

If you've had your Covid vaccine at the Grafton Centre, you may be familiar with the Where's Wally illustrations inside the pods. Added as a bit of light-hearted fun and to aid relaxation, these were the brainchild of Alex Prosser-Snelling.

As HR Director for McDonald's, Alex works with restaurants all over Europe and in his spare time he's been working as a volunteer vaccinator at Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust's (CCS) large-scale Covid vaccination sites.

Here the 44-year-old father of two explains how people skills are key to both roles and how volunteering with CCS has challenged his thinking, as well as the pride he feels being part of the NHS.

"During the first year of the pandemic I volunteered with a local organisation which I co-founded called Royston vs Coronavirus which involved picking up shopping or medication for people who were self-isolating, and then when the vaccination programme was rolled out, I became a volunteer steward with the Royal Voluntary Service and another local organisation in Hertfordshire called Communities 1st.

"I was inspired to help after seeing the disruption the virus had caused both across the UK and internationally and I wanted to do everything I could to contribute to the solution.

"Whilst stewarding I wondered if it would be feasible to become a vaccinator and I applied to St John Ambulance and went to Norwich to do some training. I don't have a clinical background, so it was all new injecting oranges and learning how vaccines work but the combination of e-learning and hands on training that St John Ambulance and CCS provided was very thorough.

"My first shift was at Chesterton, and I was vaccinating within half an hour! Since then, I've done most of my shifts at the Grafton Centre, but I've also worked at Eaton Socon and Wisbech. I work from home and am quite flexible, so I've always fitted volunteering around work and tend to do a weekend shift, as well as an evening shift midweek.

"Before Christmas when there was a big push on boosters, I did a lot of shifts, and it was great to see CCS Trust senior management working in the vaccination sites too - there's always a real team spirit.

"On a good day, I've vaccinated between 100 and 120 people and the public's gratitude has definitely been a highlight and comes out in different ways. There are the people who are very nice to you, it's often the older ones who are just so polite and really go out of their way to thank you and that's lovely. But what's nice is when you get someone who's terrified of needles or has a very complicated medical history or a condition which is difficult for them to deal with, and which can be challenging for you too, and you manage to get them vaccinated. It doesn't really matter if they say thank you or not because you know you made a difference for them on that day and that's rewarding.

"Whether working in my regular job or at the vaccination sites, people skills are essential. It's important to be able to put someone at ease and understand very quickly how they're feeling and be able to respond accordingly. Essentially, it's judging whether to crack a joke or whether you need to be very serious and professional.

"Having a bit of international and intercultural sensitivity has definitely helped too. I remember vaccinating an elderly Muslim lady and we found a way to connect and talk to each other mostly based on smiles and sign language.

“The gift of working at CCS has been the diversity. I’ve vaccinated people aged 12 to 92 and met people from all walks of life and that’s challenged my thinking!

“Vaccinating staff and volunteers at the vaccination site has definitely been a highlight and a privilege. It’s always rewarding doing that for them because they’re there helping, and it feels a bit like you’re going to get your homework marked when you’re vaccinating another vaccinator, so I’ve always enjoyed that!

“In terms of challenges, the main one is pace. One night at the Grafton Centre, I was doing Moderna boosters, and I was getting through lots of people, but I kept glancing at the queue and realised it wasn’t going down, and I figured out I was the only one vaccinating that evening!

“The problem is you’re keen to go fast but you can’t do it any less well, you can’t skip a question or not click a box on the computer or get your vaccination technique wrong so it’s hard balancing pace with quality. At the end of the day, quality always wins, so if we need to stop and ask the clinical lead a question, we’ll stop and talk to the clinical lead, we don’t assume it’s all ok and carry on. The most important thing is getting everything right, regardless of whether we’re holding up the queue.

“Sometimes when you’re volunteering you might go home wondering if it really was useful, however when you’re working at a vaccination site, you have people telling you what a difference you’ve made every two and a half minutes, so it’s very positive.

“Has it inspired me to think more of the NHS? Yes definitely! I feel hugely inspired seeing the NHS from the inside, especially the commitment to quality and patient care.”