Cage-free eggs: an update from the BHWT

Hen keepers will no doubt remember the flurry of UK supermarkets and retailers pledging to go cage-free by 2025 – but, as we enter 2025, where do those pledges stand, and how many hens are still in cages?

The BHWT has been raising awareness of the humble laying hen through its rehoming work since 2005.

Will major UK retailers meet their pledges to go cage-free by 2025?

Since 2005 the BHWT has been raising awareness of the humble laying hen, encouraging the public to see them as more than egg laying machines and, instead, value them for the sentient, joyous creatures they are. Along with that we have run several successful campaigns encouraging the likes of Hellmann's mayo to go free-range and asking questions of Mr Kipling, one of the nation's favourite treat makers, after he reneged on his free-range pledge.

Not only that, but we have also encouraged consumers to influence hen welfare with their purses by opting for the best eggs they could afford in the supermarket because, as we know, change happens best from the ground up.

Fast forward to 2016 when mounting pressure from a collective of animal rights organisations and activists began, along with measured campaigns in which we took a strong position, advocating 'free range is best'. As a result, retailers such as Tesco, Aldi and Lidl vowed to stop selling eggs laid by caged hens come 2025.

However, this was a voluntary move and, as such, there were no boundaries put in place when it came to exact timeframes and, for many supermarkets, whether the change would apply to both shell eggs and eggs used as ingredients.

WHAT'S THE CURRENT SITUATION?

As already mentioned, this initiative was a voluntary move rather than a requirement by law, meaning each company has in the meantime set its own standards.

Tesco, for example, still states on its website that it is committed to being 'cage-free by December 2025' for both shell eggs and ingredient eggs. Similarly, Lidl has set out its plan online, stating: "We are committed to working with our suppliers to phase out the sale of eggs from caged hens in our stores by 2025. This commitment covers both shell eggs and eggs used as an ingredient in our products."

Asda has a very similar statement, confirming: "Asda is committed to growing cage free egg sales and sourcing cage-free shell eggs by 2025 and are working with our suppliers on improving the welfare of the laying hens. We are also committed to using eggs used as ingredients from cage free systems by 2025."

Whether these changes will come into effect by the end of 2025 remains to be seen and, indeed, doubt has been expressed by Robert Gooch, former CEO of the British Free Range Egg Producers Association, who said in an interview with The Grocer magazine in August this year: "They won't all make the commitment by January 2025, that's for sure."

WHAT DOES CAGE-FREE MEAN?

The term cage-free is often misconstrued as meaning free-range when, in fact, barn hens have no outdoor access and a lack of natural daylight.

Even if all the retailers in question do meet their commitments, what does that mean for hens? For the most part, retailers will need to provide an affordable option for their customers, meaning barn eggs will be increasingly offered on supermarket shelves. The statistics back this up too: the number of barn eggs produced in the UK doubled between 2022 and 2023.

WHEN WILL CAGES BE BANNED ALTOGETHER?

If we look across Europe, cage bans are already in place in Luxembourg, Switzerland and Austria, with a ban to be introduced in Germany by 2026, Czechia by 2027 and Slovakia by 2030.

The European Union launched a two-year project in 2021 looking at 'best practices for transitioning to higher welfare cage-free egg production systems' claiming it would help the industry meet market demand. The project ended with a conference in Brussels but no commitment to outlaw cages for hens across the EU, leaving many animal welfare groups disappointed.

While the production of caged eggs in the UK has fallen significantly over the past decade, it is of course still our objective as a charity to see all hens kept in higher welfare free-range organic systems so they can enjoy a good quality of life.

Until then, we will continue focusing our efforts on taking hens out of farms in order to give them a chance to experience life beyond 18 months old, and we thank every one of our supporters who is enabling that to happen.

COCKEREL LONELY HEARTS

Despite our extensive work to improve welfare for all laying hens, we never forget about the boys. We care about all chickens and so want to find homes for as many unwanted cockerels as we can, which is why our Cockerel Adoption facility was established.

The poor old cockerel is somewhat maligned and misunderstood, with crowing an increasing cause for complaint and the (incorrect) view that the boys are always aggressive. In fact, a cockerel will flourish when he is homed with a flock of hens.

Rehome a cockerel this Valentine's Day

"There are several handsome fellows looking for love this Valentine's Day and all you need to do is browse the candidates on our website at *bhwt.org.uk/cockerel-adoption*

Here, he is able to take his natural place as a protector from predators and a male presence also helps to iron out bullying amongst hens, as he instinctively takes the dominant role in the flock.

In next month's issue of Country Smallholder, we'll be exploring more in-depth the issues surrounding cockerel hatching but, for now, we're focusing on the joys that cockerel keeping can bring, and we'd love anyone considering keeping one to go down the adoption route first.

There are several handsome fellows looking for love this Valentine's Day and all you need to do is browse the candidates on our website at *bhwt.org.uk/cockerel-adoption*. The scheme was devised to send unwanted cockerels off to loving new homes and, as such, all the cockerels on the page are rehomed free of charge.

Zu Rojas, who successfully rehomed his cockerel Puddle, told us: "I want to say a huge thank you for putting the advert up for me; Puddle went to a really lovely home yesterday and has already settled in. His new owners have been sending me photos and updates. I am so grateful to you all at the BHWT, I really couldn't have wished for a better home for him."

BHWT

The British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) was established in 2005 by Jane Howorth MBE. We are Britain's first registered charity concerned with rehoming laying hens while improving hen welfare across commercial and domestic sectors. We believe that pet hens matter; everything we do is to improve the welfare of our feathered friends and introduce more people to the joys of hen-keeping.

- Every year, with support from over 1,400 volunteers at 48 pop-up sites, we rehome over 50,000 hens saved from slaughter.In 2024 we rehomed 64,000 hens, including our one millionth hen to His Majesty The King.
- We educate consumers to help them make informed choices when shopping. For example, about caged eggs hidden in processed foods and the problem of using large eggs, rather than small or mixed weight.
- We work closely with government agencies and veterinary institutions to develop programmes and practices to improve hen welfare in both the commercial and domestic sectors.
- We offer a wealth of information and guidance online and offer a free 'Hen Helpline' service to all hen keepers needing advice on caring for sick chickens.
- We have also developed an educational programme providing resources to schools to help pupils explore the connections between food, farming, and animal welfare.
- We work with academic researchers to facilitate ground-breaking studies into pet hens and provide grants to vets and veterinary students to conduct research into chickens to build evidence-based data about how best to care for pet hens.
- There are many ways to get involved with the British Hen Welfare Trust's work. From rehoming to fundraising, volunteering and donating, every single gesture helps – the smallest of things can have a huge impact.