

Self-confessed people person Claire Shearer has been volunteering at our Dereham large-scale vaccination site since last July.

Here she explains what inspired her to get involved with the fastest and most successful vaccination programme in NHS history and the highlights and challenges of being a volunteer.

"During lockdown, I found it hard being away from my new grandchildren and thought if I helped with the vaccination programme it would enable more people to get vaccinated quicker.

"I started volunteering as a steward in July 2021 through the Royal Voluntary Service and have been volunteering two or three times a week when shifts are available.

"My husband's got cancer and I've also had cancer, and I promised both him and my daughter that I wouldn't put myself at risk.

"Whatever the weather, I've been outside greeting people and once a taxi driver gave me a box of Heroes chocolates; he'd been dropping people off for their vaccinations and said: 'It's always you, you're always outside!' We've had cupcakes given to us too, it's lovely and does make you feel appreciated.

"When I first started, somebody came up to me and asked: 'Who does the vaccine?' and I said: 'The people inside' and they said: 'It's not you then?' and I said: 'No, I'm a volunteer, I'm going to guide you in but I don't actually do the vaccinating' and I think they were so relieved I wasn't going to be out in the corridor sticking needles in people!"

"I find volunteering very rewarding, especially when people arrive who are terrified of needles, and I watch them walk out having been vaccinated and they give me a thumbs up – it's magic!

"One of my highlights was when a young girl arrived with her boyfriend and he came up to me and said: 'My girlfriend's in the car, she can't get out but she's desperate to have the vaccine'. I went into the vaccination site and came back out with one of the nurses and we managed to reassure the girl quietly and calmly; she was so chuffed when she left having been vaccinated and that made it all worthwhile. Fear is a horrible thing and fear of injections is awful, so it's always a highlight knowing you've helped someone get vaccinated and seeing their bravery.

"In my stewarding role, I've dog sat, child minded and even kept a young lad's motorbike safe and wiped it down when it was raining – just being able to help out and feel useful makes me feel good.

"The main challenge has been keeping calm if people are rude. When the vaccines changed, we had quite a few unhappy people who wanted to have Pfizer for their booster, and we were offering Moderna. They were frightened I suppose of having something different and some were aggressive. I also had to turn people away when we weren't offering walk-ins and ask them to book an appointment which didn't always go down well.

"I'm definitely a people person and worked as a dental therapist for many years. During this time, I saw lots of anxious patients and helped to allay their fears.

"When I got breast cancer four years ago, it gave me numb fingertips, so I had a forced early retirement, but I wasn't ready to be thrown onto the scrapheap and volunteering is a great opportunity to feel useful!

"Whilst stewarding, I've seen some of my patients turn up for their vaccinations and it's always nice to see a familiar face. In addition, I've met lots of new people from all different walks of life.

"We're lucky in Dereham as the whole vaccination team is lovely, and I've met some very interesting people who have stories to tell.

"We're now vaccinating 5-11-year-olds, and someone has made amazing tabards for the staff to wear - I wore a unicorn covered one at the weekend and another steward wore a Spider-Man mask. We're doing all we can to make it as pleasant an experience as possible and staff have donated some lovely colouring and reading books.

"It's been a pleasure volunteering with the vaccination programme – seeing people coming out of the vaccination site with their sticker and smiling is priceless!"