

Helping vets to be masters of their own destinies

The Veterinary Edge hears how a new company is embarking on an ambitious programme to open practices in co-operation with like-minded people – and looks at the first one in Cheshire.



What should you do after a corporate buys out the multi-centre practice in which you're a partner? Stay on as an employee? Retire to the south of France? Or put the money into a new business to help vets who want a stake in a practice to get started?

Following the sale of the

practice to VetPartners in 2018, three former partners from the Willows Veterinary Group in Cheshire and surrounding areas (not to be confused with Willows Referrals in Solihull) embarked on that third option. Endowed with an entrepreneurial spirit, they didn't want to work for anyone else and have branched out on

their own, setting ambitious goals and opening their first practice in September.

Vets Sean Cleary and Richard Thomas, along with chartered accountant Jane Platt, have set up North Star Vets with the aim of having at least 10 clinics running within five years.

Jane is a local farmer's



The team at Burford Lane Vets (from left): Hannah Downie, RVN and receptionist; Ashlee Crook, joint head veterinary nurse; Dr Pieter De Villiers, director and lead veterinary surgeon; Jane Platt, finance and people director; Dr Richard Thomas, property director; Dr Sean Cleary, clinical director; Gemma Scott, joint head veterinary nurse; Maxine Hackett and Georgie Richards, receptionists.

daughter who, after graduating in economics from Cardiff University, qualified as a chartered accountant in Liverpool with PwC and later moved to a local firm of accountants where she became a partner.

The Willows group was one of her clients and Jane moved there as practice manager after the birth of her son in 2000. In 2010 she was made a partner, an unusual step at the time for a veterinary partnership but her appointment strengthened the group's financial and head office functions.

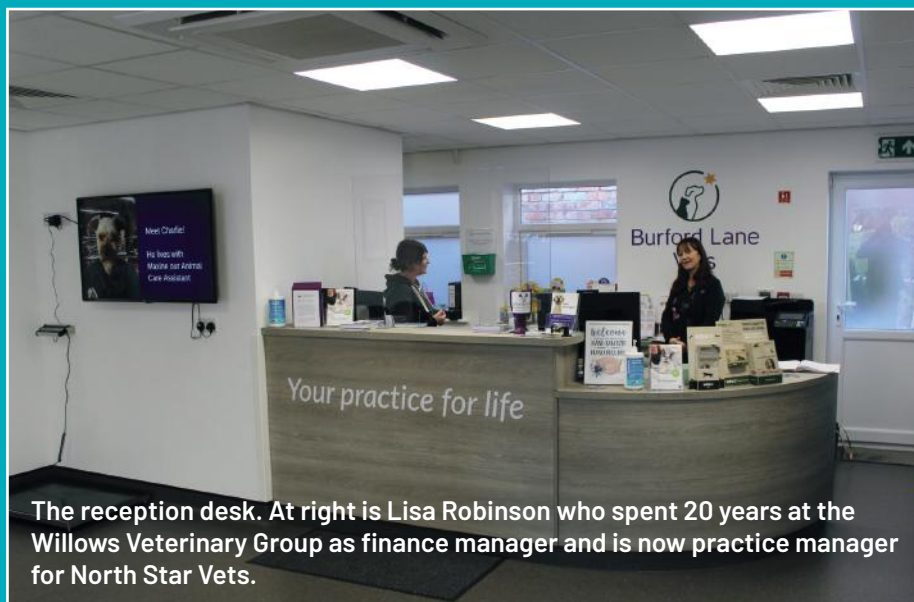
The first North Star practice, Burford Lane Vets, on the outskirts of the historic town of Lymm in Cheshire, will be followed by two others in the same county – one a refurbishment of a retail unit, the other a new build – in the spring of 2022.

The head vets at each practice will be given an equity stake in their practice without any capital investment, as part of the trio's aim, as they put it, "to give the next generation of vets an opportunity to own their own practice".

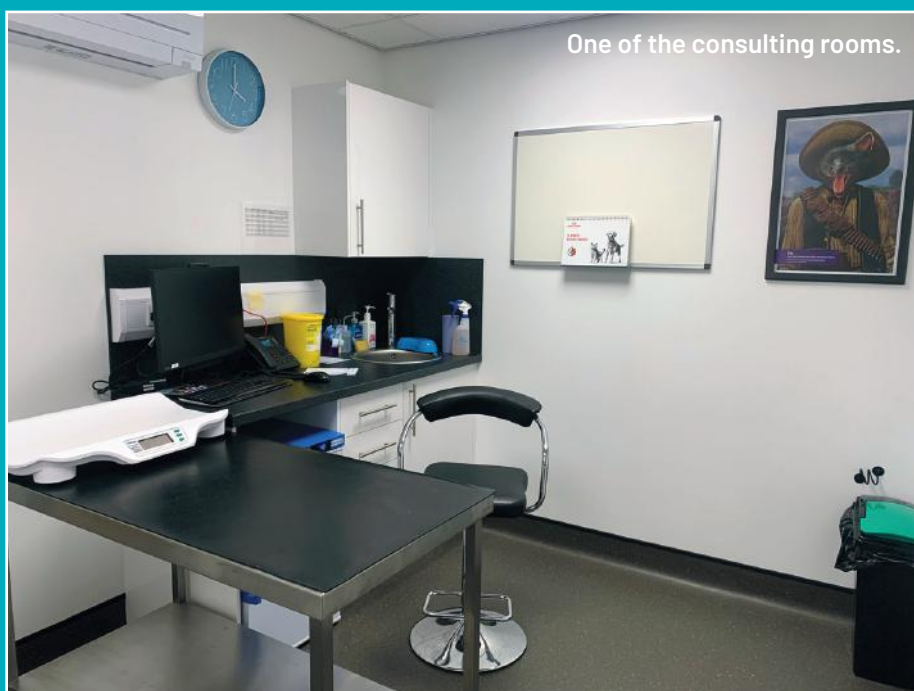
The trio have very clear ideas on the way forward. They don't want to invest in property and will lease premises, the Lymm site being leased from the owner of the training centre next door; nor do they want to do things on the cheap and have spent close to £500,000 setting up this first practice.

They want to give independent vets their heads and will maintain a light touch with each practice, handling such matters as HR and health and safety, with a management fee based, they state, on the real costs and considerably lower than the standard industry charges.

"Our aim is to set a practice up, get it running and then move on to the next one," says Richard, who qualified from Bristol in 1989, later joining the Willows group on the large animal side and becoming a partner in 1997.



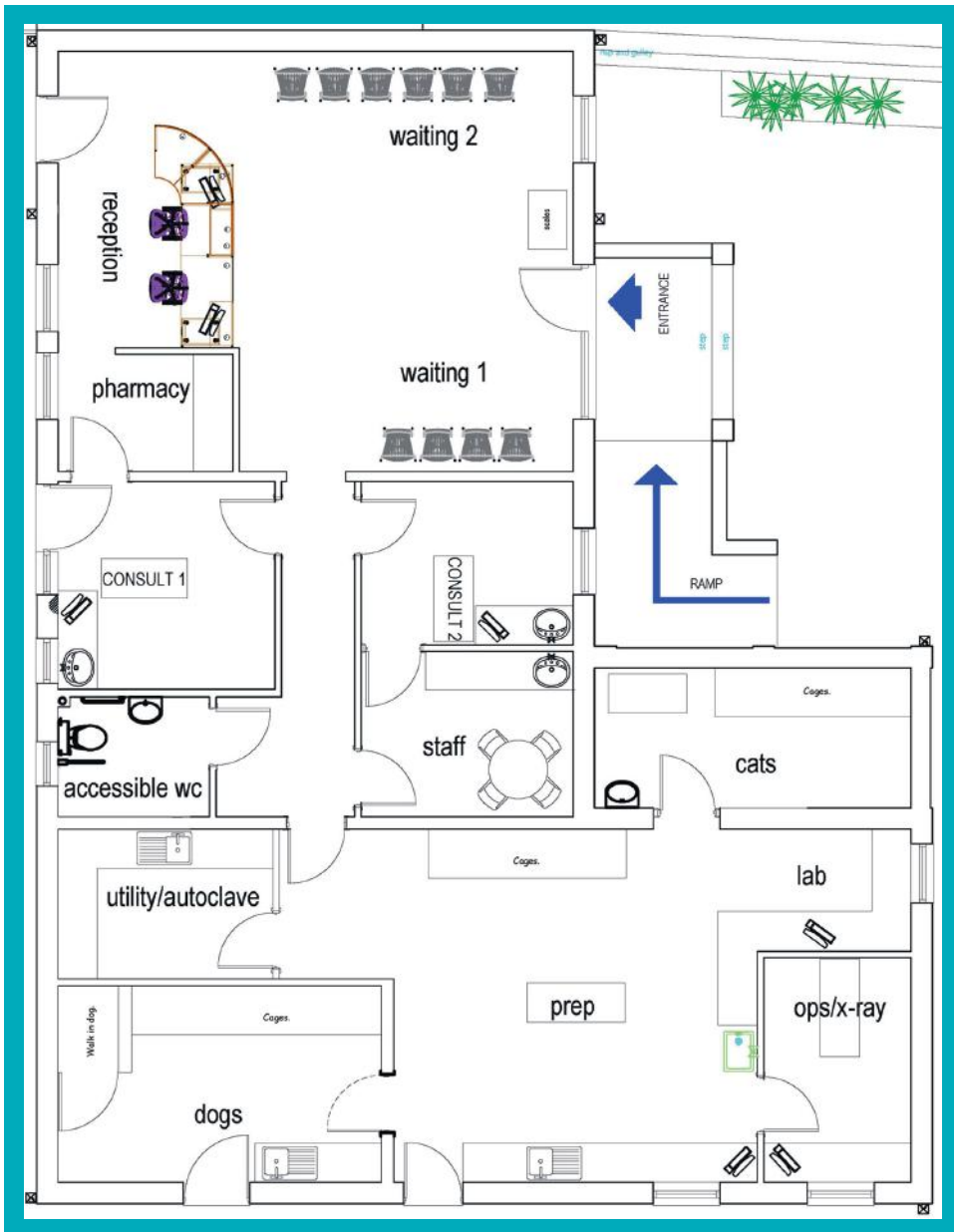
The reception desk. At right is Lisa Robinson who spent 20 years at the Willows Veterinary Group as finance manager and is now practice manager for North Star Vets.



One of the consulting rooms.



Burford Vets' operating theatre with x-ray and processor from A. Somerville.



to take their careers as far as their drive and personality will carry it."

"It's a great model for younger vets," says Sean, a graduate of New Zealand's Massey University who completed a postgraduate qualification in finance after finishing his veterinary studies in 1999. He and his wife came to the UK in 2002 on the traditional Kiwi two-year adventure but liked it so much they stayed. He joined the Willows group at the end of 2002 and became a partner in 2006.

"Our vets will benefit from our many years of clinical, financial, human resources and procurement experience and have the opportunity to add the finishing touches to a practice where no expense has been spared on the fit-out and equipment.

"Everything from finding a property, negotiating the lease, fitting out the practice and health and safety is taken care of. It means our equity partners can enjoy being fantastic vets and reap the financial rewards that brings, and we are here to support the practice and take care of all the administration, procurement, marketing and everything else that goes into running a successful business.

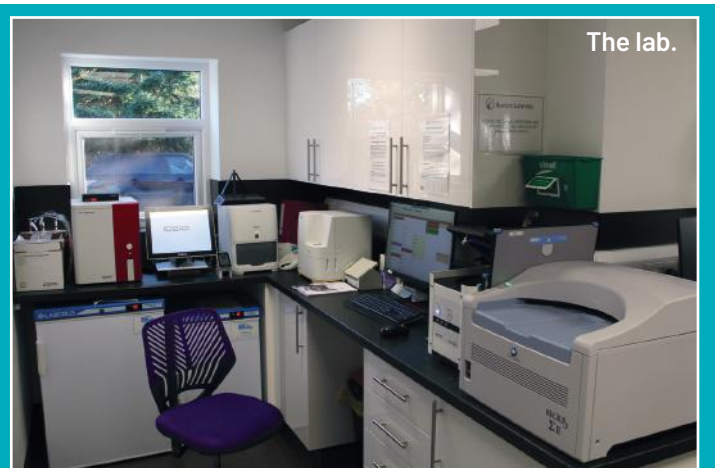
"We have benefitted from the shift in the industry that saw veterinary groups acquired by large corporate businesses. However, this has inadvertently made it difficult for the next generation of vets to follow the traditional route of buying into a practice as they progress from

"We want the vets who join us to become the 'go-to vet' in their area with clinical skills that elevate them above the average practitioner, or with the drive to develop them; in other words, a 'can-do' person who inspires those around them and leads by example.

"Our business model is based on finding special people who excel at what they do," he says. "In return, we will provide a state-of-the-art clinic in a prime local location; the time and support to allow them to hone their clinical, commercial and financial skills in a vibrant atmosphere; and the opportunity



Part of the waiting areas.



The lab.



The prep room.

having to find a huge initial investment.”

Sean adds: “There are a significant number of vets who are looking to launch their own practice. I’m proud of this sentiment – it’s testament to the entrepreneurial spirit in our profession. However, starting from scratch is fraught with risk, expense, and complexity. Our innovative model helps great vets set up in business as leaders of their own practice and our unique offering is already attracting interest from high-calibre individuals.

“We take a real pride in being the solution to fix the broken practice ownership model and North Star Vets will empower ambitious vets to enjoy a better and more successful future, which in turn will translate into the standard of care our clients enjoy.”

The team gets to work

The first practice is located at the former Pets Animal Hotel kennels in Lymm with Dr Pieter De Villiers as the “equity owner”. He has a team of eight – vets, nurses and receptionists – to run the practice with each person working a four-day week with a Saturday rota of one in three; out-of-hours work is delegated to nearby practices. The team started work on 1st September, enabling them to get everything ship-shape for receiving the first clients on 20th September.

Pieter graduated from the Pretoria veterinary school in 1990 and worked for a time with Virbac before moving to the UK in 1999, the year he

a junior role to partner, as corporate interest has pushed the values of practices to unaffordable levels for most vets.

“We want to bridge that gap and give a leg up to vets who want to be masters of their own destinies, without the difficulty of starting from scratch or



The cat and (right) dog wards with cages and kennels from Technik Veterinary.

completed an MBA; he also recently completed a veterinary business management course at the University of Liverpool. He worked for the Willows Group at its Beech House Surgery in Warrington and early in 2017 was appointed a small animal divisional partner as part of the group's scheme to give vets at branch practices an equity stake – a move which led to substantial growth at the branches.

After the sale of Willows, Pieter worked as a locum until taking up the reins at the new practice, where he is delighted to be leading the team.

A 24-week build

It took just 24 weeks for the 178-square-metre building to be transformed from kennels into

Colin Carthy of Dane Architecture comments...

Small animal surgeries can be quite challenging projects, especially achieving the right layout and workflow within the constraints of an existing building like Burford Lane Vets. Before we even submit a planning application, we always spend time making sure we have the right layout and that we can accommodate all the specialist services and equipment that go into a veterinary surgery. This ensures that once approved, we can move quickly onto the construction phase drawings and on to site.

I have worked with Richard, Sean and Jane over the last 15 years and together we have completed a lot of new build and fit-out projects ranging from small animal surgeries to hospitals, farm and equine facilities. Together, we have gained a huge amount of experience in delivering veterinary projects like this latest one.

My advice would always be to approach someone professionally qualified in architecture, and ideally one with veterinary experience. Take your time and make sure you get the project right at the feasibility stage; employ your architect to run the project on-site and co-ordinate the specialist veterinary fixtures, fittings and equipment as a turn-key development.

■ Dane Architecture was formed in 1998 by Colin Carthy as a registered architectural practice with the Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists. Colin has more than 30 years' experience in the architectural design services sector and has a particular expertise in veterinary projects. Based in Northwich, Cheshire, the firm provides a full architectural design and project management service using the latest CAD software.



outstanding practice premises and tarmac to be laid for the substantial parking area. There's a spacious reception/waiting area, with the pharmacy out of sight adjacent to the reception desk with easy access from all areas of the practice; three consulting rooms; a large prep area with the other facilities radiating from it, including the theatre with x-ray, cat and dog kennels, a lab, and a utility room which includes the laundry and autoclave.

"It has fantastic functionality," says Pieter, "with a terrific workflow." This layout will form the basis for future developments in the group, with tweaking to suit the specific circumstances.

The insulation had to be upgraded and various other items of work needed doing to enhance the practice's green credentials. There's an all-electric hot water system – with no gas in the building; plus an electric inverter heat pump heating/cooling system in which every 1kW of electrical energy used to power the heat pump returns 3-5 kW of heat energy. Ventilation is via a Lossnay heat recovery system. LED lighting has been installed throughout as have sound-reducing ceiling tiles.

The practice called upon Justin Phillips of the marketing consultancy Practice Made Purrfect who designed the signage and colour scheme, developed the online booking system and came up with the idea of photos in the corridors of staff members superimposed with animal heads.

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