

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck in 2020, Karen Dear was furloughed from her job as a dance school teacher. Eager to do something to help, she began volunteering in her local community and was inspired to join the biggest vaccination programme in NHS history in January 2021.

Fast forward a year and after working at several of Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust's (CCS) large-scale vaccination sites, the 57-year-old explains how the experience resulted in her pursuing a career in the NHS.

"When we went into lockdown, I began volunteering for my local community in Cambourne, Cambridgeshire. We had a community group that organised food banks, shopping for people who were isolating etc, and then in January 2021 I saw I could take that a step further and join the NHS vaccination programme, so I applied for a band 3 administration role.

"I hadn't had an interview for 16 years because I'd been in the same job for a long time, but I thought 'I can do this'!

"Previously I'd worked as a teacher for a large dance school however that was very much hit by Covid and lockdown, so classes had to stop, and I wanted to put my time to good use.

"I started my new role in March 2021 and was based at The Priory Centre in St Neots, Cherry Hinton and then Eaton Socon; in addition, I also worked at a couple of mobile vaccination sites in Hills Road and at The Hub in Cambourne.

"I really enjoyed being part of something that felt as though I was helping us as a country fight the Covid battle and I felt proud to be making a difference in my own small way.

"Being furloughed and in lockdown meant I'd spent quite a lot of time on my own and it was nice to be out there and doing something to help.

"Although we were fighting something quite negative, there was always such a positive atmosphere in the vaccination sites, and I loved the camaraderie.

"I'd built up lots of transferable skills over the years in my role as a dance teacher, especially interpersonal and communication skills, and they all proved useful in this public-facing role.

"I initially found it daunting understanding the workings of the NHS and being in a clinical environment, and I used to have a funny feeling in my tummy when I went to a different site, but I soon got over that.

"Whilst working at the vaccination sites, I took the opportunity to complete my Care Certificate and through this, I was put in contact with Julie Nicholson, Large Scale Vaccination Retention Programme Manager at CCS, who opened my eyes to the various roles and opportunities across CCS and the NHS in general.

"Last autumn, I embarked on a temporary, part-time role with the CCS training and education team which I've really enjoyed, especially since my background is in teaching and training. I was made to feel so welcome and loved being part of the team and getting to understand the NHS more and how it works.

"Although I could have taken on the training role permanently, I've recently accepted a new full-time role as a ward clerk on the maternity unit at Bedford Hospital.

"It wasn't an easy decision however I'd always been interested in being a midwife so that was a big draw for me. On top of this, my four children have virtually left home, so the house

is very quiet, and I felt I needed to be out and about, meeting people and being in a buzzy environment.

“At the moment, training is all done online via MS Teams so I’ve been working from home, and although it’s not lonely, I feel that at this stage in my life I need to be amongst people - I suppose you could say I have empty nest syndrome!

“My advice to anyone considering a career switch like me is to understand how the NHS works and research the various roles and opportunities available as there are so many.

“I think knowing what you don’t want out of a job is equally as important as knowing what you do want, for example, I knew I wanted a public-facing role but equally I didn’t want to be doing shift work.

“The NHS Jobs website is really informative, and I’d encourage anyone in a similar position to reach out to the retention team as they really helped me.

“It’s a big change when you’ve done something for so long and I feel quite emotional about it all. In one way it’s sad because like so many people, something I’ve done for so long has been hit by Covid however I got to the point where I needed to turn the situation into a positive and the future is definitely looking brighter!”

The CCS large-scale vaccination retention team provides information and guidance to support large-scale vaccination (LSV) staff to move into other roles within the NHS and care sector.

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