

## Hatching a plan to promote hen husbandry

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The first and most important aspect to remember when dealing with hens is they are not exotics – it is not necessary to run to the referral book when a client telephones with a chicken problem.

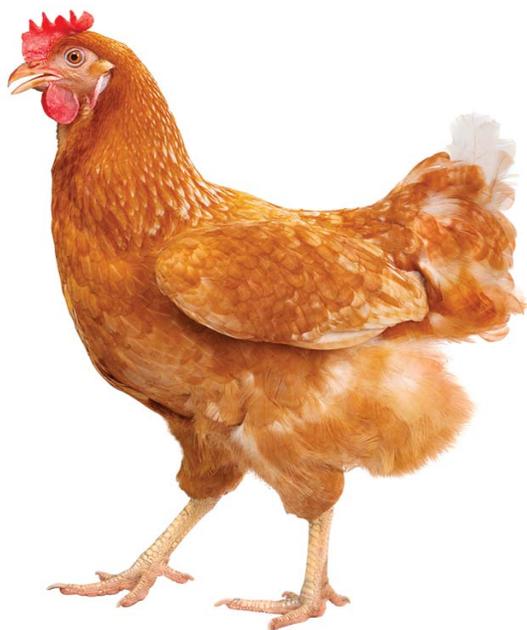


IMAGE: Fotolia/stockphoto mania.

Hens do not require lots of specialist equipment and medicines going out of date on the shelf, but if your clinic becomes known as a hen-friendly practice and you are seeing more hens as a result, you can go down that route once your reputation for poultry is established.

There is a world of difference between a commercial farmer keeping hens on a large scale and a backyard pet hen owner. Remember, hen owners want to treat their hens in exactly the same way as they would their cat or dog.

Former battery cage hens are adopted without any expectation they will continue to lay and quickly become much-loved family members (**Figure 1**). Consequently, these owners have money to spend on family pets and turning away hens is effectively turning away a growing income stream, if nothing else.

Hen clients will be happy to sit in the cat area of the waiting room, but will appreciate not being booked in when the clinic's noisiest, most boisterous dog is scheduled. Pop the carrier on to a counter to make the hen feel safer.

## Promoting better welfare

In the UK, about 36 million laying hens are divided between colony (enriched) cage production, barn, free-range and organic free-range.

Colony cages replaced barren battery cages at the start of 2012 and laying hens now live in colonies of around 80 birds. The enriched system provides some of the conditions hens need to exhibit their normal behaviour, such as small nesting areas, scratch pads and perches. Well-managed units keep hens in conditions where good husbandry will minimise potential disease risk from rats, flies and wild birds.



**Figure 1.** Hens can quickly become much-loved family members.

Barn hens live in large flocks (typically 4,000 plus) with more space to move around – usually on a soil floor, although some units incorporate metal raised areas that enable birds to jump from level to level, giving them increased area to exercise.

Access outside is not provided and a badly managed barn system can result in a build-up of ammonia due to faeces not being cleared regularly; not quite the idyllic image a barn egg conjures up on an egg box.

Husbandry is key and a barn system also allows increased opportunity for vermin to come into contact with the hens by tunnelling in under a farm, if not strictly controlled.

Strict guidelines exist for free-range hens regarding access to forage outside and farms providing tree cover on ranges will see flocks happy to spend time outside. The British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) encourages growth in smaller free-range units on the basis that, typically, the smaller the flock, the greater the welfare, as hens are able to experience natural behaviour options (**Figure 2**).

However, while demand exists in the UK for cheap eggs, the charity would prefer it come from hens kept in colony cages in the UK, rather than poorly regulated foreign farms with little welfare consideration and/or regulation.

The split between farming systems is driven purely by consumer demand and shopping preferences. Clients are consumers as well as pet owners and many are prepared to pay a little more for higher welfare.

Growth in sales of free-range eggs has risen steadily since the charity began – from 32% free-range in 2004 to 52% in 2014. However, one of the main aims of the charity is to educate consumers about the use of eggs as ingredients – for example, shop bought cakes and other processed foods.

## Keeping hens happy and healthy



**Figure 2.** Free-ranging hens with suitable tree cover.

Hens are easy to look after – providing them with a secure coop, cosy bedding, vermin and predator-proof run with an outside shelter will tick all their boxes. Add commitment to shut them in at night and let them out in the morning, as well as a sound understanding of what can and can't be fed to them, and you have the makings of an excellent hen keeper. As with any pet, cleaning out the coop is a requirement (a daily faeces pick up and weekly clean out is sufficient). Anything can be adapted to make a hen house – garden sheds, Wendy houses and stables all make suitable starter homes (**Figure 3**).

## How to help BHWT

Hens are like cats and dogs with feathers. They are also pets with benefits; no other pet will provide you with breakfast, after all. So, what better way to demonstrate to the younger generation these creatures have value and are not just there to be used and discarded? Moreover, children love a daily treasure hunt and will often develop a keenness for eating eggs in all forms.

Hens can also have therapeutic benefits. The feathers are soft and commercial hens are extremely friendly – especially when handled regularly. Children with learning difficulties seem to form a special bond with them and when allowed to take responsibility for the hens' daily care, children thrive.

Consider setting up a waiting room display featuring hens. This can include the work of BHWT, but also promote free-range thinking. You might invite hen clients' young children to draw pictures of their favourite hen or send in a photograph and story for your display. Most clinics have a newsletter that goes out to clients – why not speak to your practice manager to see whether a feature on hens could be included?

Are you a secret Mary Berry with amazing cake making skills? Even if you are more of a novice baker, your kitchen efforts can help save more lives and promote the charity's work. Sign up to hold one of the fund-raising Free Range Fridays, where the charity provides educational materials, as well as fun balloons and stickers – you provide the cakes and your clients give a donation, eat cake and learn about our work.

Or, if you fancy yourself as budding Paula Radcliffe or Mo Farah, the charity has running shirts available to compete in sponsored fun runs, half marathons and so on – better still, take part dressed as a hen (**Figure 4**).

## Advocating better training



**Figure 3.** Wendy houses can be adapted to make cosy hen coops.

Undertaking CPD is the most important way of achieving better veterinary training and we are fortunate there is now CPD available for veterinary nurses to expand their knowledge of these amazing creatures.

Until recently, most CPD has been aimed at vets only, However, with the increasing popularity of hen keeping and larger number of hens coming through the door, there is greater demand for CPD aimed at VNs and no excuse for vets and VNs to be uncertain when treating hens.

## Getting involved

Alison Colville-Hyde is a good example of someone whose passion for poultry has developed into a fascinating and fulfilling role. Alison is employed by The Chicken Vet – part of St David’s Poultry Team in Exeter – and developed a sound knowledge and wide experience of poultry, having grown up on a farm.

Alison studied veterinary nursing at Bicton College of Agriculture in Devon, with specific interest in working with cattle, sheep, pigs, horses and, especially, poultry.

Having enjoyed a short spell working at The Donkey Sanctuary and running the BVNA Devon branch, she progressed to animal health officer at Defra (now the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency), gaining experience in challenging situations including working with swine fever, foot-and-mouth disease and Newcastle disease.

Since Alison always aspired to work with poultry, she was pleased to commence a role with Lloyd Maunder, a broiler producing company in Devon, managing 45 sites across the south-west producing chickens for major supermarkets. She loved being involved with the hatchery, feed mill,

veterinary input and showing visitors around the units. She also spent time in the slaughterhouse checking reject levels and sorting production problems, drawing on knowledge gained from her farming background, veterinary nursing and Defra.

In 2009, Alison joined St David's Poultry Team as field services manager and is now involved directly within the poultry industry with its 850 million broiler chickens, 35 million laying hens and parent stock of both, not to mention pet chickens and other avian species, including the game bird industry.



**Figure 4.** Sponsored runs can help raise hen welfare awareness.

The St David's practice covers the UK and Republic of Ireland, with 15 vets solely focused on poultry medicine. Field work in this context refers to specialist advice on bird management, vaccination, postmortems, taking diagnostic samples, parasite control and understanding products in relation to poultry.

Aside from commercial farms, Alison is well placed to manage The Chicken Vet, having kept, bred and shown poultry from a young age. The Chicken Vet caters for the pet chicken keeper and its website ([www.chickenvet.co.uk](http://www.chickenvet.co.uk)) incorporates a wealth of information on all things chicken, plus a shop selling treatments and preparations to suit the pet chicken.

The Chicken Vet has developed CPD courses for small animal practice vets and is developing one for veterinary nurses, too. Alison teaches chicken husbandry on the CPD courses, as well as runs courses outside of her day job for interested groups and practices.

Alison is the first to acknowledge veterinary nursing is a valuable base point from which to start working with livestock and admits she is one of those lucky people who actually can't wait to go and do a day's work.