

As a steward volunteer, Ray Smith has been guiding and supporting people at Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust's (CCS) large-scale vaccination sites for more than a year. Here the 60-year-old shares the highs and lows of stewarding, the main skills required and how his background in IT has been a bonus.

"I retired early and was already registered as an NHS Volunteer Responder where I did prescription collections for local vulnerable people, so it was a no-brainer when the call came out for steward volunteers.

"My first shift was at the Grafton Centre in February 2021 and I'm still stewarding now, mainly at Chesterton Indoor Bowls Centre.

"When I'm not playing golf, I'm stewarding, and I currently do two to three shifts per week on average.

"It's a good feeling knowing I'm helping others and I'm always happy to discuss any qualms people have.

"There's a great team spirit at the vaccination sites, I've developed a good rapport with the vaccinators, and we've had quite a lot of fun over the year!

"The obvious highlight is the thanks and recognition we receive in the morning team huddle. The NHS staff always welcome the volunteers and give us great credit for what we do. Even though they're wearing blue scrubs and I'm in a hi vis jacket, I feel part of the team and know they look forward to seeing me each morning, so I feel very appreciated.

"In terms of challenges, in the early days it was having to wipe down every seat once somebody had sat on it. When you're vaccinating 700 people a day, that's a lot of wiping; it was non-stop, so we had to be on the ball and work fast!

"One of the greatest challenges was last winter when there was a request for more volunteers to help with the accelerated booster campaign. Sometimes we had six volunteers on a shift, and I was the only one with experience, so I was giving the new volunteers an induction on the job, which was challenging, especially as it was so busy. I was once referred to as the 'volunteer in charge', and I'm pleased to say that many of the volunteers returned, I didn't scare too many away!

"I think the main skills needed when stewarding are the ability to be engaging and good mobility. We're the first person people see when they arrive so saying 'Good morning' or 'good afternoon' and 'welcome' is so important. Most people are unsure what to expect and if they see a big queue, they can start to panic but I'll have a chat with them and try to allay any fears. We still get people coming in for their first jab, especially if they're hoping to go abroad this summer, and we don't judge.

"I generally sign up for two shifts a day so I'm there just before 8am and leave just after 4pm. During this time, I can do anything from 5,000 to 15,000 steps, so being able to stand on your feet for many hours is vital.

"Before I retired, I worked in IT for 39 years, so I'm more than happy to assist the vaccination staff whenever a laptop starts beeping or someone needs help with their emails and Microsoft Teams.

"The busy days are the best days and I always find it rewarding going home at the end of a shift. The camaraderie and sense of pride in getting the job done and knowing that I'm assisting people with their health going forward gives me a smile on my face and I definitely have no intention of stopping just yet!"