

"Engineers will always be needed in the NHS and an engineering apprenticeship is one of the best ways in."

An engineering apprenticeship in the NHS was the perfect choice for Chris because he's always been interested in mechanics. He's now in a permanent role and loves knowing he's contributing to making patients' time in hospital as comfortable as possible.

Chris Barnett

Engineering craftsperson (and former apprentice)

Employer or university

Newcastle Upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust



How I got into the apprenticeship

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I've always been practical and hands on – even from a young age – and my hobbies and interests played a big part in making me realise some sort of mechanical apprenticeship would be a good step for me. I wanted a career where my job and interests intertwined.

Both my Mum and Dad are engineers. My dad's a production engineer and Mum was a quality auditor. She saw a leaflet about apprenticeships in the NHS so I applied and it was great to find something I enjoy straight from school.

The NHS provides an excellent apprenticeship programme with great training and support.

Coming into the apprenticeship I had some mechanical knowledge, and I've gained skills and practical experience so that I'm now involved in bigger jobs and projects.

What I do

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My role consists of maintaining different services in the hospital, including ventilation, steam services, heating, domestic water and drinking water, as well as bigger projects such as full ward refurbishments.

I enjoy it because you can be doing a completely different job each day, working on different pieces of equipment in different areas of the hospital. For example, today I checked the heating system in our dental hospital, which was turning itself on and off. I stripped the system back and reinstalled it. Later today I'm scheduled to carry out quarterly maintenance on the catering ventilation system.

The hospital provides a 24 hour service, and I've worked on large 'shut down' jobs where the whole steam service in the hospital is shut down so we can carry out maintenance and repairs during the night.

I went on quite a few courses through my apprenticeship – sometimes for up to a week at a time – to learn about different maintenance activities and the correct operating procedures for different systems.

I became more independent and trusted to carry out certain jobs around the hospital unsupervised, and I've been offered a position as an engineering craftsperson in the estates department.

The best bits and challenges

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The best part of this job is knowing I'm contributing to making patients' time in hospital as comfortable as possible.

I don't work directly with patients but sometimes have to do mechanical tasks near their beds, so it's important to be friendly and chatty. I got a cheer when I arrived on the wards with air conditioning units during the heatwave!

My proudest achievements so far are winning a regional apprentice of the year award and the Institute of Healthcare Engineering and Estates Management National Apprentice of the Year Award 2022. They felt like recognition of the hard work I've put in.

I enjoyed being involved in recent water and steam shut downs at the trust - both big and important projects. And I'm proud to have been commended by the head of our estates department and the trust chief executive.

COVID brought big challenges and we could only work with those on our shift pattern. This was difficult because it meant covering the whole site in smaller teams and we worked different shifts, including weekends.

Life outside work

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I've loved motorbikes since I was nine years old! In fact, it's where my interest in mechanics stems from and I loved engineering subjects at school. I still maintain bikes and get out for a ride every weekend. So you could say I'm now doing what I like at home as well as at work!

I like to keep generally active, and belong to a gym.

Career plans and top tips for others

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I love what I do and the contribution I make to patient services. I've recently been offered an engineering craftsperson role and would love to progress to a supervisor role.

I'd like to study for a degree in mechanical engineering, possibly through the trust's scheme of going to university one day a week. Getting a degree would enable me to progress into a managerial role in the future.

Doing an apprenticeship was the best decision I've ever made. Through the NHS, an apprenticeship can lead to a job for life and there are some colleagues at my trust who are ready to retire now but started as apprentices in the 1980s!

The training and support available is phenomenal. The qualifications you gain are impressive, as well as the knowledge you gain from learning on the job with experienced colleagues. And the NHS has a great reputation for apprenticeships which is always helpful when applying for jobs.

Engineers will always be needed in the NHS and an engineering apprenticeship is one of the best ways in.

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