

Lancashire Smiles

Arnold Gangaidzo guides us through the opening of his family friendly practice near the Fylde coast in Lancashire

When I set out to launch my squat practice, I presented the bank with an optimistic business plan while holding onto a more cautious, pessimistic one. In hindsight, even that wasn't pessimistic enough.

At my previous practice, the principal had expanded to open a second site, effectively making me lead of a squat practice. This experience gave me the confidence to take that leap of faith. So, I started saving. My goal was to reach £100k, but despite falling short, I still walked into the bank with that business plan to support my case.

I wanted to establish a squat rather than purchase an existing clinic because it would allow me to design everything from the ground up. I've seen how easy it is to become entrenched in a particular culture – both positive and negative – and how teams and patients often resist change. I didn't want my practice to become a battleground, so I sought a blank canvas.

THE PERFECT PLACE

I needed to exclude locations within a five-mile radius of my previous employer. I also required a location close enough to home to avoid a long commute, which I couldn't face.

These factors narrowed my options, and it took me about three months

THE BEACH AND ROCKS INSPIRED THE WALLS, WHICH ARE MADE FROM MICRO-CEMENT IMPORTED FROM SPAIN AND ARE A DELICATE SOFT PINK

Step inside...

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to find the right place. In August 2023, I came across a former carpet showroom available for lease on a mainly residential street. It's located in Kirkham, a small town about 15 minutes from my home in Preston.

The showroom had been there for many years, with the owners living upstairs, and they had sold the building to my current landlord, who uses the first and second floors as apartments. The ground-floor space had been refurbished and was perfect, so I began negotiating the lease.

One of the main sticking points was that I wanted to buy the building, and I insisted on including a first-refusal clause in the contract. I also negotiated a six-month rent-free period. These negotiations continued until February; in hindsight, this delay was a blessing.

The build started in March with an expected completion date in May, but that didn't happen. The builder had clearly underestimated the scope of what could be achieved. This experience has taught me some valuable lessons: always build in margins – then build in some more. Do your due diligence, and for future projects, I'll be relying on a friend who's a builder.

Ultimately, however, you are 'married' to a build team and need to make it work. Thanks to that six-month rent-free period, we could fit out without any rent until August 2024.



The ethos

Lancashire Smiles showcases Arnold's dedication, vision and commitment to the community. He emphasises creating a 'family' practice and integrates that principle within the team. The practice prioritises comfort, open communication and outstanding patient care. The contemporary design is inspired by the coastal beauty of the Fylde area, with sleek micro-cement walls and glass-panelled doors, resulting in a bright and welcoming environment.



COASTAL VIBE

I don't have a design bone in my body, but I knew how I wanted patients to feel. The practice is near the Fylde coast, and I wanted the aesthetic to reflect this. This was a key aspect of the overall design thinking.

The beach and rocks inspired the walls, which are made from micro-cement imported from Spain and are a delicate soft pink. The design flows well – we have created a complete circular journey from the surgery to the restroom and other areas.

The flooring is grey micro-cement. We also wanted the design to allow plenty of light and feel spacious, so we installed glass doors etched with our logo in the surgeries and glass panels leading directly into the waiting area.

We partnered with Vita Architecture, fully understanding that this vision would come at a cost. I could have gone with dental-specific designers, but I was determined to create a space that didn't feel like just another dental practice.

I decided to keep Ben Lee from Vita Architecture on board. I quickly realised that if you don't have a background in construction or design, it's essential to have someone who does and who you trust to guide you through the process – whether that involves selecting furniture, managing the build, or ensuring that every detail of the planning is executed correctly. It's not always about seeing your vision come to life exactly as you imagined; it's about trusting the process.

For me, this was a significant investment, both financially and emotionally. After all the hard work and saving to get to this point, I didn't want to risk my inexperience or naivety derailing the project. So, having someone who truly understands and shares your vision is crucial.

STANDOUT FEATURES

Lancashire Smiles was initially designed with three treatment rooms, with one fully equipped from the start. The second room is now complete, and by the end of next year, the third will be finished.

We have installed two Belmont Eurus S8 treatment centres. I've used Belmont chairs for most of my career and explored other options to see what else was available, but the Eurus S8 – one of Belmont's top models – stood out for its thoughtful features.



The team

DENTIST & OWNER
Arnold Gangaidzo

PRACTICE MANAGER
Clare Weston

HEAD DENTAL NURSE
Emma Lancaster

FRONT OF HOUSE
Jessica Andrew

TRAINEE DENTAL NURSES
Megan Lees and Grace Brindle

DENTAL HYGIENIST AND THERAPISTS
Yvonne Wainwright-Stringer and Jessica Adamson

I particularly appreciate the wireless pedal and the computer that allows me to set up a personalised profile. Other clinicians can also create profiles so the chair automatically adjusts to their preferred settings. Our dental nurse has her own controls, which means both of us have had great experiences providing treatments and working with patients who enjoy the chair's comfort. Plus, the S8's ambidextrous design is a huge bonus.

The practice also has a storeroom, a kitchen, two restrooms for staff and patients, a decontamination room and an office for the practice manager.

We are looking to hire a treatment coordinator to ensure everything runs smoothly and efficiently. This is especially important for more complex treatment plans.

It is essential that patients can enjoy a seamless experience, knowing exactly what to expect at each stage and how the financing will work.

COMING TOGETHER

Our Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspection took place the first week of September – a week before we planned to open. I had already scheduled some appointments, so it was risky. Thankfully, we got the green light to open.

We launched with two apprentice dental nurses, a front-of-house receptionist, a practice manager and myself. In that



first week, when we had patients enjoying the space, receiving treatment, seeing the team working together, and enjoying being with each other, it finally felt like a reality. Only then could I enjoy the journey.

By October, our dental therapist had joined the team, and things started to come together organically. Everyone embraced the vision and felt a sense of ownership. It was also great when patients began receiving care without me being there, knowing I could trust the team to deliver high-quality care.

A FAMILY FEEL

Building loyalty and satisfaction goes beyond just financial incentives – it's about fostering genuine connections. Having talented staff members doesn't guarantee loyalty or a sense of belonging. That's why our ethos and culture, which centre around the concept of family, play a vital role.

We nurture this with meaningful events – from gathering to share cake, celebrating birthdays and organising team days out to actively seeking input from the team on how we can improve – these small actions matter.

We ensure their voices are heard by constantly finding ways to engage them and holding regular staff meetings. We let staff members take ownership of initiatives, like auditing patient feedback to identify areas for improvement, which allows them to invest in making positive changes.

Throughout this journey, my family has been my unwavering support, and my wife, Rumbi, has been especially instrumental in helping me pursue this dream. We even hosted an open day to invite our loved ones into the practice to appreciate what we had all achieved – and that was a truly special family moment.



ADVICE FOR OTHERS

When it comes to sharing advice for opening a squat practice, these would be my tips:

1. Consider how you will manage your living expenses during your first year of practice. Although you may be earning more, that does not equate to your actual income. That additional revenue is typically reinvested in expenses and staff, which means you will take home very little during that first year. Ensure that both business and personal bills are covered. I anticipate that operating costs will be significantly higher. Account for those margins – not just to share with the bank but because you'll need it
2. Prepare your patient list a few months ahead of opening. From my experience managing a squat, I realised how gradually things can unfold with many empty slots in the diary. To ensure patients were ready at launch, I proactively scheduled appointments and marketed our dental payment plan early on – we even achieved our first-year plan-patient target within weeks of opening the doors. Taking that leap of faith is essential
3. Plan your ideal patient journey. How do you want patients to experience the appointment booking process at your practice? How would you like them to be welcomed in the waiting area during their visit? What do you envision for their experience in the surgery and X-ray rooms? I mapped out these journeys for patients and staff. As a family practice, we offer baby-changing facilities and a play area filled with toys. Your plans should encompass your brand, ethos, communications and physical space. The practice design should reflect your overall vision
4. Be proactive in training the team and invest in them. The week before we opened, we had an induction week during which the team got to know each other, took personality tests, and addressed key areas such as medical emergencies and the patient journey. Three team members had no dental background, so we needed to ensure everyone felt comfortable seeing patients when we opened. We need to discuss the membership with patients in a way that allows us to communicate the same information confidently. We created a template script that serves as a launch pad for pointers on what we want them to convey

to patients, ensuring a consistently positive experience.

Patient Plan Direct had onboarding sessions for the team, and since I use the Itero intraoral scanner, we had training for that, too. A good friend specialising in marketing showed the team how to use our CRM to manage patient details and communications. They needed to know how that system integrated into our patient management software, Dentally. I needed everyone to have an overview of how the practice operates

5. CQC played a significant role in the process, and we used a dental compliance company to assist with the CQC application who advised us to submit it early and provided support throughout. I didn't want my lack of experience to hinder our ability to open
6. Seek a mentor or connect with individuals who can guide you in developing your business. Ensure you focus on working on the business, not just in it. It's easy to prioritise clinical work and expect the business to flourish independently. Being intentional about business development is crucial. I dedicate Tuesdays, Monday afternoons and Thursday mornings to business development. You won't grow your business unless you specifically allocate time for that purpose.

Who was involved?

Designers

Vita Architecture

Business support

Ultimate Dental Business

Marketing

Chupaco

Dental payment plan

Patient Plan Direct

Practice management software

Dentally