

**If you had your Covid vaccination in King's Lynn or Cambridge, it's quite possible you were vaccinated by Connor Ruane. Aged 17 when he joined our team in January 2022, Connor's one of the youngest vaccinators at Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust (CCS) and has been described by his manager as a shining star. Before he left to embark on a Paramedic Science degree in September 2022, Connor shared his story.**

"Had the pandemic not happened, I certainly wouldn't be in the position I am now. Although it's been dreadful, it's given me lots of opportunities, so I do have a lot to be thankful for.

"I initially applied to be a vaccinator as I had such a determination to do something to help and as far as I'm aware, I think I'm the youngest vaccinator in the country. I started when I was 17 and have now been vaccinating for eight months, mainly working six or seven days a week at Shakespeare Barn in King's Lynn, as well as doing four or five shifts a month at the Grafton Centre in Cambridge.

"Working at the vaccination pods was my first job and I came into it with an interest in molecular biology and virology, so being able to help protect against coronavirus was a big incentive.

"My biggest highlight was turning 18 when the whole team sang happy birthday. Being 18 meant I could vaccinate children as well and I've learnt so much from watching and listening to my colleagues, especially Carole, Aime and Angelika.

"The oldest person I've vaccinated was 104 and the youngest was five but a special moment for me was vaccinating my grandfather.

"One of the first children I vaccinated was a young girl who was really nervous and crying, and being able to put her at ease with things like breathing exercises and tapping her on the shoulder, so she didn't know when the needle was going in and then being thanked by her parents, the nurse and my supervisor was a definite highlight.

"Everyone has so much more life experience than me and my colleagues have been massive role models. They haven't just taught me how to vaccinate, they've taught me how to be an adult and most importantly how to talk and listen.

"As a vaccinator, you definitely need to be a good listener. There are two sides to it, you've got the practical side, listening to people if they have any medications or contraindications but also the personal side which involves listening to people's concerns and allowing them to express their feelings and hesitations about being vaccinated. Admittedly I didn't understand how to do that when I first started because I was so young, and I think that's been the biggest part of my training.

"People like to talk and initially I found listening to their stories about cancer diagnoses or experiences of being on ventilators during the midst of the pandemic challenging because I didn't really know what to say but the more it happened, the more I got used to people opening up, and listening has become a highlight and a privilege.

“I’ve enjoyed the social side of the job too – I always say make friends as well as colleagues and there’s a real camaraderie at the vaccination sites. We keep each other’s spirits high and that’s one of the best things about the role.

“The biggest challenge for me has probably been waking up early although having said that I look forward to going to work each day and when my alarm goes off for a shift, I’m straight out of bed! When I work in Cambridge, I have to travel an hour by train, so I wake up at 4am to be there for 8am. I don’t get home until 6.30pm and I usually fall asleep straight away!

“Another challenge has been making sure I didn’t burn out. In April, I was working six or seven days a week but then I completely stopped because I had exams and my driving test. I wasn’t keeping up with my college work and that set me back and there were times when I felt overwhelmed.

“There’s no such thing as an average day – I’ve been fully trained as an immuniser, administrator and steward and am happy to do whatever needs doing even if that’s watering the plants! My main duties involve delivering vaccines, reviewing different medications and prescriptions, reading letters from GPs, highlighting contraindications with the nurses and managing those, making sure I’m following national protocols, communicating with and providing travel advice for people going on holiday, as well as cleaning and general maintenance keeping.

“I’ve always wanted to work in the health service, which was a big thing for me when I did my GCSEs, I loved science and it’s inspired me to do a lot with my career.

“I’m about to start a three-year Paramedic Science degree at Edge Hill University and after that I’m hoping to move to The Midlands to study medicine for four years. My dream is to go into the helicopter emergency services one day but one thing’s for sure, working at CCS really has set the standard and my future career has a lot to live up to!”