

Willows Veterinary Group

Hartford, Cheshire



Staff: partner vets 26 • full-time equivalent vets 66 • registered veterinary nurses 61 • trainee veterinary nurses 70 • receptionists 98 • administration 16 support staff 13 • management (non-clinical) 9 • employed staff total 333
Fees: initial consult £27.50 • follow-up £21.20

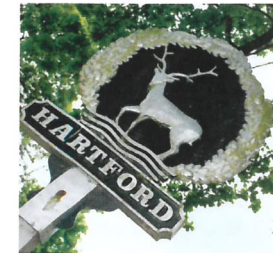
■ Mighty oaks from acorns grow is an expression we are all familiar with. But it appears the same can be said for Willows too, as VBJ discovered when we headed to Cheshire last month to visit one of the north-west's largest independent mixed animal practices ...

WITH A MULTI-TIERED share structure, centralised head office support function, marketing department and its own graduate academy, it would be easy to think the Willows Veterinary Group enjoys the benefits of corporate backing. But you'd be very wrong. From its origins in the 1960s as a two-man farm animal operation based in Hartford near Northwich, the practice has grown organically, bolstered by some local acquisitions, to a business with more than 90 vets working across 24 small animal, equine

and large animal sites – all without any help from the City. Including non-clinical roles, Willows employs more than 300 people, including its own recruitment officer, IT specialist and a marketing manager. These are not job

titles one would usually expect to find outside the corporate sphere, but as partner Mark Proctor explained, a big part of the group's success is being open to new ideas and ways of doing business.

"We pride ourselves on being



an independent, traditional practice, but one able to offer many of the services and efficiencies the corporates do. We have a separate marketing department based in our new headquarters building where we have also moved a lot of other back office elements, such as accounts, HR, IT and health and safety. It has always been important for us to move with the times to ensure our business offers maximum benefit to its clients and employees.

"Where we differ to some of the corporates is we can offer an affordable, structured career path with good prospects for young vets. Several levels of partnership mean entrants can afford to buy in, despite limited bank loan support, and this allows us older guys to move on when the time comes and create a genuine transfer of assets at a realistic price."

↓ Group headquarters located at Gadbrook Business Centre in Rudheath, near Northwich

"Because new partners actually buy into their own specific business unit only, they are driven to achieve success there and don't expect any cross subsidy from other areas."

Vets within the group benefit from a defined career path, beginning with starter partnerships in individual branches, followed by entry into companion animal farm or equine divisional partnerships. Eventually, partners who wish to move more into general management may move up to partial or full board partnership level when shares are made available in all the other divisions.

Mark added: "We aim to offer the best service possible at an affordable price for our clients while retaining individual service at all branches."

The many different activities of the group are ring-fenced into separate business units, namely, small animal, farm, avian, equine, Oakwood Referrals and an SQP-led trade dispensary for POM-VPS medicines (Beeston Animal Health).

Beeston Animal Health also has three online businesses: wormers.co.uk, petfleas.co.uk and a POM-V dispensary for small animal medicines in 365Vet.co.uk

All this adds up to a healthy turnover in excess of £20 million



and with the comprehensive nature of its offering to farm, equine and small animal clients, the group has been able to thrive in a very competitive and changing environment.

Willows is also a member of XL Vets, a group of around 50

↑ Oakwood referral clients and Willows first opinion clients are dealt with by dedicated teams sharing common waiting and reception facilities

UK-wide practices dedicated to preserving a strong future for private, independently owned veterinary practice.





↑ Small animal prep area

The financial team is led by accountant Jane Platt, the only non-vet Willows partner, and produces monthly net profit figures for each business unit from which the business goodwill value is derived to produce monthly share valuations.

Each business unit is free to pursue its own goals and direction, with the main board

acting as a management and financial filter for new projects.

“On a quarterly basis, each clinical division attends the first part of the board meeting,” added Mark. “For example, the equine divisional partners recently attended to update us on the progress of their recent equine merger and why an MRI scanner would be a great idea.”

The Willows equine business is a twin-centre practice running from Ashbrook Equine

Hospital near Knutsford and is headed up by partners Roger Dixon and Kerry Comb. Meanwhile, the newly merged Hampton Equine Centre is run by partner Kate Sumner, where the emphasis is on the Thoroughbred racing world.

However, small animal is the largest part of the business these days and twice-yearly small animal strategy meetings are held to form coherent goals for the unit. There are also

small committees of partners and managers responsible for marketing, stock control, communications and IT, plus a finance committee headed up by Jane Platt.

But where it all began for Willows was the farm business and the practice still prides itself on being at the heart of the Cheshire rural community.

Mark added: “Cheshire farmers are very important to us, but there may soon only be a small handful of practices doing farm work in the county. It’s a very challenging sector, with dairy farming under severe pressure due to such low milk prices. We clearly recognise the needs of our farm clients and strive to help with all aspects of production and animal welfare.

“We are still totally committed to farm practice and were very pleased to

↓ The farm practice; note the packed lunches ready for ambulatory vets to grab and go



be able to merge with three neighbouring farm practices in the past two years and now have five farm centres for the convenience of our clients.”

In recent years the growth of the small animal practice has been very evident – including Oakwood Referrals, based in the 24-hour Willows small animal hospital at Hartford.

“Our aim is to provide a complete service under the Willows umbrella, which is why Oakwood Referrals was established 15 years ago – we wanted to retain the highest calibre work within the small animal practice and be sufficiently equipped with the right staff and facilities to cope with all clinical eventualities,” said Mark.

With the expansion of the small animal practice came the need for more professional marketing, so, six years ago, a dedicated marketing manager, David Crane, was appointed to open up new and innovative ways to interact with clients and their pets.

David explained: “We are revamping all our websites to ensure greater functionality and a more user-friendly experience. We concentrate on SEO to ensure our listings are visible and having multiple surgery websites with plenty of links gives us a lot of cascade authority, which delivers distinct SEO benefits.

“One of our biggest successes is the Cheshire Pet Network, which is an association of >





↑ The equine hospital at Ashbrook; The Firs Veterinary Surgery based in Kelsall

affiliated local businesses we created that now has more than 200 members. This generates a lot of recommendations for our small animal surgeries. A further development of this original concept is The Cheshire Charity Pet Network, which aims to raise the profile of local rescue centres and provides a centralised animal rehoming website for the area.

"We hold evening meetings where our members come to discuss a variety of pet-related subjects and the network is circulated with our newsletters and magazines throughout the year.

"We are very community focused and have organised a large number of dog shows where, given the right publicity and marketing, attendances are always pretty buoyant. In fact, the network has been so successful, Willows' last Pets in the Park event attracted 8,000 people."

David and his team also put great emphasis on their social media activity – a recent post on Alabama rot received almost 300,000 views – the aim being to ensure the pet-owning public is always made aware of the Willows' view first when it comes to important stories impacting on animal health or welfare.

Not that the marketing team has forgotten the more traditional ways of enticing clients through their doors. Car stickers, vet wrap, t-shirts



and Buster collars all bear the practice name and logo, while every branch now boasts its own marketing champion.

A free monthly magazine is also distributed to existing and potential customers, while *The Willows Insider* staff magazine ensures the team is kept up to date on the latest developments.

And there have certainly been plenty of developments of late.

Last November, Willows merged with the 16-vet Charter

↑ General and orthopaedic theatres

↓ Prep area



Vet Group from Congleton, while the previous year, Hampton and Manor Court vets joined the team.

On the buildings front, advanced plans are in place to expand the flagship hospital site in Hartford – more space for Oakwood Referrals is the priority here. Meanwhile, refurbishment plans are in hand at five other sites, plus two potential new start-ups in the north of the practice.

It seems Willows never stands still and, following our meet and greet at headquarters, we are whisked down to Hartford,

the site of the farm practice hub, the small animal hospital and Oakwood Referrals.

Joined at the hip to the farm operation is the small animal hospital, run by partner Bruce Waddell. As well as taking on Willows' out-of-hours cases from the south of the practice area, the Hartford hospital also serves as the home of Oakwood Referrals.

This unit of the business is headed by RCVS-recognised specialist and European diplomate in surgery, Charlie Sale. Charlie has been with the business for 21 years and, along



with Bruce, is the man with the job of managing the expansion project and juggling the needs of the referral business.

Bruce said: "The construction is not going to be easy, or ideal, but it can all be phased and the expansion will bring us two more theatres and an extra imaging suite. We have a really fast DR x-ray system here, but the queue can still get quite long in busy periods, so we do need that second x-ray suite.

"We will also be adding a procedure room for ultrasound and endoscopy – plus a lot more storage. We have just outgrown this site since it was expanded 16 years ago."

Oakwood has a full-time soft tissue surgeon, as well as a full-time orthopaedic and spinal surgeon. There are also advanced practitioners in internal medicine,

↑ Burgess mobile CT/MRI unit

↓ Farm office

dermatology and cardiology.

Charlie added: "We cover most things here and are part of the RSA preferred partners network.

"We are a RCVS-recognised specialist-led team with many years of referral experience. Having no interns or residents means when a pet is referred, clients always see the clinician who will be dealing with the pet. Working alongside first opinion vets, within both the hospital and the veterinary group as a whole, means we have great potential to communicate our philosophy of case management and how we can improve clinical flow."

"That is the core of what Oakwood is about - providing a very high standard of care



from caring, professional staff who aim to restore the quality of life in the patients they see."

And that mantra also holds true for the rest of the business which, despite rapid recent growth, remains very much a traditional partnership run along traditional values.

Jane Platt concluded: "We are all very positive about the future of the business. We have a very good model here, which really encourages the best young vets to see their long-term future with us. The graduate academy is also starting to bear fruit, which is great as the young, talented vets we want here are the future of the business.

"The next step for the business is consolidation post-mergers – we are not actively looking, but if anything comes up that is of interest, we will always consider it, but only if we can see some real value for the practice and clients alike. Equally importantly, we hope our values for independent practice will attract ambitious and talented young vets and support staff – we think we have a great future to offer them."

