



Viking Vets - Winner

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

Veterinary work will always be challenging but we have put in place measures to reduce this. The vets consult for a maximum of 3 hours with breaks added in where needed, decided by the vet. Our appointments are by consultation only, which leads to a more predictable day and we can spread the workload. Our shortest consultations are 15 minutes. Receptionists and nurses are trained to triage on the phone so if anything sounds like it may need a work up they will be encouraged to come in sooner rather than waiting until evening surgery as this could mean working beyond our 6.30pm closing time.

We are fully supportive of part-time working and many of our team members have reduced hours to help with their work/life balance, and spend more time with their children and pursue other interests. All vets, except the new graduate vet, work part-time, and we are still able to maintain client continuity by bonding the clients to individual vets, which reduces the stress for the vets. By increasing client satisfaction, we increase job satisfaction. We have five experienced vets and one new graduate who is on an easier rota, which means she is able to pick up work if the other vets are running behind. This put less pressure on the new graduate, and helps the experienced vets if they run over on appointments.

Over the past 17 years we have collected some beloved but challenging clients. Any client that staff are finding too demanding or difficult to deal with is seen by the head nurse or senior vet as soon as possible. Team members are empowered to resolve issues and know they will be supported in the choices they make.

We have closed our books for new registrations when the workload has become too great. This is to prevent the stress resulting from too high a workload. It shows the team that we take their concerns seriously. Our existing clients loves the fact they belong in an exclusive club!

The practice is situated in an old building but we have managed to incorporate air-conditioning (a god send for women over 40!) and have large, airy consulting rooms where clients can bring the whole family in with their pet. We have separate cat waiting and consulting rooms, thereby causing less stress to cats and allowing the vets/nurses to deal with calmer pets.

We have built a peaceful garden room where the team can go for breaks and lunch. It is also used for appraisals and private conversations. There are no phones or doorbells, just the quiet tinkling of the water feature outside. This has enhanced the working environment, providing a dedicated, peaceful space for staff to get time out from the busy working day.

At no time is anybody left in the building by themselves and home visits are always conducted by two staff members. Everyone's safety is a priority and we never want anyone to feel uncomfortable.

Q2. Balanced Workload: supporting work-life balance

Obtaining a balanced workload and an appropriate work-life balance is a fundamental aim for all of our team and everyone is supported to achieve this. We work hard to create a culture of teamwork where everyone helps and supports each other.

We could have later opening hours and could be open longer on a Saturday, but we have made the decision that we would rather look after the team than have extended opening hours. We have also outsourced our out-of-hours work while still retaining our overnight care for in-patients. They are cared for by the owner who lives on the premises and the new graduate who works four night shifts per month.

All vets, except the new graduate, work part-time. There is a lot of flexibility in accommodating everybody's individual circumstances especially as life changes with the demands of a family and the rota is adjusted in the school holidays. We have found that mothers with children who work part-time are not only very effective, but very happy to be in an environment with people who listen to them! We are also able to reduce our use of locums as the part-timers can take on more work while others are on holiday. The clients are happier seeing a familiar face even if it is not their usual vet.

Each vet has a dedicated ops morning, where they will book their own ops in, having continuity in the case load gives a higher job satisfaction, than having to pick up cases from other vets.

We do not just take account of family demands, but any team member who wants to pursue outside interests like Rugby or filming will be accommodated in consultation with owners.

The nurses work a four-day week. They work different rotas each day, which gives them a variable job, with an even spread of early, mid and late finishes throughout the week. The head nurse is responsible for the nurse and reception rota. She is very flexible in swapping shifts to accommodate personal needs. We also have a tick list for each rota on display, so people can see if anybody is running behind and can help out.

Breaks and lunch are enforced unless we are dealing with a major emergency; the vets have one hour for lunch, while the nurses and reception staff have a shorter lunch but additional breaks in the morning and afternoon. The owner sets an example and does not work between 1 and 2pm. Staff are more relaxed and happier when they have had their lunch break so the day runs more smoothly.

We have dedicated cleaners, which reduces the amount of cleaning the nurses have to do and shows that their time and clinical skills are valued.

There is time set aside to do quiet work away from the busy reception for nurses and receptionists, rather than trying to fit it in amongst everything else. This allows them to concentrate on a task without interruptions and complete jobs that otherwise wouldn't get done.

Q3. Relationships at Work: fostering effective working relationships

We want to enjoy coming to work, feel we have a purpose, that our opinions are listened to and that we develop our clinical skills as well as our life skills. We achieve this by having a clear culture within the team. Ours is CARE. Clinical resolution, Affirmation, Reward and Emotional wellbeing. This involves every level of our interaction, with our patients, clients and with each other. To achieve this we need to nurture strong relationships among team members, and have ample opportunities for communication.

We have a daily ward round at 8am to hand over any inpatients to the nursing team and catch up with the admit team. There is also a huddle every day at 4pm. This is an opportunity to bring the whole team together. We review the day's operations, discuss what has worked and anything to look out for, as well as plan for the next day's operations and any other issues that anyone has. It is during this time that we also celebrate birthdays. Each team member is responsible for one colleague's birthday cake and card, which is presented during the huddle. These daily meetings allow everyone to feel included in the team.

We have our garden room for time away from the practice, which allows the team to have lunch together and build relationships that are not work-related.

We recently had an interesting workshop on personality types for the whole team. This highlighted how different personalities prefer to be communicated with and how people can be misunderstood due to a different way of communicating. It was a bit of an eye-opener for most of the team!

The monthly practice meetings are an opportunity for the team to get together in the relaxed home space above the practice. Home-cooked lunch is provided by the owner and as well as communicating important aspects of our jobs it is a chance for the team to interact.

We have a social committee that organises four events a year. Examples of things that we have done include ceramic painting, go-carting and cocktail mixing. We have been given donations from clients that have gone into the social fund and the owners also put money in after busy periods. It is also important to be mindful of the fact that not everybody wants to socialise outside work so there is no pressure to attend these events.

We have a wild Christmas party at the practice where the reception becomes a cocktail bar, and the prep-room a disco. The team had the option of having this at an outside venue but chose to have it here. In the summer we have a BBQ in the garden for all staff and their families.

We have just started crafternoons on Saturdays. Two people are making dresses for the Christmas party and others are learning to knit. This is another opportunity to socialise outside of work hours and get to know each other in a casual environment – as well as learning new skills!

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

Our profession is an endlessly changing and challenging one. We need staff who want to learn new things. It is also important to review what does not work well so we can improve and avoid repeating mistakes. CPD is funded for all team members and new knowledge is brought to the whole team so that we all benefit.

All new team members have a personal induction plan. They have a chat with the owner at end of the first week and then monthly for six months. This is so that they can raise any concerns, especially regarding additional training requirements, as well as receiving feedback on what they are doing well and where there may be room for improvement.

We have appraisals every 90 days. These are positive, with the aim of discussing what each person wants to do and how this can be aligned to benefit the practice. If we have a team member who is underperforming this will be dealt with at the time rather than being saved up for the appraisal. There may be personal reasons for underperformance, and if that is the case we will be supportive and look at changing job responsibilities. However, it can be very stressful for a high-performing team to have somebody who is 'slacking' so this is dealt with by the team leader.

Student nurses have time set aside with their Clinical Coach, where they are able to work through their NPL and set their weekly work targets.

We have taken on our first new graduate vet this year who has her own mentor. She has an easier consulting schedule in which she only consults for 1 hour at a time when the other vets are available for extra support.

All vets are encouraged and supported to develop their own area of interest. Our monthly Mortality & Morbidity meetings are also great CPD opportunities as cases that have not gone according to plan are discussed, and changes are made and implemented.

The owner of the practice is a vet but has attended leadership courses after recognising that a veterinary education does not necessarily provide these skills.

We have monthly Lunch and Learns for the whole team, which are another opportunity for CPD. We use both external and internal resources as well as web-based lecturers. These provide experience of learning about a specific topic in detail.

We offer many rewards for staff. At the end of every monthly practice meeting we have the Prosecco award. A bottle is given to somebody who has achieved something special. There are normally at least three awards per month. Everybody receives a Christmas hamper to show that they are appreciated for their hard work. There is also an Easter egg for everyone at Easter and a gift from the owner's annual holiday. Our Petplan practice vouchers and health plan bonus is shared out among the team. Wages are reviewed annually to ensure that everyone is being fairly paid.

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

Over the years a great deal of energy has been put into cultivating and protecting a working culture that benefits everyone from the clients to employees and the partners of the practice. One important part of this stems from giving everyone in the team both the autonomy and support that is needed to allow them to flourish.

Being a small, independent practice, we are lucky that everyone can have a voice and part of our culture stems from embracing new ideas both from the top down and the bottom up. It doesn't matter who has presented the idea, be it the managing partner or a trainee – It is presented to the team as a whole, discussed openly and if agreed to be of benefit to the practice and the team, due to our size and a lack of bureaucracy, it can be quickly and efficiently implemented.

The array of weekly and monthly meetings (see communication at work) is where this usually happens- It is an open forum where people are given the opportunity to influence and express opinions thus contributing to the overall strategy of the practice. The agenda list for the meeting is open; so anyone may put forward ideas about what is discussed at these meetings.

We nurture a no blame culture. Team members are encouraged to be considered but confident when making decisions and taking on responsibilities, safe in the knowledge that they will be supported if anything were ever to go wrong. Junior members of staff have mentors assigned who are likely to have “been there and done that” and can give advice and support whenever needed.

Every team member has a job description for their area of responsibilities in which they have autonomy to make decisions. These responsibilities have been assigned based on personal interests and are reviewed annually. Team members are empowered to manage their areas of responsibilities with minimal to no top down interference. We reject micro-management at all costs however senior members of staff are always at hand to run things by if ever needed. The head nurse organises the weekly rota for nurses according to individual special interests; for example some love clinics while others prefer operating or carrying out X-rays.

We recently introduced laparoscopic equipment into the practice. One of our senior vets, headed this up and was given freedom to assess all options, negotiated a deal and implemented the training and HSE. We did the same earlier in the year when we replaced our ultrasound equipment, giving the task of sourcing the equipment to the people that would be using it.

When we employ new team members current staff are all able to meet the shortlisted candidates during informal morning or afternoon chats with the team. We then all vote on the best candidate to ensure that we employ someone who will fit in with the whole team as it is in everyone's interests to make a success of new staff members.

Q6. Communication at Work

Daily

The daily morning ward round brings everybody up to date with the in patients. At four o'clock in the afternoon we have our daily 'huddle', here the ops are discussed, inpatients reviewed and any other daily issue discussed. It is a 10-20 minute standing meeting, but it is very effective in bringing front and back of house together and preventing fragmentation of the team.

Weekly

The head nurse and deputy nurse have a weekly meeting to make sure the nursing and reception team are working well. Any problems are dealt with either on an individual basis or brought to the monthly nurse or practice meeting. The head nurse then also has a meeting with the senior vet/owner. Clinical coaches and students also have meetings to review their progress in the NPL and set the next week's work.

Monthly

Every month the practice is closed on the last Friday of the month from 12 to 2pm for the nurse/receptionist meeting, clinical meeting and practice meeting. The clinical meeting and nurse/receptionist meeting run concurrently before the whole team comes together for the practice meeting over home-cooked lunch provided by the owner. There is an agenda list up in the nurse's office throughout the month so that everybody can write down any points that need to be discussed at the next meeting. The practice meeting is an opportunity for the team to discuss, decide and delegate what we need to do. We also have some regular headings: Service- where the monthly feedback forms are discussed, HSE- there are always an interesting topic from the Head nurse, FFS (For Fucks Sake), this is generally repeat offences like not washing up your cup, smelly loos, lunch wrappers in the clinical waste etc. We end the meeting on a happier note with the monthly Prosecco awards. A summary of all meetings is written up and circulated to staff, and individual actions arising are put up on the notice board.

Monthly Lunch and Learn makes sure we all sing from the same hymn sheet regarding everything from flea treatment to put to sleeps.

Every month there is also a Mortality & Morbidity meeting for the vets and senior nurses. This is a no-blame discussion of areas that have not gone according to plan and a chance to suggest changes that can be implemented. The meeting focus on problem solving rather than fault finding.

Annually

In December we have an annual review meeting where the practice is closed for three hours. Prior to the meeting opinions are sought from all team members regarding new investments, new services and monthly campaigns. The meeting is a chance to review and reflect on the year, thinking about what has worked and what has not. We also discuss next year's plans, including new services, team development, new investment and our financial targets. We organise the monthly campaigns for the following year and discuss and who will take charge of each one. A big home-cooked lunch is again provided by the owner.

Q7. Health & Psychological Wellbeing

Everybody in the veterinary world is prone to emotional stress and vicarious trauma that can lead to compassion fatigue and burnout. We openly discuss difficulties and promote a strong team working environment where everyone supports each other.

Team members have a back-to-work interview with the owner after any period of sickness. This is to make sure they are fit to come back to work, assessing if any changes to their work need to be done and if there are any work-related issues that are contributing to their absence. We also pay staff during sick leave.

All members of the team are given free personal medical insurance when they have been with us for six months. This means they can access medical care quickly if they need to, thereby reducing unnecessary worrying and stress. We also insure up to three pets for the team members. This reduces the stress involved in worrying about costs when pets get ill, especially if they need to be referred.

Everybody is encouraged to have lunch in the garden room to get away from the hustle and bustle of the practice. This allows people to get a bit of fresh air and have a break in a quiet, relaxing environment. If the weather is good, the garden is beautiful and enhanced by the relaxing sound of the water feature.

We have started to operate a fear-free practice (for the pets!). More fractious pets are sedated rather than wrestled to the ground, which leads to less physical injuries, bites and scratches, and enables a calmer working environment as the pets are more relaxed.

All accidents are recorded and discussed under the HSE heading in the monthly practice meetings. Near misses are also noted and any changes that can prevent them are implemented. We have all been trained on manual handling, thereby reducing musculoskeletal stress and strain and have monthly reviews on HSE incorporated in our practice meeting.

Team members are able to bring their dogs to work, and we have a small doggy day care for the team's pets. This means that staff can interact with their animals during breaks and don't have to worry about leaving them at home.

One of our receptionists has attended a course on bereavement, which covered how we deal with our clients and patients, and also how we look after each other. We openly discuss difficulties we have had, especially around putting animals to sleep and having to deal with distressed owners.

We sadly lost a dear colleague to pancreatic cancer a year ago. She chose to work until two weeks before she died (we had offered and encouraged her to take any time off that she needed). She had been at Viking for 15 years and was part of the family. We were all deeply affected by this, and have spent time raising money for cancer research, by participating in Race for Life and Wear it Pink. We light a candle at every practice meeting in her memory.