



Isle of Man
Government

Reilrys Ellan Vannin



Code of practice for the welfare of **Rabbits**

September 2023

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Understanding the Animal Welfare Act 2023

Introduction to the Code

Owning and caring for a rabbit can be a source of great enjoyment, but you should be aware that rabbit ownership is a major responsibility. Consequently, you should think carefully about all factors that will affect your ability to care for a rabbit and whether a rabbit is suitable for you. Would you be able to provide for all of a rabbit's needs? You will need to consider the financial and time implications of having a rabbit as a pet and its needs. Caring for a rabbit can be expensive and you should consider whether, for instance, you would be able to afford the cost of routine and unexpected veterinary treatment, or the cost of pet health insurance.

There is no one "perfect" way to care for all rabbits because every rabbit, and every situation, is different but they all have the same needs. It is up to you to find out what your rabbit's precise needs are and how to meet them. Under section 6 of the Animal Welfare Act 2023 (the Act) you must take such steps as are reasonable in all the circumstances to ensure that the needs of an animal for which you are responsible are met, to the extent required by good practice which are set out in the Act as follows:

- (a) need for a suitable environment
- (b) need for a suitable diet
- (c) need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- (d) need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- (e) need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

Under the Act you are always responsible for your rabbit's needs.

Furthermore, if you are a parent or guardian of a child under the age of 16 years old, you are responsible for any animal that child looks after. If you are unable to care for your rabbit at any time, you must make arrangements for another suitable person to look after it on your behalf. It is important to remember that you remain legally responsible for your rabbit's needs, even when you are away. The person with whom you leave your rabbit will also be legally responsible for your rabbit's welfare in your absence.

If you own or are responsible for a rabbit, and fail to meet its welfare needs, you may be prosecuted under the Act.

It is up to you to find out what your rabbit's precise needs are and how to meet them.

The Code of Practice on the Welfare of Rabbits is made by DEFA under section 6(5) of the Animal Welfare Act and come into operation on the same date as the commencement of the Act.

This code has been adapted from the Code of Practice for the Welfare of Rabbits issued by the Welsh Government with their permission under the terms of the open government licence version 3.

How to provide a suitable environment for your rabbit to live in

Make sure your rabbit has a suitable place to live. A rabbit should have access to appropriate places and provisions to rest and sleep in comfort, eat and drink undisturbed, exercise and explore safely, hide when afraid or feeling insecure, shelter from the weather, interact with (and escape from) companions and play.

Your rabbit's living area should have at least two compartments: a darkened sheltered area for sleeping and another for eating/relaxing. It should be a comfortable, dry, clean, well-ventilated and draught-free area where your rabbit will feel safe and be protected from predators and extremes of weather and temperature.

The floor of the living area should be big enough so that your rabbit can easily move around, eat and drink. The living area should be big enough for it to lie down and stretch out comfortably in all directions, high enough for your rabbit to stand up on its back legs without its ears touching the top, and it should be long enough for your rabbit to move around, feed and drink. As a guide, it should be able to hop three times from one end to another as a minimum. If you keep more than one rabbit together, there should be enough space so that each adult rabbit can behave like this. There should also be safe hiding places where each rabbit can choose to be alone if it wants to. Your rabbit's living area should be:

- sturdy, waterproof and easy to clean;
- raised off the floor; and
- placed in a sheltered position.

The living area should be brought into a shed or unused garage for the winter months or otherwise protected from bad weather. Many consider a small shed fitted with a cat flap into a secure run as a good permanent accommodation.

House rabbits should be provided with a secure area where they can feel safe, sleep, toilet and be confined to when unsupervised. A living area that is kept permanently in a shed or indoors may not need to be waterproofed in the same way as those used outdoors.

Wood shavings or shredded paper should be used as a toilet area. Bedding should be provided to give your rabbit extra insulation, somewhere to hide and something to nibble on. It should be clean and dry and should also be safe for your rabbit to eat. Examples include hay and straw.

Your rabbit should have daily access to a safe and secure run where it can run and jump. The run should be as large as possible so that your rabbit can stretch upwards to its full height and run, not just hop. Rabbits are very active, athletic animals. Jumping on and off raised areas, such as appropriate sturdy platforms or hay bales, helps to maintain their bone and muscle strength. If your rabbit does not have enough exercise, its bones can become weak and break; this can happen even if your rabbit simply struggles when you pick it up. The run should contain raised areas for jumping and preferably should be outside with access to a grassy area.

This area should provide protection from predators and extremes of weather and temperature as well as areas where your rabbit can hide if it wants to. Where more than one rabbit is exercising together there must be enough space in the run so that each can behave like this at the same time once adult.

Rabbits should have 24 hour access to appropriate hiding places where they can run if they feel afraid, stressed, unwell, or simply want to be on their own for a while (see also the section on "How to provide the right companionship for your rabbit"). There should always be at least the same number of hiding places in any enclosure as there are animals. Hiding places should be an appropriate size for your rabbit and should have more than one entrance. Suitable hiding places include cardboard or wooden boxes, paper sacks, sections of wide-bore drain pipes and shelves that your rabbit can get under. You will need to make sure that these are non-toxic and contain no sharp

edges.

Rabbits should be protected from bad weathers as well as strong sunlight or changes in temperature. This includes your rabbit's living area and run. Outdoors a cover, blanket or piece of old carpet could offer added protection on cold nights provided there is enough ventilation. Indoors, a rabbit's living area should be placed in a cool room, out of direct sunlight and draughts, as well as away from radiators and loud noises.

Part of providing a suitable environment is making sure that it is safe, clean and hygienic. Wood shavings or shredded paper should be used as a toilet area. Alternatively a litter tray can be provided with non clumping, non toxic material. Your rabbit's living area should be cleaned daily. You should:

- remove and replace any shavings or bedding that are wet or dirty;
- remove any uneaten fresh foods; and
- thoroughly clean water and food containers before refilling.

The entire living area should be cleaned thoroughly at least once a week but as often as necessary to ensure a clean hygienic environment for your rabbit. You should:

- use a good quality, pet-friendly disinfectant that you rinse off and allow to dry before allowing your rabbit to enter;
- replace all bedding and shavings with a fresh supply.

It may be useful to leave some used but clean bedding so your rabbit feels safe. Run areas should be changed, or the area where you put the run regularly cleaned. You should not keep more animals than you can look after and meet their welfare needs. The more animals you have the more work is involved in keeping them clean.

Ensure your rabbit is kept away from potentially harmful substances. You should be careful when using either herbicides or pesticides. You should not allow your rabbit access to flower beds or other areas that are likely to contain poisonous plants. If your rabbit is indoors, it should not have access to electrical cables as they may harm themselves by chewing through them. Household cleaning materials, medicines or other products intended for people or other animals should be kept out of reach. In the house, potentially poisonous plants should not be kept or should be placed where your rabbit cannot reach them. You should contact your vet promptly if you think your rabbit has come into contact with anything that could harm it.

Make sure your rabbit is transported safely. Rabbits should be transported in a secure pet carrier of adequate size and with good ventilation. Your rabbit should be familiar with the carrier to help it feel at ease and reduce the stress of transportation. Rabbits should not be left unattended in a vehicle in warm weather. This can be life threatening.

When you are away you have a responsibility to make sure that your rabbit is cared for while you are away. Someone looking after a rabbit for you must supply for the rabbit's needs every day. When someone else is looking after your rabbit, they are legally responsible for its welfare and you should ensure that they understand its needs and any special requirements it may have. Many rabbits prefer to stay in a familiar environment, but you should make suitable arrangements with a neighbour or pet sitter. You should make sure that they can meet all of your rabbit's needs. You may wish to consider whether a good boarding facility would be better, where your rabbit can be monitored and cared for by someone knowledgeable on how to look after rabbits.

How to provide a suitable diet for your rabbit

It is your responsibility to ensure your rabbit is fed an appropriate diet. Rabbits are herbivores; they need a diet that is high in fibre to wear down their continuously growing teeth, keep their intestines functioning properly and help prevent them from becoming bored. The first part of a rabbit's digestive tract does not let them absorb all of the nutrients that they need. Partially digested food passes out of the body as soft pellets, which are then eaten by the rabbit and re-digested. The rabbit also produces brown round droppings that it does not usually eat.

A rabbit's daily diet should consist mainly of large quantities of hay or dried or fresh grass that will provide the necessary fibre for the rabbit. Rabbits should have access to hay throughout the day and night. Green plants and a small amount of high quality specialist rabbit food such as extruded nuggets or high quality pellets should make up the remainder of your rabbit's diet. Muesli-type mixtures may be attractive, but you must ensure a balanced diet is eaten because your rabbit may pick out the 'tastier' ingredients, often called selective feeding. You should check that all of the previous meal has been eaten before offering more and any food that is mouldy should be removed as soon as discovered.

Fresh grass can be fed to a rabbit if plucked from the ground, but avoid dirty roadsides or places where the grass may have been treated with pesticides or contaminated with faeces. Lawn clippings and clover may upset a rabbit's digestive system.

Obesity, teeth and gut problems can be a problem in rabbits caused by inappropriate diets and overfeeding. Root vegetables or fruit can be given occasionally but, as carrots are especially high in sugar, you should use the carrot tops and only a little of the carrot itself. Don't give your rabbit too many specialist rabbit treats. Sticky, sugary treats should be avoided as they can harm a rabbit's teeth.

Rabbits are very sensitive to any change in their diet so any alterations must be introduced gradually. This is especially so when weaning rabbits and introducing them to green plants. Examples of suitable green plants include broccoli, cabbage, parsley, watercress, celery leaves and kale. Safe wild plants include chickweed, bramble, raspberry, blackberry and strawberry leaves and dandelion. All green foods should be washed and dried. Twigs from safe trees such as apple and pear that have not been treated with pesticides can be provided to help your rabbit to wear down its teeth by chewing them. You should not feed any plant unless you are sure of its identity and safety. Many plants can be poisonous to your rabbit.

Changes in the amount your rabbit eats may indicate illness.

Your rabbit must always have access to fresh water preferably in a metal-tipped feeding bottle. Clean it regularly and check for leaks and air blocks. In cold weather, make sure that the water has not frozen. Your rabbit may prefer to drink from a bowl and although this is less hygienic than a bottle, it is important to remember that it is best to use whatever your rabbit is familiar with. If the water is presented in a new way, your rabbit may refuse to drink and become dehydrated.

Your rabbit should not be too fat or too thin. Ideally you should easily be able to feel its ribs. Adjust how much you feed your rabbit to make sure that it does not become over or underweight. Rabbits that are over or under weight may suffer.

Sometimes rabbits have different dietary needs, such as when they are recovering from an illness or if they are pregnant. Your vet or appropriately qualified pet care specialist will be able to advise you about this.

How to provide for your rabbit's natural needs

Your rabbit should be able to behave normally. Rabbits have several specific behavioural needs that can make them a complex pet. These needs relate to rabbits being prey animals and so easily frightened. When introducing a rabbit to new things, you should always provide it with the opportunity to escape to a safe hiding place.

It takes time and effort to train your rabbit. Reward good behaviour immediately with something that your rabbit likes. Never shout at or punish your rabbit. It is unlikely to understand and can become more nervous or scared. If your rabbit's behaviour becomes an ongoing problem, seek expert advice.

Rabbits that are content will be calm and relaxed. They will nibble food, sit or lay outstretched and will be happy to approach and interact with people, other rabbits, and other animals and objects. Rabbits respond to stress in different ways. It is important that you can recognise any changes in the behaviour of your rabbit. In most cases, where rabbits are afraid they prefer to run away to a quiet and hidden location. This is normal behaviour, but is reason for concern if it happens more than just once in a while. You should be able to recognise signs of stress in your rabbit. Signs of stress may include:

- appearing nervous (freezing, hunched up with ears flat against the body);
- being excessively jumpy and watchful (bulging eyes);
- being aggressive to people or other rabbits, particularly if the behaviour is unusual;
- being aggressive when handled;
- lethargy and lack of interest in its surroundings, food and so on;
- being restless;
- being very inactive;
- hiding or trying to run away;
- breathing heavily;
- altered feeding or toileting habits;
- over-grooming;
- not grooming; and
- showing repeated movements that do not seem to have a purpose, such as biting a water bottle, biting bars, circling or head bobbing.

If you see any of these signs of stress you should contact your vet promptly. Your vet will be able to advise you on the best course of action. This may include referring your rabbit to a qualified animal behaviourist.

You should take reasonable steps to protect your rabbit from being stressed. Typical things that can make your rabbit stressed include:

- novelty (for example the first trip in a car or being handled by a stranger);
- fear-inducing stimuli (for example sudden noises);
- social stress (for example too many individuals in a small space, loss of a companion, living alone);
- inability to perform normal behaviour patterns (for example a lack of companionship or mental stimulation, insufficient exercise or being unable to run away from something that is causing stress);
- pain, discomfort or illness;
- being unable to control environmental factors (for example lighting or temperature);
- lack of space;
- withdrawal of food or water;
- boredom; and
- lack of adequate ventilation.

It is natural for rabbits to hide from a real or perceived danger as well as from stressful circumstances, such as noise, the presence of other animals or small children. Your rabbit should have easy access at all times to a secure hiding place (such as a wide tube, cardboard box or secluded part of the living area).

You should ensure your rabbit has enough mental stimulation from you and from its environment so

that it won't get bored and frustrated. Bored rabbits quickly become unhealthy, unhappy and possibly aggressive. Provide your rabbit with safe toys to play with and chew and regular opportunities to play with people or other friendly rabbits. Provide your rabbit with suitable materials that allow digging behaviour and areas to mark its territory with chin secretions, urine and droppings.

Every rabbit is an individual and some are naturally more confident than others. However, the way each rabbit behaves is largely influenced by experiences during the first few weeks of life. Socialisation with people and rabbits is an essential part of early learning. This process starts with the breeder who should ensure that the baby rabbit is introduced appropriately to different people, objects and sounds so that they develop into confident adults. Generally, rabbits that are well 'socialised' at an early age will be able to cope with most new situations and people confidently when an adult. If your rabbit is likely to come into contact with cats, dogs or other animals it is important to introduce them gradually and in a positive way at an early age. Never leave your rabbit alone with a cat or dog, even if they are familiar with each other.

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How to provide the right companionship for your rabbit

Rabbits are social animals and should ideally be kept with another rabbit. Unless you are planning to breed from your rabbit, neutered rabbits of a similar size make the best pairing. You should be aware of how your rabbit responds to other rabbits and animals. If it does not mix well, you will need to keep it apart from other animals or keep it and/or the other animals under suitable control.

You should handle your rabbit every day from an early age, but not until it is at least one week old. Your rabbit should have plenty of things to stimulate it mentally. This can be contact with another rabbit, animal or human. Never leave your rabbit alone with a cat or dog. Socialisation with other rabbits, animals or humans is an essential part of early learning. This important period of learning is within the rabbits' first three to four weeks of age, but can continue for much longer. Large numbers of animals need a great deal of care. You should not keep a large number of rabbits if you cannot meet their welfare needs. Neutering should be considered if you keep more than one rabbit (see the section on neutering).

If your rabbit is left on its own for long periods of time, it will feel frustrated and its behaviour may change to reflect this stress. Rabbits instinctively fear other kinds of animals such as dogs, cats, people and birds. Through careful training and very sensitive handling, pet rabbits can learn to enjoy the companionship of people. Many rabbits will choose to spend much of their time in the company of another friendly rabbit.

Rabbits will accept a guinea pig as a companion, but this is not advised. The powerful hind legs of even a small rabbit could cause serious internal injury to a guinea pig that could be fatal. Rabbits and guinea pigs also have different dietary requirements and ways of communicating.

Where rabbits of different sizes are kept together, you should provide hiding places, so that a smaller rabbit can escape from the attention of a larger rabbit. When kept in pairs or groups, the size of the accommodation will need to be large enough for the number of rabbits you keep. Make sure your rabbit has places it can go to get away from companions if it wants to. A rabbit, whether kept alone or with other rabbits, should have the opportunity to interact with its owner for several hours a day.

A successful relationship between two rabbits will depend on a number of important factors. The following need to be given very serious consideration when pairing rabbits together as potential companions:

- How, where and when they are introduced;
- Their gender (male or female);
- Whether they are neutered or not;
- The age that they are introduced;
- Their individual personality;
- Their previous life experience - particularly when very young; and
- Their relative size - a smaller or younger one could be injured or bullied by a larger or older companion.

If you are introducing rabbits to each other you should seek advice from a pet care specialist on how to proceed to minimise the risk of fighting and other welfare problems. If your rabbits have had to be separated for any reason, such as having been hospitalised, you should seek advice from a pet care specialist on how to re-introduce them to minimise the risk of fighting and other welfare problems.

How to keep your rabbit healthy and protect them from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Good health is an essential part of good rabbit welfare. Your vet is best placed to advise you about routine health care for your rabbit, such as neutering, vaccination, internal and external parasite control as well as any health problems your rabbit may have. Some medicines used for humans and other animals can be very dangerous to rabbits. Only use medicines that have been specifically prescribed or recommended for your rabbit by a vet. Complementary and non prescription treatments may also be available from pet stores and other outlets. Some treatments may require a "suitably qualified person" (SQP) to be present.

As the person responsible for your rabbit's welfare you should consider:

- prevention of disease: there are vaccines that are designed to protect rabbits from diseases such as Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD). Both of these diseases are usually fatal and your rabbit should be vaccinated. Your veterinary surgeon can provide information on the prevention of diseases;
- provision of a healthy balanced diet;
- provision of the right environment that minimises the risk of injury and disease;
- prompt action if a rabbit becomes ill or shows a change in its behaviour; and
- checking your rabbit daily.

Prevent your rabbit having contact with wild rabbits or areas where wild rabbits have been.

You should be aware of the signs that indicate your rabbit is not well. You should consult a vet if your rabbit shows any signs of illness or a change in behaviour.

You should examine your rabbit for signs of injury and illness every day. You should especially check around its back end for soft droppings that are stuck, as these attract flies which can lay eggs and cause 'flystrike', which is often fatal. This is particularly important in hot weather. Ensure a vet treats your rabbit promptly if it is injured or ill.

You should have a plan in place in the event that your rabbit needs to be euthanased, either as a quality of life decision or in the event of serious injury or illness. Although this may be difficult to think about, it is important to consider the financial and practical aspects of euthanasia should the worst happen.

You should ensure that your rabbit's coat is properly groomed. A pet care specialist may be able to advise you about coat care. Nails should be checked at least once a week as these can grow quickly. Your rabbit's nails should be kept at an appropriate length. Rabbits' nails wear down naturally when they exercise on harder surfaces or when digging. How often your rabbits' nails need to be trimmed depends on where your rabbit is kept.

You should not allow your rabbit to escape. It is useful to have it permanently identified with a device such as a microchip so that it can be returned to you should it stray.

During warm weather, rabbits should be checked at least twice daily underneath and around the bottom for droppings. Having a dirty bottom can increase the risk of a condition known as fly strike which can kill a rabbit in a matter of hours. Fly strike occurs when flies lay their eggs in the rabbit's dirty fur. The hatched maggots eat into the rabbit's flesh, causing severe damage and releasing toxins. This may produce shock, severe illness and even death. You should contact your vet immediately if you find maggots on your rabbit.

It is a good idea to check your rabbit's weight at least once a week. Loss of weight may indicate a dental or other health problem. Being overweight or obese will cause your rabbit to suffer.

Your rabbit's teeth will grow continuously throughout its life. Dental health relies on a diet high in hay and grass which will wear down its teeth. Check your rabbit's front teeth to make sure that they are

not misaligned or overgrown. Only a vet should correct misaligned or overgrown teeth. Back teeth cannot be seen easily and should be checked by your vet. They can be misaligned and grow sharp spurs which can cause pain to your rabbit when it eats. Dental problems can cause a poor appetite, a wet chin or drooling. If your rabbit is showing any of these symptoms you should take it to see your vet promptly.

One particularly important consideration is getting your rabbit neutered. This will not only prevent any unwanted baby rabbits but provides other advantages. Rabbits that are not neutered tend to show problematic behaviour and may suffer health problems.

If you are considering breeding from your rabbits, you need to make sure that the welfare needs of the parents and their potential offspring are met. Consult your vet as necessary. You should ensure you have found suitable homes for the baby rabbits and you should avoid unplanned pregnancies. A female rabbit can produce between 4 to 12 babies per litter, and will become pregnant again soon after she has given birth. If kept with an un-neutered male, the female may have 6 litters a year, potentially 72 babies. The pros and cons of whether to neuter your rabbit, as well as timing, should be discussed with your vet.

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Sources of further information

Your vet.

- The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, Belgravia House, 62-64 Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2AF (Telephone number 020 7222 2001 or www.rcvs.org.uk). The website has a "find a vet" facility.

Local libraries and bookshops for up to date books on rabbit care.

Websites such as:

- Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors: www.apbc.org.uk.
- Blue Cross: www.thebluecross.org.uk.
- British Rabbit Council: www.thebrc.org.
- Companion Animal Welfare Council: www.cawc.org.uk.
- PDSA: www.pdsa.org.uk.
- Pet Advisory Committee: www.petadvisory.org.uk.
- Pet Care Trust: www.petcare.org.uk.
- Pet Food Manufacturers Association: www.pfma.com.
- Pet Health Council: www.pethealthcouncil.co.uk.
- Rabbit Behaviour Advisory Group: www.rabbitbehaviour.co.uk.
- Rabbit training: www.clickerbunny.com.
- Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund: www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk.
- RSPCA (Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals): www.rspca.org.uk.
- DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs): www.defra.gov.uk.
- Scottish Government: Agriculture: www.scotland.gov.uk/topics/agriculture.

This Code of Practice applies to all pet rabbits

The purposes of the Code is to provide practical guidance to help you to comply with the provisions set out under section 6 of the Animal Welfare Act. It does not tell you precisely how to care for your rabbit but it does summarise important things you should know and what to do when making decisions about how best to care for your rabbit.

Breach of a provision of this Code is not an offence itself but if proceedings are brought against you for an offence under section 6 of the Act, the Court will look at whether or not you have complied with the Code in deciding whether you have committed an offence.

If you are unsure about anything to do with the care and welfare of your rabbit, you should always seek advice from an expert such as a veterinary surgeon, mainly referred to as vet. A list of suitable organisations and places to find help are provided in this Code.