run each session independently.

Many of the young refugees and asylum seekers are of a similar age to the majority of the volunteers (18-25). Having a direct demonstration of welcoming and warmth from a peer is incredibly powerful and N.E.S.T provides just that, in a way which is both educational and inspiring for both students and refugees. Students run and lead the project with the input of their peers attending the project. This is completely unique to N.E.S.T and it is what makes this project so incredibly powerful and influential in the region.

### 3.3. Training

There is a training session at the beginning of the year in which new volunteers are given information on the best ways to help the learners. N.E.S.T has had training previously for a few of its volunteers by International House in Newcastle, which was used to help to train the new volunteers as well.

During each session the resources, such as textbooks and word games, are all provided and can be used by volunteers to aid their teaching experience. There is also a project lead at each session that



they can look to for pedagogical advice. First aid training is also given to all students in a leadership position as well as any other volunteer who would like it.

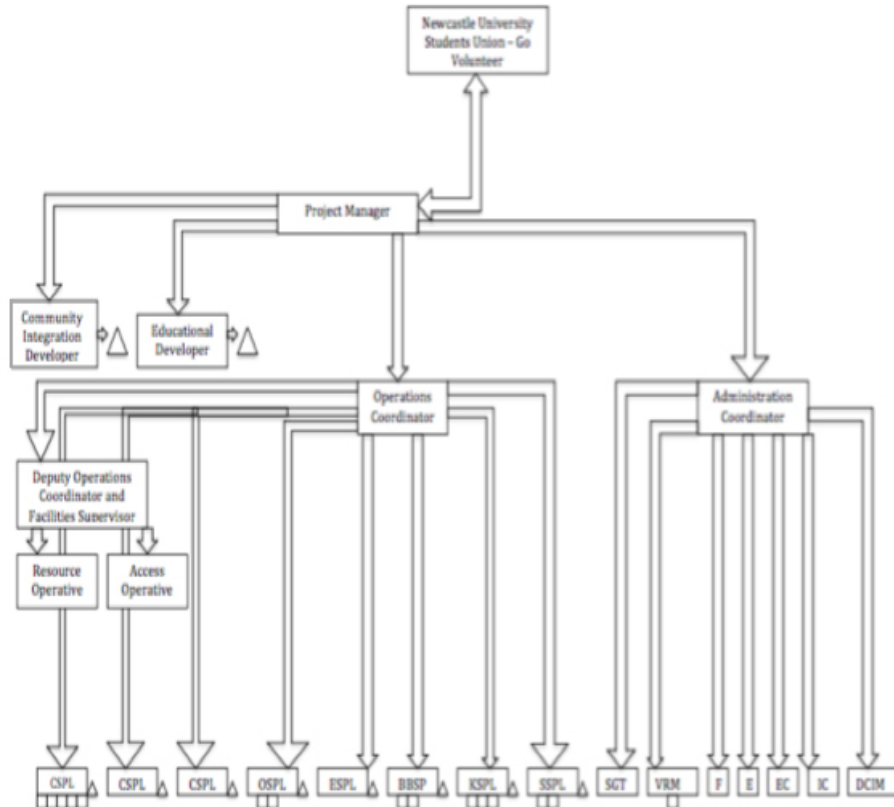


Figure 1. Leadership structure.

### 3.4. Procedures

N.E.S.T implements certain policies and procedures throughout the sessions to ensure the safety of learners and volunteers. This includes a volunteer brief at the beginning of every session where safety procedures are enforced, such as fire risks, as well as not exchanging contact details with learners. This is when the session plan is explained. There is also a debrief after every session, where

volunteers report back to the session leads about any issues they had and discuss as a group possible solutions that need to be employed.

#### **4. N.E.S.T outcomes**

##### 4.1. What impact does N.E.S.T have on learners?

###### 4.1.1. English language provision

The project provides one to one English language support which is available to everyone (including families) seven days a week. Not only does that help to increase the standard of English language amongst members of the forced migration community in the region but it also reduces the need for translators at organisations such as the Job Centre, NHS services or schools, meaning that this money can be used elsewhere, mitigating any negative impact of refugees and asylum seekers. Providing refugees and asylum seekers with the ability to communicate gives them the tools they need to begin talking to their neighbours, speaking with their children's teachers, making friends at school and college, and working towards gaining qualifications and employment.

###### 4.1.2. Regional understanding and awareness

N.E.S.T Explore is a branch of N.E.S.T which takes the learners who attend the sessions into the community and into the region to help them to become accustomed to their new home. The project runs trips to local facilities such as the city library, the local markets and shops and the free museums and galleries. Many of the learners report that simply walking through the doors of an establishment can be the most difficult aspect of accessing support, so we are there to help them make those first steps.

When learners were taken on a trip to the city library, they were showed how to behave appropriately in the library so as not to disturb existing members. They were then helped how-to take-out books and volunteers supported them in signing up for a library card and

accessing the internet. Volunteers were able to take the strain off of the staff by teaching the learners the procedure, so they were able to access life-changing facilities without any negative impact to the local community. N.E.S.T also runs trips using public transport so that the learners get support in how to use the metro and the bus so that they feel confident getting around and there is a prevention of any potential negative circumstances arising caused by a lack of knowledge.

N.E.S.T is also helping its learners to get into areas of Newcastle and Northumberland which are perhaps less accustomed to seeing diverse populations. For example, it took 70 refugees and asylum seekers into rural Northumberland to learn about the local history of the region. They talked with local residents and with local business owners about who they were and what they were doing. They introduced the local community to the learners and facilitated conversations which were warm and both sides reported conveyed a positive reaction towards the interactions.

#### 4.1.3. Immediate reduction in social isolation

At N.E.S.T there is an extremely diverse group of refugees and asylum seekers who attend, as well as an extremely diverse group of students who make up the volunteer base. At every point in the session, both the learners and volunteers are working together and learning from one another. There is a community spirit and despite the vast differences in gender, religion, upbringing, nationality, sexuality, cultural norms and political view, a common goal is shared: to work together to teach and learn English and enjoy each other's company. During a session there is also a break where everyone comes together to have refreshments and talk to one another.

At an average community session there might be 70 individuals, including volunteers and learners, with an age range of 8 months to 75 years and with over 20 different nationalities. It is demonstrated to all that attend and everyone who is informed about this project that it is possible to overcome differences and create forward thinking groups. N.E.S.T is a safe-space for everyone who attends but it can also be seen that the learners are not only connected with each other but are mirroring the internal communities in their own neighbourhoods.

#### 4.1.4. Case Study

Kamal started attending N.E.S.T sessions regularly in 2017. He began with very basic English skills and improved rapidly with the help of volunteers. When asked to write about his time at N.E.S.T, he wrote:

For months, I have looked for places to learn English without paying fees. My friend told me that N.E.S.T. runs a class in Newcastle University. I went there and started to learn English as a second language. As my interests were sparked, I started joining all the sessions regularly. I was impressed by the way the volunteers were able to bear with me at the start as I had made a lot of mistakes. It was amazing. At the start it took a lot of effort from the amazing volunteers and at times from me to learn, but it is clear to me now that I have improved. I don't use it like before, meaning that previously I had to stop and think for a while when I was writing because I didn't know how to say this or that. Let alone writing in English. How was I going to say certain words? How is this number written? Or was my grammar correct? I found help from the volunteers at N.E.S.T they taught me that using English is not as difficult as I imagined. I used English in everyday conversation with people around me and in N.E.S.T sessions. I felt that instead of a foreign speaker of English language I was like the true speakers. I became one of them. My English has improved and my language became good and strong.

#### 4.2. What impact does N.E.S.T have on the local community?

##### 4.2.1. Understanding of local issues

The volunteers know that a large part of the North East population is happy to have refugees and asylum seekers here, but it is also understanding that difficulties caused by cultural differences and perceptual misunderstandings can occur often where there may be deprivation and sudden increases in demand on local services and support. Part of this may come from a lack of understanding of the social norms and typical behaviour which is accepted in Britain. It may also come from frustrated local communities who feel unable to express their opinions without being castigated as racist. In addition, pressure on certain services may increase waiting lists and reduce

available places leaving some members of the existing community feeling unjustly unsupported. The volunteers are aware of the cost of translation services and also the financial consequences for issues such as inappropriate waste disposal. It is understood that specifically there are issues with prejudice against Muslims and N.E.S.T wants to reduce the mistrust and misunderstandings which occur. On top of this, it wants to make the integration which does occur meaningful and not simply organised communication.

#### 4.3. What impact does N.E.S.T have on students?

A total of 320 volunteers completed at least 2 hours (one session) volunteering with N.E.S.T during the 2017/18 academic year. 35% of the volunteers have volunteered on a regular basis (10 volunteering hours or more). Excluding the two project managers, the total number of volunteering hours for 2017/18 is 3923 hours. The project managers have contributed 1,802 hours each this year. This is based on them both volunteering 35 hours a week every week. The 35 hours includes the time they volunteer directly with the learners but also the time spent on the logistics and admin of N.E.S.T. Including the project managers hours it makes a total of 7,527 volunteering hours. To put that into context, 7,527 hours is equivalent to 313.5 days.

To understand the impact on those who volunteer at N.E.S.T, a questionnaire was created. A total of 60 people responded and of those, 15% volunteered 1-5 times, whilst half volunteered on over 20 separate occasions during the academic year. When volunteering, the most popular session was N.E.S.T Community, with 2/3 of respondents having been involved. In contrast, only 5% had been involved in N.E.S.T Beyond Barriers.

During their time at N.E.S.T, all volunteers felt that at least one of their skills had been developed. For every attribute listed, at least half of the respondents believed that they had felt an improvement; the top 3 most selected being communication skills (95%), teaching ability (88.3%) and the ability to work cross-culturally (80%).

The impact on volunteers outside of their employment-related skills was even stronger. 83.3% said that volunteering at N.E.S.T had given them a better understanding of the issues faced by others and

helped them get to know people that they would not have done otherwise, 80% said that N.E.S.T had provided them with a sense of purpose and 75% said that their understanding of different cultures and their confidence had improved.

Please select the option(s) that are appropriate to you. "Volunteering at N.E.S.T has improved my..."

60 responses

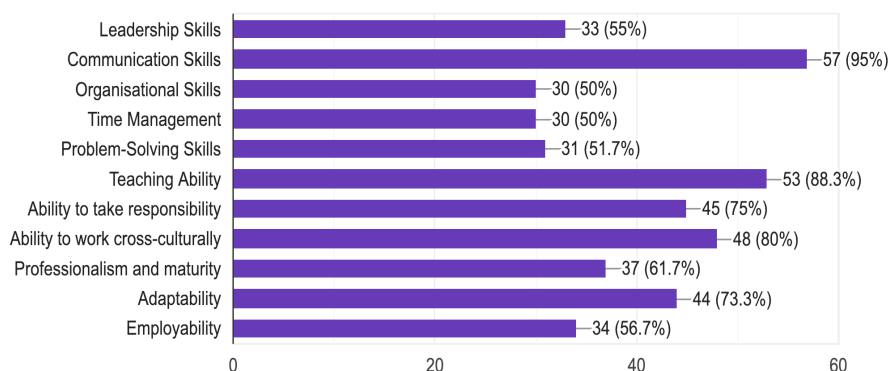


Figure 2. Benefits of volunteering at N.E.S.T survey results.

Dimitris, a student who volunteered for N.E.S.T from its conception says that it is:

One of the most eye-opening experiences I had was when I was helping a learner read a text about celebrities and the cinema and singing industry. Sarah Jessica-Parker, Madonna, Brad Pitt, the Oscars; people and things we have all at least heard of and consider rather universal knowledge. He had never heard of them. And there it struck me, that what N.E.S.T. does is bigger than merely teaching the alphabet and proper grammar. It plays a role in the integration of those people in our society. Obviously, knowing Madonna and the Oscars is not what I mean by integration. How to queue, how to go to the supermarket and find what you're looking for, how to communicate in different occasions. For instance, myself not being English, I realized several times that I needed to ask an English friend about the difference in how two similar words are perceived by the listener, how to find the post office and send a letter, how to go to the doctor, how often should I say "please". At N.E.S.T. we have the fantastic chance to show to

refugees settled in the area how welcome they are and how life is here. To show our solidarity. The key words of our title are “teaching” and “solidarity” and in my opinion, showing solidarity is the most valuable aspect of N.E.S.T. Our solidarity is not expressed through some kind of activism (which I whole heartedly support) but through teaching. Just try to understand what it feels like not to be able to communicate with the people around you and consequently struggling to restart your life. We can only assume what it feels like. And yet, that assumption is more than enough for us, for you, to give a little bit of your time and energy and join us in helping the refugee community of Newcastle and Gateshead. And possibly beyond.

The N.E.S.T volunteer base is made up of around 600 students with around 300 active student volunteers. Putting aside the direct benefit to student volunteers, it is important to consider what it means to have 300 young people who work, study and live in the region to demonstrate first hand integration not only to themselves, the fellow student community (making up a large percentage of the local population) but also the local communities who interact with students. Students who are part of N.E.S.T will leave the project promoting support for the forced migration community and talking of the positive experiences that they have had with them. It is unusual to have such strong support from this demographic. If the local community observes how students are interacting with refugees and asylum seekers, the students may act as enablers for meaningful interactions and they could facilitate the growth and cohesion of the local community.

## **5. What is the future of N.E.S.T?**

N.E.S.T is now at a stage where it is beginning to reach capacity as a completely volunteer-led project. The project manager volunteers around 35 hours every week in order to manage the project and allow it to move forward at the pace that it is currently progressing. Whilst support is needed to fund the project itself, the current priority and absolute necessity is to employ a project manager who can take on the role of running and developing the project so that it can strive to meet its potential in all areas.

With a high increase in the number of children using the service there is a look towards improving the service that can be provided to them and to their families. N.E.S.T would like to introduce a School Liaison Service where they can assist families at parent's evenings and work with teachers to ensure the best care for the children. They are considering offering a more specific service to 13 to 18 year olds where there is a need within the community; opening a youth club style session could help with this. There is also a push to help the children who are multilingual to gain recognition for their communication skills and give them the opportunity to support other children and learners at N.E.S.T, promoting their leadership skills.

N.E.S.T is working towards making it a more immersive experience for learners by working with each individual to set aims and targets and then adapting the service already provided for each of them to help them to achieve this. This is taking time both to implement and to introduce as well as costing more money to divide resources. However positive effects are already starting to be seen in the attitude and motivation of learners and so the aim is to be persistent in establishing individualized practice and also searching for funding to support this.

As N.E.S.T expands there is a determination to maintain a down-to-earth attitude towards service provision and centre all developments around a needs analysis basis. There is a recognition of the large skill set of the learners that attend the sessions and the volunteers understand that the people who know best what they need and are most motivated to and vital in creating change, are the learners themselves. In order to continue to move in the right direction across all session and to honour the community environment which N.E.S.T embodies, across 2019 and 2020 a user-led service would like to be established. There would be an introduction of learner leads for each session who will be a representative for the learners attending that session. This will encourage N.E.S.T to further understand the needs of the learners and help to promote their leadership, team working and communication skills. Eventually this would be replicated within the STEM children's sessions, with the help of the children and their parents.



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## Appendix

### Beyond Barriers Videos

#### *Teaching videos*

- How to make a doctor's appointment: <https://youtu.be/wZbGfDirNFM>  
 How to say hello: <https://youtu.be/W1NwrGKPBEU>  
 How to describe your day: <https://youtu.be/XrDjBjA52Gs>  
 How to talk about sports and hobbies: <https://youtu.be/mPtROCSKmo4>  
 Phonics Lesson: <https://youtu.be/IbIh8GpnpR8>  
 Phonics lesson two: [https://youtu.be/y2q1Rp0PG\\_c](https://youtu.be/y2q1Rp0PG_c)

#### *Promotional videos*

- A day in the life of a N.E.S.T volunteer: <https://youtu.be/L5q7fBxbz8Y>  
 Christmas celebration: <https://youtu.be/fF4tN0S6-fY>  
 A N.E.S.T Explore trip into Northumberland:  
<https://youtu.be/cZGZspWs65U>  
 A N.E.S.T Explore trip to Elsdon:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyVWzkc8amg>  
 A message from freshers at Newcastle University:  
<https://youtu.be/13QE95UUmus>

*Insight videos*

Volunteer leadership training camp: <https://youtu.be/hMS7aRyi0o8>

Insight into volunteer training camp: <https://youtu.be/4LnYm-vKLPI>

One session at N.E.S.T Create: <https://youtu.be/7wz68rWw5Tw>

Children enter national drawing marathon: <https://youtu.be/9eZItv6OmbI>

Attending a conference in London: <https://youtu.be/rBwdIzkw-wE>

Easter party: <https://youtu.be/1D2Pt5976aU>

Behind the scenes volunteering:

Our first year at N.E.S.T: <https://youtu.be/VGklCmJ9v14>

Volunteers describe their experiences at N.E.S.T (year one):

<https://youtu.be/XOKTpLeA7D4>

Volunteer perspective: <https://youtu.be/t67UFIgWd0M>

