



Community feel reflected at thriving small practice

● They say the best things come in small packages. That certainly rings true for the team at Fernside Veterinary Centre where, despite space being tight, the practice has been punching above its weight for years. *VBJ* paid a visit to find out how.

PRACTICE PROFILE
 Fernside Veterinary Centre,
 205 Shenley Road,
 Borehamwood
 WD6 1AT.

Premises
 60 sq m.

Staff
 Three full-time vets;
 four registered VNs;
 three registered student
 nurses; and
 three receptionists.

Fees
 First consultation fee: £38.99.
 Follow-up consultation
 fee: £32.99.

SANDWICHED BETWEEN A gents' barber shop and a pizza takeaway in Shenley Road, Borehamwood is Fernside Veterinary Centre.

From the outside it looks small – and that's because it is. In fact, at just 60 sq m it's hard to see where they find room for three vets, four



Staff at Fernside Veterinary Centre. Right: the practice's frontage.

registered veterinary nurses and all the equipment needed to run a modern first opinion veterinary practice.

But, much like Dr Who's Tardis, there's a lot more to Fernside than first meets the eye. "We always say this is a hospital-sized practice within a branch-sized surgery," explained owner and lead veterinarian Robyn Farquhar.

Robyn, a graduate of Massey University in New Zealand, first arrived in the UK in 1986, working in the midlands for 10 years before deciding to take a

punt on a small practice in Borehamwood.

She added: "Originally, I wasn't interested as I thought it was in central London and, because of my interest in horses, I didn't want to work in the middle of a city.

"It was owned and run by vet Vivienne Sheridan – she ran a kennels and surgery in the town next door and this

was a little lock-up shop open for two hours a day.

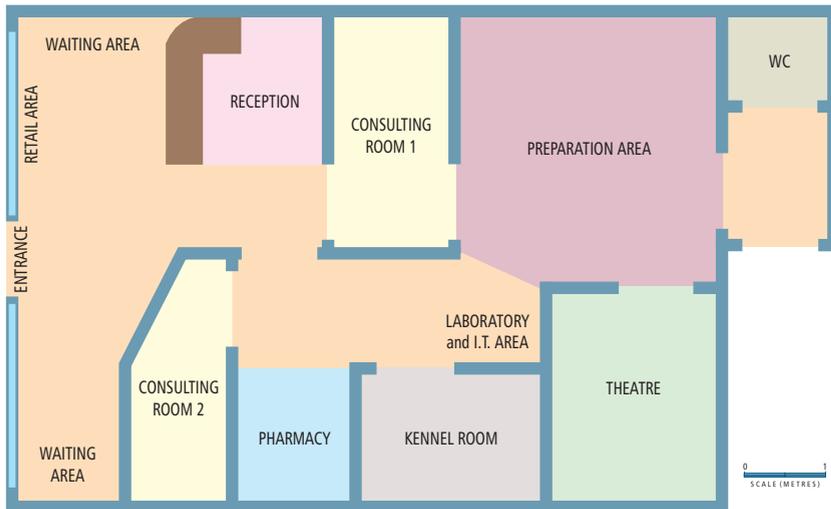
"When I realised it wasn't in the middle of London, I bought the goodwill and took on the lease for £55,000. At that time I was already quite an experienced clinician; I had been a house surgeon in Sydney when I first qualified and I had done my Australian college exams in feline



Waiting area and retail display (top).



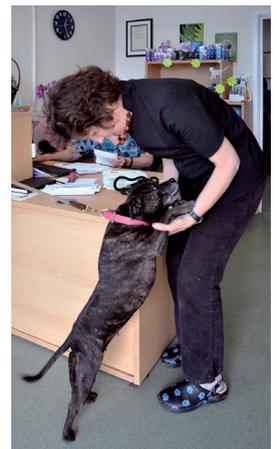
Reception.



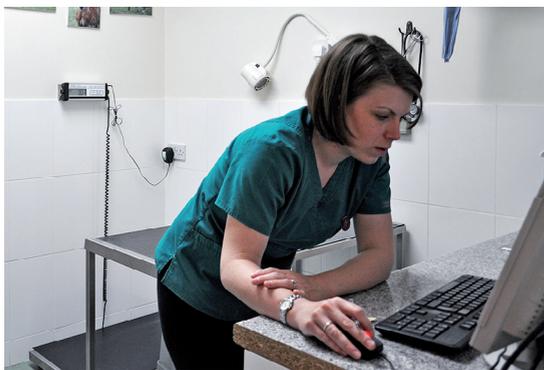
really enhances our business too. Because we have such bonded clients there are occasions when they ring to say they would prefer to bring their pet here."

Used as an overflow for the east end of London in the 1950s, today's Borehamwood is a mix of council housing and private estates with some wealthier areas on the outskirts of town. This has created a mixed client base for Fernside. Robyn explained: "It's a very mixed town and a mixed client base, and I have very strong loyalty to those people.

"But we have not built a base by being the cheapest – I am not interested in undercutting; I don't want to get clients on price; I want to get clients because they think



Practice owner Robyn Farquhar greets a patient.



A consulting room. Below: the pharmacy and dog/cat ward.



medicine, so I knew I had the skill set to take this on.

"When we moved in, the premises was split between a tiny three-room practice and an old sweet shop, so we did a refurbishment in

1997 to get it up to standard. Before then it looked like a Chinese takeaway."

After changing the name to Fernside – a nod to the national emblem of her native New Zealand – Robyn set

about building her business.

She said: "It was quite scary as I was not used to having loans and when I first bought the place there were thousands of card records. We went through that lot, trying to work out who the active clients were.

"At the time I had a little flat upstairs and it was 24/7, but it was doable because I was building it up and I found the clients liked the continuity."

Since then things have changed and the increased expectations of the public surrounding the delivery of out-of-hours care meant Robyn turned to the RVC just up the road for help.

"I reluctantly let my weekends go and, over the years, that has expanded so, since 2007, the RVC has been doing all my out-of-hours work," added Robyn.

"Its out-of-hours service is excellent and it enhances us as a business because of that link with such a prestigious establishment. There are some things we will handle ourselves, though, and although none of my staff are on a rota to do that work, they will always come in for a special case and I think that



Ultrasound machine, scrub area and preparation room.

we offer a very good service. I think our strengths are things such as, whenever we finish an operation, or if it has been a complicated procedure, we telephone the client."

It's an approach that has worked out well for Robyn and her team. Since 1996, turnover has increased from £120,000 to £800,000, while she now employs one other full-time vet (Fiona Grieve)

and four registered veterinary nurses, including practice manager Emma Eve-Raw.

Emma said: "We are an RCVS-accredited training practice for veterinary nurses and a centre for extramural studies, and that has helped us when it comes to looking for new staff – two of our VN team were here as trainees before we took them on. That is really important, as they know the way we work here and it gives us

continuity with our clients, who really respond to that.

"We have a really good group dynamic and that is vital in a practice where space is at such a premium. I think because the clients know we are the size we are they are prepared to work with us a little bit in terms of appointment times and things like that."

Keeping all those clients happy represents an impressive balancing act

for Robyn and her tight-knit team. With eight staff milling around a space not much bigger than an average ⇩



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takeaway outlet, there has to be some give and take.

Emma added: "We get a low number of complaints and we have worked really hard at that. We encourage our clients to give us a lot of feedback and, on the whole, that feedback is really positive. The whole team plays a big role in that."

"Our receptionists are just great; last week, myself and Robyn held our clinics at the same time and the waiting room was heaving, but the clients were happy because they were all having a chat with each other and the receptionists, and having a great time out there. That is a real strength for us – that community feel we have built up here over the years."

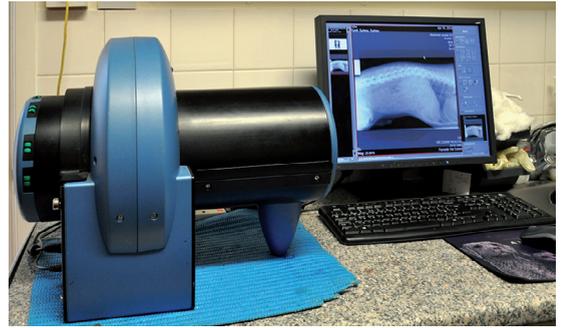
Fernside has also built up an impressive suite of

equipment, including a digital x-ray, a Doppler blood pressure monitor and a new upgraded asymmetric blood pressure monitor. This investment in the latest technology and an ongoing commitment to CPD means the practice continues to thrive in an area where competition from the corporates is fierce.

Two nurse clinics a week also help keep clients bonded to the practice, as do a wide range of online activities – including a Facebook competition run by the nursing team.

Emma said: "Our receptionist Tracy had the idea of running a competition to find a dog, cat and small animal to be the faces of our vaccination certificates and we put that competition on Facebook."

"In the end we had 278 entries, which we thought was fantastic. People



Digital x-ray with monitor. Below: a patient warmer.



decided which pets should win by "liking" them and, from that, we got a dog, a cat and a hedgehog that became the vaccine certificate winners, and the runners-up we put on our recall card vaccination reminders."

Because it went so well, Emma decided to contact the local newspaper with the story. She added: "They came down and took a load of photographs and wrote a really nice piece in the paper the following week."

"Afterwards, I thought it would be a really good idea to contact Boehringer – which I knew was doing a Hounds for Heroes campaign – to see if we could get funding to produce a calendar for the charity, which it agreed to do."

"Robin chose the back 12 pictures and we also did a collage of all those animals that had been entered. We have been selling those calendars for Hounds for Heroes and that has gone

down really well with clients."

With the business continuing to grow, which now includes a mobile nurse service, Robyn admits she has considered moving to bigger premises – but bigger is not always better.

"It is hard to stay small and do it well as we have increased costs, but I am loathed to move as we have such loyalty from our clients and our focus has always been on doing what we do as well as we can."

"Everything we do is genuine and real, and our customers buy into that," Robyn concluded.



The operating theatre with x-ray machine (top).



Fernside's veterinary ambulance.