



ENJOYING THEIR ROLES – Sarah and Ian, volunteers at the vaccination centre in the United Reformed Church



FULLY JABBED – Yavor and Tsvetelina after receiving their boosters

# Volunteers keep vaccine clinic going strong

by Aysha Gilmore

**THE number of people being vaccinated has dropped since the Christmas booster surge in one of Woking's main vaccination centres.**

The clinic at Woking United Reformed Church (URC) was vaccinating more than 2,000 people a day in December, although this has fallen to 400 since the start of January.

"The numbers have dropped significantly," said Tahir Hussain, director pharmacist of FastHeal Pharmacy which operates the centre. "Although this was expected as everyone was told to have vaccines before Christmas."

The increased vaccination uptake in December was a result of the government's scheme to offer everyone a booster before New Year, which was influenced by the spread of the Omicron variant.

When the centre was first opened at URC, it was thought it had the potential to vaccinate around 800 people a day. Tahir said that due to the increase in demand they had to find ways to refine their system, by increasing the number of volunteers and even removing chairs to make the process faster as the clinic ensured thousands of people received protection against COVID-19.

The vaccination centre was formerly based at St Paul's Church and moved to its current venue in White Rose Lane in September, where it is open six days a week.

The centre offered vaccinations for both appointments and walk-ins and during that peak period Tahir said the bookings would fill up within 20 minutes.

Site manager Fleur Chan said: "From September to the new year we were so busy, it was fantastic. We had queues of people and we had fully booked appointments, we got through a lot of patients and did well for the programme."

A range of efficiency measures kept everything moving. Fleur joked: "I had a foghorn, ordering people in the queue up and down the road."

Both Tahir and Fleur put the success of the local booster drive down to the loyal 450 volunteers who made the programme possible.

Retired primary school teacher Ian Hay started volunteering at the St Paul's vaccination centre nine months ago. He said the most enjoyable aspect of volunteering at the clinic was the Woking public.

"Sun on my face, a bit of banter with the punters, brilliant," he told the *News & Mail*. "You can't ask for a better life."

Others, like retired childcare worker Lesley Streeter, joined the centre at the end of November, as things were ramping up.

"I was looking for something to do, and what nicer



READY TO GO – Farzana prepares a jab for Emma

**THE vaccination centre is open Monday to Saturday, from 9am-5pm. Booked appointments and walk-ins are available.**

**The centre is a three-minute walk from Woking Railway Station, or there is free parking on the top floor of nearby Heathside car park for people getting a jab.**

**The clinic is now offering COVID-19 vaccines to 12 to 15-year-olds, who will need to be accompanied by a parent/guardian.**

**To book or for more information, visit [www.facebook.com/fasthealpharmacywoking](http://www.facebook.com/fasthealpharmacywoking).**

thing than to help people come along and get their jabs, I have absolutely loved it," she said. "It was manic. You could do a four-hour shift and it would absolutely whizz by because it was so busy, but everyone stepped up and nobody wasted even a second. "Mostly people are really grateful. They say thank you, a lot of people go away and bring back food, a box of biscuits or sweets."

Emma Bentley, a part-time singing teacher, has worked as a vaccinator at the clinic since May. "I re-



READ ALL ABOUT IT – Tahir Hussain, director pharmacist of FastHeal Pharmacy, provides Bruce with a booster information leaflet



PLANNING – Site manager Fleur with Nyasha, who is the centre's clinical lead



WALK IN TIMES AVAILABLE – Inside the vaccination centre

ally wanted to do something in the pandemic to help. I have delivered around 9,000 vaccines now. I didn't realise I could do so many.

"I get sent a lot of the nervous patients because I think I'm quite good with them," she said. "You get people with needle phobias and past medical traumas. I enjoy being able to put their minds at ease and give them a positive experience, so they don't have any fear around getting a vaccine."

Emma stressed it was important for everyone to continue with the vaccine programme: "If someone is needle phobic that is something we can deal with, and we can navigate that correctly to give them a positive experience."

The centre has an active social media presence, including a video walk-through of the vaccine site and pictures of volunteers and vaccinators, to make it as accessible as possible. For all the hard work, there is still a need to encourage people to come forward and increase the local vaccination uptake.

Of the 11 districts in Surrey, Woking borough is in the bottom tier in terms of uptakes of booster jabs and vaccinations in general.

Tahir said the lack of booster uptake in Woking could be due to misinformation on social media platforms, and not communicating an effective message to all the ethnic communities who live in Woking.

"Our vaccination site has volunteers from a range of cultural backgrounds. A lot speak Portuguese, Punjabi, Urdu and Romanian," he said.

He feels the diversity of the URC centre can be used to prevent misinformation to communities that may be disconnected. "By having healthcare professionals with the understanding of both the clinical background of the vaccine and the Woking community, we can liaise an effective message to people who haven't already come forward for a vaccine," he said.



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