

Laying hens as family pets: let's do more to help them

Being awarded Charity of the Year 2015/2016 by the BVNA has offered the British Hen Welfare Trust the opportunity to address a wide range of challenges with the ultimate aim of improving the welfare of backyard laying hens.

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Having started from a spare bedroom, the British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) subsequently became the first registered charity for hens, in 2005, and now has more than 30 pop-up points across the country where people can adopt ex-commercial laying birds destined for slaughter. Numbers peaked with almost 72,000 hens being re-homed in 2012, the year of the barren cage ban, and an average of 50,000 birds is maintained through its adoption scheme each year. The charity's supporter base has grown to 59,000.

Keeping hens as pets ticks boxes: known provenance of food made popular by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall; educational benefits for children who all too often have no perception of where an egg comes from; the fulfilment of an inherent and widespread desire to help animals in need.

However, the aim was never to solely offer a lifeline to a few thousand lucky birds (in reality less than 1% of the 36 million UK laying hen flock), there were other key objectives, including to change the mind-set about hens as pets: on the premise that if the public better understood the joys of hen keeping,



From commercial stock to family pet is an easy transition for laying hens.

then welfare improvements would naturally follow. In our Hensus survey undertaken last year, 98% of charity supporters stated that free range eggs used as ingredients and free range eggs used in the leisure industry was a deciding factor when shopping or eating out. Hens make powerful educational tools.

The growth in the adoption of laying hens has led to growth in associated industries, and hens as pets are now catered for in many country stores and on the high street. Hens are also beginning their journey to join the billion pound pet industry circuit, a point welcomed and encouraged by the charity.

However, what the national re-homing initiative has also done is reveal gaps in veterinary knowledge across the country, and the BHWT is particularly keen to encourage greater understanding within the profession, leading to improved diagnosis and treatment of backyard hens as pets. The charity regularly receives calls from hen keepers asking for advice, and while keen to offer help, the charity obviously acknowledges the need for professional intervention rather than homespun remedy.

Following a programme filmed with Jimmy Doherty in 2010 called *The Private Lives of Chickens*, in which ex-commercial hens were put through a series of intelligence tests and underwent behavioural analysis by experts, the charity was contacted by St David's Poultry Team, a globally renowned commercial poultry specialist based in Exeter. The outcome has been the emergence of The Chicken Vet (<http://www.chickenvet.co.uk/>), a facility aimed at supporting the backyard poultry keeper. The Chicken Vet has developed a CPD course for veterinary surgeons and is currently creating CPD aimed at veterinary nurses. These are

all indirect triumphs in the eyes of the charity, which is keen to see good quality care being offered to the hens making transition from commercial bird to family pet.

Then there are the regulations: as far as treatments are concerned hens are not legally considered pets, because they are food-producing animals, the result being they are unable to enjoy the legal right to receive comprehensive treatment for sickness and injury, including analgesia. With the trend towards keeping hens as pets, the charity would like to see this anomaly addressed by both the veterinary profession and pharmaceutical industry, with more treatments being made available other than the current eight licensed products, none of which are ectoparasiticides or analgesics, leaving veterinary surgeons having to substitute with some creativity and estimate dosage through the Cascade system (EU Regulation 37/2010).

Moreover, most treatments that are licensed for poultry are usually only available in commercial quantities, yet the potential for a new income stream is surely worthy of consideration, especially given the billions spent by consumers within the pet industry.

In conclusion, the concept of hens as pets looks set to stay (and will hopefully continue to grow), and while there are several veterinary surgeons around the UK leading the way in the development of innovative procedures and treatments, it is essential — in our view — that the veterinary profession as a whole joins the groundswell of enthusiasm for these underestimated, much-loved birds. **CA**

For more information visit the British Hen Welfare Trust's website: <http://www.bhwt.org.uk/>