

# FOOD HERO

SAINSBURYSMAGAZINE.CO.UK/LIFESTYLE

As founder of the British Hen Welfare Trust, **Jane Howorth** has been helping to improve the lives of commercial laying hens for more than 15 years

**Hi Jane. Since 2005 the British Hen Welfare Trust has been rehoming ex-commercial hens otherwise headed for slaughter. What was the starting point for you?**

When I was just a teenager I saw the Panorama documentary *Down On The Factory Farm*, and it changed my life. I became vegetarian overnight because I didn't like the old intensive farming methods. Then I moved to Devon in 1995 and had space for some chickens. I trawled country lanes and found a battery farm and very politely asked the farmer if I could have a dozen of his hens before they went to slaughter. He was about to depopulate and said yes. I very deliberately lost count and ended up coming home with 36!

**The charity now rehomes about 60,000 hens a year as pets through adoptions. What makes chickens well suited to have at home?**

They're inquisitive, endearing, charming, precocious, soft and fluffy, and they're very good at producing a delicious breakfast for you – it's a daily treasure hunt for children! The two words that we hear most often is how 'life-enriching' they are.

**You were awarded an MBE in 2016 for services to battery hen welfare. What have been some of your proudest moments with the charity?**

Definitely some of the milestones:

we've helped over 860,000 birds and counting, so I can't wait to get to the big 1 million. We're also incredibly excited about launching a course on hens aimed at vets and vet students. At vet school, very little time is dedicated to chickens, but now that we've rehomed so many thousands of hens, there is a growing demand for veterinary support for pet chickens.

**You've also recently launched a campaign encouraging shoppers to switch from large eggs to mixed weight ones. How will this help hens?**

Hens that are encouraged to lay large eggs are more prone to health issues. It can lead to prolapsing, bone breakage, and it takes a lot of calcium out of their bodies. The bigger the egg, the more it takes out of the bird. We're all united on this – farmers don't want them to have to lay big eggs, and we want hens to just lay what comes naturally. If consumers switch to medium or mixed weight eggs, farmers won't be pushed towards manipulating their feed mix so that the birds then lay big eggs all the time. Everybody wins on this; there's no loser.

**Why have large eggs become the preferred choice?**

We're all just trained to see that big is best. The irony of it is that the smaller the egg, the bigger the yolk-to-white ratio – and everybody likes the yolk. The Guild of Food Writers has also responded to the campaign and proven that you don't need large eggs in all your recipes. I think consumers really need to be aware, because with such a simple change in their shopping habits, they can actually make a big difference.



‘The two words that get said most often from anyone who has adopted hens is how “life-enriching” they are’



From top: Jane Howorth MBE; comparing egg sizes; retired commercial hens on adoption day



*Did you know?*

Laying hens are typically kept by commercial farmers until they are 18 months old. A rehomed hen can generally be expected to live for another three or four years. For adoption info, visit [bhwt.org.uk](http://bhwt.org.uk)