

**John Barlow has worked with Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service (CFRS) for more than 35 years and over the past year he's dedicated his free time to volunteering at three of Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust's (CCS) large-scale Covid vaccination centres. In recognition of his efforts, John was delighted to be invited by the Duchess of Cambridge to attend a Christmas Carol Service at Westminster Abbey to celebrate the incredible work of individuals and organisations across the nation who stepped up to support their communities during the pandemic.**

**In January 2022, John was recruited by CCS on a fixed-term contract to vaccinate for 16 hours a week at Queensgate in Peterborough. Here he shares what inspired him to get involved with the vaccination programme, as well as the challenges and highlights of being a volunteer.**

"I started volunteering in January 2021 at Peterborough City Care Centre. My wife is a retired midwife and she'd also applied to work on the vaccination programme and was talking to somebody who said they were looking for volunteers to help with stewarding and she suggested I put my name forward. Coincidentally, at the same time, CFRS were also asking if any staff would be prepared to help with the programme. The Fire Service had adopted a flexible approach to work patterns as a result of Covid and, providing line managers could see that essential activities were being maintained, they were content for staff to assist at the vaccination sites.

"I began volunteering for 2 or 3 days a week which involved meeting and greeting, screening people at the door to check whether they'd had Covid in the last 28 days, showing people into the waiting area and the pre-assessment rooms, directing them to the vaccination rooms and then keeping an eye on them for 15 minutes in the post-vaccine observation rooms.

"For many people, coming to the vaccination centre was the first time they'd been out of their house for nearly six months and they were so pleased to have a chit chat. I must admit I was equally pleased to get out from behind a screen and talk to people face to face as my role as Emergency Services Mobile Communication Programme Manager with CFRS meant I'd spent many months on video calls with colleagues, so it was fantastic!

"A little while later, I had the opportunity to train with St John Ambulance to become a volunteer vaccinator. My first shift was at Peterborough Showground, and it was quite daunting to begin with! I began vaccinating in May and by then the vaccination programme had ramped up at quite a speed. Bizarrely I was paired off with the healthcare professional who used to work with my wife on the children's ward, so she monitored me and assessed my vaccination technique and I think I'd probably administered several vaccines when she let me fly solo.

"In terms of challenges, the main one has been dealing with people's anxieties, so having good communication skills and empathy has been key. We've had people with needle phobias and others who didn't really want to be there, so it's been important to encourage them and let them know the benefits of the Covid vaccination programme and make them feel at ease.

"Working as an operational firefighter for more than 30 years meant I was used to meeting and dealing with people at the worst times of their lives and in what could be stressful situations for them, so I was able to transfer this experience to the vaccination site whenever people were feeling wound up and anxious and needed to be treated with kindness and compassion.

“One of my funniest highlights was when we started vaccinating 12-18-years-olds and a brother and sister came in and just as I was about to vaccinate the girl, the brother kicked her chair and went “Ouch!” The girl jumped up and fortunately I hadn’t put the needle in, but she slapped her brother across the face and that was quite amusing!

“Vaccinating entire families has been a highlight too. One day we had five Nepalese ladies who were married to Gurkhas all come in at once with a single interpreter, and a colleague and I vaccinated all five of them in the same pod.

“I’ve also vaccinated a few people I know, some of whom were surprised to see me in scrubs instead of my usual CFRS uniform!

“It’s been uplifting to witness the public’s gratitude towards volunteers, and I’ve felt heartened by the friendliness and appreciation from NHS staff. Working with like-minded people from the Royal Voluntary Service has been very enjoyable and I find it very rewarding going home after each shift knowing I’ve made a positive contribution.

“In December I was stunned to be invited to attend the Duchess of Cambridge’s carol service at Westminster Abbey. The Fire Services in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were all asked to nominate a person who they thought had helped during the vaccination programme and I was selected to be the representative for England!

“The Chief Fire Officer had nominated me and I never expected to hear anything again and then out of the blue, I was on a Teams call and my wife brought an envelope to me with Buckingham Palace on the postmark; I opened it and there was an official invitation from the Duchess of Cambridge, and it blew my mind.

“I was a couple of metres away from William and Kate and it was an experience I shall cherish forever!

“In March 2022, I tested positive for Covid-19 but fortunately I’d received all my Covid vaccinations, including the winter booster, and I suffered nothing more than a mild sore throat for a couple of days. After 5 days I tested negative, so the value and benefit of the vaccination programme really has made a difference to me.”