

Former primary school teacher Rachel Smith has been working as a vaccinator at Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust's (CCS) large-scale Covid vaccination sites for 15 months. Here she explains how she got involved with the most successful vaccination programme in NHS history, the highlights and challenges of the role and why it's led to many a trip down memory lane.

"After I left teaching, I took on a bank administrator role with the schools' immunisation programme, which involved going into primary schools to help with giving the children's nasal spray flu vaccine.

"When the Covid vaccination programme started up, I was transferred over on bank to assist but, because I've got a background in first aid and I'm a type 1 diabetic which means I'm quite used to needles, the nurses I was working with said, 'You can do this, why don't you train to be a vaccinator?' so I decided to go for it and was trained up within a month!

"It's been fantastic to be part of the vaccination effort. 18 months ago, the general population was very down about this dreadful virus, and nobody could do anything about it, so it really felt like a massive step forward.

"When I started vaccinating, we had all the older folk coming in and they were like Russian dolls brushing the snow off their coats. It would take us ages to get their clothes off because they had so many layers on, but everybody was just so positive, it was magic!

"Some folk came in dressed up to the nines, they had ex-army uniform and regimental ties and cuff links and tie pins, and many of them hadn't been out for a year and they were so polite and respectful.

"I was initially based at CCS' large-scale vaccination sites at Castle Quarter and Attleborough and I now work at City Hall in Norwich where I'm on a fixed-term contract and do a 12-hour week.

"Yes, there have been challenges but we've just got on with it and always found a way to overcome any obstacles with plenty of teamwork.

"The vaccination sites have posed their own challenges. It's very odd, for example, when you go to get things out of the clinical room and above you are the old grills from the Chicken Shack, or you're going down to the basement to get equipment and you're in the back of a shopping centre. It's like something out of a thriller movie where you're going down into the bowels of places and are faced with these massive lifts and doors.

"In terms of the various cohorts, the people we find most challenging now are the ones who for one reason or another delayed having their first vaccine and now want to go on holiday and are frustrated because we can't give them their second vaccine in a timescale that fits their plans.

"Vaccinating the little ones is different again but I'm finding that okay because of my teaching background; I know the sorts of things children are into and can talk about what they're studying at school.

"We do get people who are needle phobic and I had a lassie who fainted the first time round and when she came back for her second dose she asked if I was going to be vaccinating her again and I said, 'Yes, I'm really sorry about last time' and she said, 'No, if you're here I know I'll be alright!' so that was really rewarding.

"There have been so many little highlights and it's usually the people you know you've really made a difference to. I remember very early on vaccinating an elderly gentleman and he was

absolutely fine, but after I'd vaccinated him, he started to cry and I said, 'I'm so sorry if I've hurt you' and he replied, 'It's not that, my wife died two days ago from Covid'. It was good to be able to comfort him by telling him his wife would be so glad he was getting himself protected.

"During the past 15 months, I've vaccinated some parents of my primary school friends, ex-teachers of mine who are all in their seventies and eighties now, people who I was at school with as a teenager, and also some of the children I've taught. It's been like lots of different parts of my life coming back to meet me and amazing how many people recognised me after many years!

"In terms of transferable skills, the ability to deal with people and especially children who are worried has been helpful. As a teacher, you quite often have anxious parents because they're worried about their child or people who can be quite cross about something that's happened. Personal skills and the ability to interact with people, reassure them, and give them confidence are very transferable, as well as being very organised and detail conscious.

"Caring for and looking after others has been part of my family values from childhood and I have no intention of stopping vaccinating yet. I feel a great sense of pride working for the NHS; it's interesting the number of people who when I tell them I'm working for the vaccination programme say, 'That's amazing, what a great thing to be doing!'

"There are always frustrations in any job, but I've found the level of professionalism among the NHS staff to be amazing, and the teamwork amongst everyone at every level, including our amazing volunteers, a really positive experience. Without exception, the nurses I've worked with have all been caring and welcoming to those of us with no previous NHS background, and it's been a real privilege and the perfect way to step away from teaching and still feel like I'm doing something very worthwhile."