



Meadows Farm Vets - Winner

Q1. Work Conditions: supporting staff in dealing with the demands of their job

As a farm animal only practice, our vets spend the majority of their time working as individuals on farm both during working hours and when on call. Consequently we have several mechanisms in place to protect and support them as a team: satellite tracking of vehicles to monitor visit progress especially when on call at night and to update farmers with estimated arrival times instantly; clinical directors available on the phone at any time to discuss cases; crushes and handling systems available for hire by farmers to make working on farm safer and more efficient for vets, farmers and animals; freedom to report concerns informally or formally without recriminations; dynamic diary booking to ensure that emergencies are attended within an hour, delays are reported to farmers, and bookings moved when specific jobs take longer than expected;

We also provide protocols for dealing with difficult clients during induction and support from the directors with respect to individual cases as they arise. Younger inexperienced vets are sent on “good outcome” visits initially to boost their confidence and build their reputations with the farmers. “Difficult outcome” visits are distributed between senior vets until the younger vets are deemed ready to deal with them, usually sooner than they think! Much of our work involves TB testing which can be very demoralising so the tests are equally shared out between all the vets: this means that if a farm is shut down, it is likely that a different vet will test there next time reducing the emotional burden on the initial vet by not making them responsible for the next test result. It also reassures the farmers that the vets are truly impartial by providing different vets, who are still very familiar with the farm, to detect reactors using the same testing methods. Vets are encouraged to take regular breaks, for example walking their dog between farms, as well as given time for refreshments, for example a cup of tea on farm, wherever possible. If the diary is stacking up, all vets are willing to assist by taking on extra jobs so that everyone finishes at a reasonable time. Each vet is provided with a van to call their own with plenty of working equipment so that they can do their job properly: calving jacks, surgical kits, stomach pumps, IV fluids, cow-side test kits, scanners etc. Sharing equipment is discouraged and vets can request new, novel or replacement equipment easily.

Since the vets are mostly out of the office, we implement a very informal relaxed atmosphere at the office to encourage team formation and bonding: generally the vets discuss what they have seen and done that day with whoever is in the office, sharing their thoughts and concerns whilst mulling over treatment options or previous farm histories. Vets who have had a particularly tough day are contacted by one of the clinical directors informally to make sure they are ok and specific one-on-one time is offered if they need to talk.

Q2. Balanced Workload: supporting work-life balance

The working day is set from 8am to 5pm (no regular appointments at weekends) so that vets can finish on time and pursue activities outside of work if they are not on call. The on call rota is 1-in-4 (summer) or 1-in-3 (winter) with 2 vets on call at any one time: thus sharing the responsibility and work load during busy periods (lambing & calving in the winter & spring). If the vet has worked a weekend on call, the following Friday is a half day with 1pm finish. The on call rota is set several months in advance so that everyone can plan around it with regards to social commitments. It is very simple to swap on call with colleagues if necessary: just arrange the swap and report it to the clinical director. If the vet on call has had a particularly busy night or weekend, their diary is rearranged to give them the lightest work load. This also applies if they have had an early start on farm. Time off for doctors appointments etc is allocated freely when notice is given so that holiday entitlement is not used up unnecessarily. There is also some leniency for doing household tasks during the day: for example popping to the supermarket or bank during working hours if there are no outstanding visits. All the vets live close to the surgery so that they can nip home for a change of clothes/shower if they have been on a particularly pungent or putrid visit.

It is not always possible to schedule everyone to have lunch at the same time, or even altogether, so vets are encouraged to phone the office when they are taking a break so that the office can manage visits accordingly. At least once a month, lunch is provided at the office either for a staff meeting or pharmaceutical rep visiting to present a "lunch and learn" meeting.

All the staff know that the practice is keen to promote a good and fair work life balance: commitments outside of work are equally supported and encouraged, for example collecting children from nursery, attending church, supporting local groups like Young Farmers or Farmers Club with presentations, engaging in charity work.

Tea and coffee facilities are provided with every member of the team taking a turn to provide baked goods weekly. Vet students are also included in this rota and strongly encouraged to take part in staff meetings and clinical discussions where suitable. There is also the opportunity to use the fishing ponds, sit quietly on the patio area near the koi pond, and walk dogs in the fields around the practice, even if the vet in question has no dog of their own. (Clean) dogs are encouraged in the office and vans to keep the vets company.

Q3. Relationships at Work: fostering effective working relationships

Since the majority of work takes place out of the office and on farm, extra emphasis is placed on making sure that when the vets are in the office, they can discuss cases, build relationships and work as a team. Because we are such a small group, there is a simple hierarchy of directors, clinical director and assistants. The directors are always available either in person or on the phone, and there is a separate office at the rear of the practice where staff members can voice concerns or issues in private.

When problems have been highlighted, the directors take prompt action to address them and if suitable, make sure that the rest of the team is aware of the issue and steps taken in order to prevent history repeating itself.

Candidates applying for employment are carefully interviewed and every member of the team has an opportunity to chat to them and the chance to give feedback or express concern to the directors in confidence. When a particular personality has changed the office atmosphere for the worse, the directors will try to remedy the situation which may in one extreme case, mean helping the person to find alternative work in a more suitable environment. Generally the office environment is very informal and light with a reasonable mix of work and non-work related conversations.

We organise a Christmas party in November, attending a black tie dinner at a local 5 star hotel for the Farmers Club Dinner Dance where many of clients get awarded cups at the annual prize giving. It's really important for our staff to see our farmers successes and we try to publish as many as we can on social media as well as telling the vets so they can pass on congratulations to the farmers on their next visit. Staff also get a hamper or turkey as well as a cash bonus at Christmas. Bonuses are also awarded when the practice has pulled together through a sticky patch.

A large part of the practice is branding and brand awareness: cow print. We support and exhibit at many local agricultural shows which involves the vets setting up and manning our stand. This year, we won Best Tradestand, Most Attractive Agricultural Trade Stand and Best Overall Stand at every show, including the Royal Three Counties Show. These accolades would not be possible without our highly enthusiastic team being on fire all day at the shows, having arrived early in the morning to set up, and usually leaving late at night after packing up (and a quick team drink in the bar).

Every couple of weeks we arrange informal drinks at the local pub for whoever is around and available. Again some of our farmers frequent the same establishment and its good for the practice for farmers to see the vets in less stressful situations. As part of being accredited under RCVS Practice Standards, we have staff meetings at least once a month or upon request.

Q4. Personal & Career Development: enabling staff to work effectively

Development and support starts on the first day of employment: all staff undergo an induction process using a booklet created by the practice, but commented on and improved by each vet who uses it. All vets are supervised initially to ensure they find their way around and are introduced to farmers with younger vets getting an extended period of support. The most effective way we have found is to get the new vet to shadow as many different vets as possible on “good outcome” visits to build their confidence and reputation. This makes the existing vets value their colleague’s progress and be proud of their achievements through teaching. Once working alone, they are also initially sent on “nice” visits to begin with. Occasionally the supervising vet will be found lurking near the farm without the younger vet knowing, so that help can be provided quickly but the appearance of independence is maintained. Support is offered from all colleagues and directors alike. In order to monitor progress, we use a very visual system of a star chart on the office wall: this allows vets to track their own case load, see what other vets have done or achieved proficiency in (decided by the director or supervising vet) and meet the targets set by the directors in terms of learning procedures. It also lets the diary administrator fairly allocate visits and book suitable vets whilst on the phone to the farmer.

As much CPD as possible is organised in-house so that all vets can benefit: for example bull soundness testing. If someone attends an outside course, they present a summary to the rest of the team soon after arriving back so that skills are shared out. Vets can suggest CPD they want to attend and lots of support is given if a certificate is chosen.

All staff have regular formal reviews twice a year with a written report. They are also able to approach the directors at any time to discuss career and personal issues, or give feedback to the directors without fear of recrimination. Exit interviews are performed so that the practice can learn and improve on areas that may not have been previously reported.

Farmers are usually reluctant to give positive or negative feedback directly to the vet at the time of the visit and some wait to contact the director at a later date. All feedback is given back to the vets by the directors, sometimes after careful editing or using constructive comments that may not have featured in the original conversation so that it is useful not damaging to the vet concerned. Particularly negative feedback is always given in private but very positive feedback is given in front of the rest of the office.

Accreditation under RCVS Practice Standards has also provided a robust framework for training and mentoring

Q5. Control at Work: enabling staff to have a say in their work

The practice was initially set up with a single director who was also principal veterinary surgeon. In recent months, the husband has also joined as a director, as well as continuing their role as practice manager. In essence, the practice is run primarily by a wife and husband team. This has the potential to be very daunting to assistants and so every effort has been taken to make sure that the team can approach either director about any issue at any time.

Regular staff meetings have an agenda set by the directors with plenty of time at the end for any queries or cases raised by the staff. Everyone has an equal say and points are debated fairly and without persecution. The whole practice has the chance to state their position and can approach the director informally after the meeting if they prefer. Together practice policies and protocols are created and adjusted to reflect changes. The director has the ultimate responsibility for enforcing policies and protocols but each vet has clinical freedom within this framework to deal with cases in a non-prescriptive manner. Cases with severely negative outcomes or ones that raise interesting issues are dealt with during Mortality & Morbidity meetings in a no-blame environment: the presenting vet briefly outlines the case and what they did, everyone chips in with suggestions and the director summarises how to move forward and what changes will be made.

Huge emphasis is placed on shared workload: in order to make this fair, there is only diary that everyone works to and visits are generally booked by the admin or vet at the diary desk. However vets can freely phone up and forward book work or request case continuance or even internal second opinions easily. "Good" jobs are equally shared out with "less good" jobs so that no one vet does all the scanning nor all the TB testing.

Each vet has some degree of responsibility: for example, one vet runs the Flock Health Club, another is in charge of the Controlled Drugs cupboard for a set period, another suggests a client meeting and takes responsibility for setting it up, advertising it, running it and staffing it with internal/external speakers. The director makes a point to encourage every vet to do this at least once and is very prompt with assistance and congratulations.

Major changes are discussed at staff meetings, for example regarding the rota or employing new assistants. Everyone's opinion is taken into account but the ultimate decision rests with the director, who will take the opportunity to explain the reasoning behind it and make sure that everyone is on board. The directors listen to all staff requests although not all will be granted.

Q6. Communication at Work

Undergoing the Practice Standards Scheme in 2012 and again in 2017 made the directors use the framework provided and embellish it to work for the practice. Regular staff meetings with minutes are circulated for everyone to check and comment on, and there is always time at the end of a meeting to bring up cases or concerns.

When staff changes occur, the rest of the team are informed in a timely manner that is sensitive to the person concerned. Inevitably there are periods of demanding work to cover a colleague's absence but the team know that the directors are very grateful for this: through verbal acknowledgement, team meals out and cash/food bonuses.

The aims of the business are summarised in the letter inviting staff to formal reviews and regular updates are given throughout the year of various projects as they arise. Staff are kept informed of the progress of the business, new clients gained, new contracts set up etc.

Having a small communal office space is very conducive to sharing updates about cases and clients. We specifically organise the diary so that all vets have some office time before 5pm to write up notes, return phone calls and manage cases in an informal environment. Typically as each vet returns to the office, they make a cup of tea and chat to whoever is around about what they have seen and done that day. This informal system creates a very lively environment where vets can ask for assistance and discuss issues without creating tension. More sensitive issues can be discussed in private with a director, usually on the same day. The main office is in the same space as reception so that farmers can see the vets and ask questions to get prompt advice. There is usually a vet in the office throughout the day, so they can also respond immediately to farmer queries during phone calls.

The director's office is set back from the main area so that she can get on with the majority of the business of running the practice in the background, whilst still being able to see the main reception and office through a series of windows. This means that the staff can approach her at any time, but she can also create a confidential and private meeting space for sensitive issues. There is a staff noticeboard for information about staff outings, holiday bookings, the on call rota and other non-practice related business. Cards from farmers are also put on this board for all staff to see. New products and interesting articles can be put up here by any member of staff at any time. It is next to the kettle but out of sight of clients.

Regular newsletters are sent out to clients and staff are keenly encouraged to contribute articles or newsworthy items. They are able to submit photos of cases and outcomes for publication on the practice social media accounts, with credit being allocated.

Q7. Health & Psychological Wellbeing

The nature of farm work is physically and mentally demanding so the practice makes sure that work is evenly distributed. We are unique in that we have a number of crushes, handling systems, crates etc that we can hire out to farmers, or get the vets to tow behind their vans, to use on farm to create a safe and efficient workplace for farmers, animals and vets alike. Vets have the complete and unquestioned support of the practice if they decide to halt a job or request assistance, even if in hindsight it was unnecessary. No vet is superman and everyone needs help occasionally. Inevitably injuries occur so all vets have private health insurance, including optional counselling sessions, and a comprehensive absence policy so they are aware of their rights and how the practice will support them. Instances involving broken bones have required prolonged absences with vets sometimes being restricted to the office, or encouraged to take a holiday in order to recuperate. Occasionally the personal life of a vet has split over into the practice and the directors have taken every opportunity to go above and beyond to support their employee in both work and personal situations. Staff are encouraged to talk to the directors in confidence and the directors make sure that they are aware of changes in staff behaviour that may alert them to potential issues in terms of wellbeing.

Whilst baked goods and biscuits are popular at the office, fruit and other snacks are occasionally provided. As mentioned previously, the practice is surrounded by fields and there are plenty of willing dogs wanting to be walked. It is possible to get away from the direct environment of the practice to a quiet patio area near the koi pond, or further down the field to some stocked fishing pools (where one of our previous vets and his dogs were often found!).

The directors have taken great care to build a team that supports each other with colleagues willing to assist at busy times, and the directors putting themselves out personally to help individuals with personal circumstances. We are very proud of this and the environment created at work. If all work has been completed ahead of closing, vets are encouraged to go home early. If work remains undone, vets are quick to volunteer to help so that everyone finishes at a reasonable hour.

Whilst there are no specific mindfulness initiatives promoted at the practice, the directors work hard to provide plenty of time of complete work so that at the end of the working day, 5pm, vets still have the energy and enthusiasm to pursue their own interests. Suggestions from staff for team activities are always considered and supported by the directors if suitable. As a small and well-formed team, we value our time spent outside of work as individuals as highly as we enjoy our time at work.