



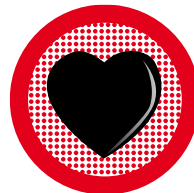
Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

Cod Ymarfer er Lles Cwningod

Dilynwch y Côd

Code of Practice for the Welfare of Rabbits

Following the code



Code of Practice for the Welfare of Rabbits

Preface

Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (“the Act”), if you own or are responsible for an animal you have a legal duty to take reasonable steps to ensure its welfare needs are met. This Code explains what you need to do to meet the standard of care the law requires. If you are a parent or guardian of a child less than 16 years old, you are responsible for any animal that child is in charge of or owns.

Breach of a provision of this Code is not an offence in itself but, if proceedings are brought against you for a welfare offence under the Act, the court may take into account the extent to which you have complied with the Code in deciding whether you have committed an offence or have met the required standard of care. You should not cause any unnecessary suffering to your animal; this could constitute a serious offence under the Act.

You will also find reference in the Code to ‘pet care specialists’. These are people who, through qualification or experience, can provide expert advice on welfare and some aspects of health for one or more types of pet animal. Examples include animal behaviourists, veterinary nurses and dedicated welfare organisations. Owners should look to their veterinary surgeon for advice on their animal’s health and refer to pet care specialists for husbandry and care advice.

To find out more about the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and details of your responsibilities under it, see Appendix 1 at the end of this Code. For further sources of information, see Appendix 2.

This preface is not part of the Code but is intended to explain its purpose and broad aims. Similarly, Appendix 1, which provides information on the relevant legal requirements and Appendix 2, which lists some additional sources of information, are not part of the Code.

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Introduction

Owning and caring for a rabbit is great fun and very rewarding, but it is also a big responsibility and a long-term caring and financial commitment. You control your pet's lifestyle; it is your responsibility to make sure that its needs are met, whatever the circumstances. The law requires that you must take reasonable steps to ensure that it:

- has a suitable environment to live in;
- has a healthy diet;
- is able to behave normally;
- has appropriate company; and
- is protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

These are explained in more detail in sections 1-5 of this Code. For further advice, speak to your vet or a pet care specialist. Other sources of information are listed in Appendix 2.

Every animal is different and as you get to know your rabbit, you will recognise familiar characteristics. It is important that you are able to notice any changes in behaviour, as these might indicate that your rabbit is distressed, ill, or is not having its needs met in some other way.

This Code of Practice is issued under section 14 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (the "Act"). This Code of Practice applies in Wales only, is issued by the Welsh Ministers and comes into force on 11th November 2009. This Code applies to all persons who have responsibility for rabbits kept as a companion animal. A separate code exists for farmed rabbits, which will be revised in due course and brought in line with this Code of Practice. Companion animals includes "*any animal kept by private individuals or groups for companionship, interest or hobby, and for breeding, supply or education related to their keeping for these purposes.*" (Companion Animal Welfare Council, 2003).

This Code of Practice is split into two parts. Part 1 is a summary of the details contained in the main Code of Practice, Part 2.

It is your responsibility to read the complete Code of Practice to fully understand your rabbit's welfare needs and what the law requires you to do.

Part one

**Summary of the
Code of
Practice for the Welfare
of Rabbits**

Section 1 – Environment

Make sure your rabbit has a suitable place to live.

Living area (hutch or cage)

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. Wood shavings or shredded paper should be used as a toilet area.

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.

Exercise area (run)

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. 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.

Hazards

Ensure your rabbit is kept away from potentially harmful substances.

Security

Whether you keep your rabbit outside or indoors, ensure that it is kept within a secure area to prevent it from escaping and to stop other animals getting in, any unwelcome visitors or even theft.

Travel

Make sure your rabbit is transported safely. On long journeys you should regularly offer food, water and a litter tray within the safe confines of the stationary vehicle.

Rabbits should not be left unattended in a vehicle in warm weather. **This can be life threatening.**

When you are away

You must arrange for your rabbit to be cared for by a suitable person if you are away from home. A responsible person must attend to your rabbit every single day.

Section 2 – Diet

Make sure your rabbit has a balanced diet that meets its nutritional needs.

Your rabbit must have access to fresh clean water at all times and a well-balanced diet.

The bulk of your rabbit's daily diet should consist of hay or grass which should be available at all times. Green plants and a small amount of high quality specialist rabbit foods should make up the remainder.

Do not make any sudden changes to your rabbit's diet as this could upset its digestive system and make it very ill.

Healthy Weight

Your rabbit should not be too fat or too thin. Ideally you should easily be able to feel its ribs.

Other dietary needs

Some rabbits have different dietary needs. Your vet or pet care specialist can advise you about the care of your rabbit in these circumstances.

Section 3 – Behaviour

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.

Training

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.

Signs of Stress

Watch your rabbit closely for unusual behaviour. If unsure, speak to your vet or a pet care specialist.

Boredom

You should ensure that 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.

Section 4 – Company

Make sure your rabbits' social needs are met.

Socialisation

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.

Relations with other animals and people

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.

Number of animals

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 section 5).

Section 5 – Health & Welfare

You must ensure your rabbit is in good health

Health care

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 your rabbit is treated promptly by a vet if it is injured or ill.

Rabbits try to avoid attracting attention from predators by only looking unwell when they are very ill. This is why changes in behaviour, including not eating, may indicate that your rabbit is ill.

Take your rabbit for regular health checks; you can then be advised about routine health care such as neutering, vaccinations (e.g. Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD)) and parasite control (e.g. fleas), as well as any health problems your rabbit may have.

Grooming

You should ensure that your rabbit's coat is properly groomed. A pet care specialist may be able to advise you about coat care. Front teeth and nails should be checked at least once a week as these can grow quickly. Only a vet should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth.

Identification

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.

Part 2

Code of Practice for the Welfare of Rabbits

What is a rabbit and what does it do?

It is only by understanding rabbits that we can provide for their physical and behavioural needs. Whilst we may think we know what they want or need to keep them healthy and happy, that can sometimes be quite different from what they actually want or need.

All of our rabbits are descended from the wild European rabbit, whose Latin name *Oryctolagus cuniculus* means 'Hare like digger of underground passages'. This name describes the rabbit's basic behaviour of living underground in a burrow, emerging on the surface in the evening and returning below ground soon after daybreak. Rabbits spend much of their time in dark or low light conditions. They do not like bright lights.

Wild rabbits are in constant danger when they are above ground. In their native Spain rabbits are eaten by over 20 different species of predators. Similarly, in the UK, predators including foxes, cats, birds and stoats also catch and eat wild and domestic rabbits. The fact that they are prey animals affects how and what they eat, how they communicate with each other and how they spend their time. This is the same for the domestic rabbits we keep. Understanding that rabbits are prey animals helps us provide a suitable diet and environment to ensure their welfare.

Rabbits eat grasses and herbs. They have adapted in the dry landscape of southern Spain, an area of hot summers and little rainfall, with poor quality herbage. Their teeth and digestive system are designed for this poor quality, high fibre food. They slice the grass stems with their specially shaped, sharp, front teeth and grind them with their back teeth. Their teeth grow continuously throughout their lives. Rabbits spend about 70% of the time they are awake eating.

Rabbits are social creatures, living in stable groups of between 2 and 10 individuals. Groups of two are usually a male and female, but females normally outnumber males in larger groups. The close bonds that form between individuals within a group and the companionship they enjoy helps the rabbits feel safe and secure and gives them and their offspring the best chance of survival. Amongst the adult males of a group there is a hierarchy, whereas females tend to live in a state of mutual tolerance, though during the breeding season this can break into serious fights which can be fatal.

Though social animals, rabbits do not have extravagant greeting displays or noisy communication signals, unlike cats and dogs. Rabbits are prey animals. Noisy or very visual displays would only serve to attract unwanted attention from predators.

Rabbits show very subtle changes in behaviour to indicate when they are in pain or are frightened. Often these are misunderstood or not even noticed by owners. Rabbits make a whole variety of sounds including grunts, growls, purrs and, if extremely frightened, they will scream. They also have a range of body and ear postures that can indicate rank, pleasure, pain or aggression.

Scent is an important means of communication for rabbits. It is useful for an animal that spends much of its time in the dark and for an animal with many predators that does not want to draw attention to itself.

Rabbits rub their chin over objects and other rabbits, but this can also include their owners and visitors. Rabbits of both sexes do this, though males more so, and can have quite damp and sticky chins caused by the secretions from the scent gland located there. Chin marking denotes territory and also acts as a means of identifying members of the rabbit's own group. It acts to both reassure the rabbit that it is amongst friends and on home territory and to deter intruders.

Rabbits also deposit scent with their faeces. Rabbits pass hard, small droppings as they move around, especially when feeding. Rabbits will scrape the ground near the boundaries of their territory and deposit a few droppings there as markers. They also create latrines, and it is this natural behaviour that makes rabbits so easy to housetrain. Latrines are used by all members of the group and, in the wild, can be made up of thousands of tightly packed faecal pellets. They are usually located on slightly high points, like an old tree stump or molehill. The latrines provide a clear signal to other rabbits. To those of the group they represent a boundary sign saying this is home ground, to others they act as a warning, a 'Do not enter' sign.

Rabbits also deposit scent through spraying urine. Unlike cats and dogs that tend to spray objects in their environment, rabbits spray each other, and, not infrequently, people or other animals they live with! They do this by running past, twisting their hindquarters and squirting a jet of urine over the target. Predominately a male behaviour this is sometimes directed at other males or intruders, but more usually it is part of the courtship ritual.

Rabbits are intelligent animals. They are very curious about their environment and any changes that happen within it. This is important in the wild as they need to know if any of their routes to the safety of their burrow have changed in case they have to run away from a predator.

Rabbits are animals that are very easily frightened. They can also remember what has frightened them. In the wild rabbits can be attacked by birds from the air, by animals on ground and even when below ground in their burrows. Thus, wild and domestic rabbits are very alert to danger. Their first response is to freeze, but if the danger comes too close then they will run away. Only if there is no route of escape do they tend to fight. A common situation where this may

occur, is a rabbit that is scared of being picked up. It will attempt to escape by running round its living area; it may then turn around and bite because it cannot get away. Rabbits are scared by sudden movements, loud and sudden noises, bright lights and strong smells. In the UK every year, many thousands of rabbits are given up to rescue shelters, often because their behaviour has been misunderstood and they have resorted to aggression. Such behaviour is indicative of suffering, a welfare issue as much as a health problem.

The information in this Code of Practice should enable you to provide a welfare friendly environment for your rabbit, so that you and it can have an enjoyable relationship.

Summary rabbit facts.

Rabbits:	Males are called bucks and females are called does. Baby rabbits are called kits.
Herbivores	plant eaters, mostly high fibre grass and herbs
Specialist	have continuously growing teeth, produce soft droppings (caecotrophs) which they normally eat and hard waste droppings
Prey species	have many predators e.g. owls, buzzards, foxes, dogs and cats
Social	need company, preferably that of other rabbits
Active	need space
Curious	need mental stimulation
Fearful	need places to hide
Life expectancy:	8 to 12 years (can be longer)
Adult body weight:	1 to 8 Kg (this varies with breed and sex)
Pregnancy:	Most litters will be born between 30 to 33 days
Litter size:	4 to 12 (average = 7) kits in a litter. The size of the litter depends on the breed of the rabbit. Generally smaller dwarf breeds will have litters of 2-4, medium breeds will have litters of 4-6, and larger breeds will have litters of 6-10.
Weaning age	5-6 weeks

Section 1: Environment

Its need for a suitable environment

- 1.1 This section offers guidance on providing your rabbit with a suitable place to live.
- 1.2 In this document:
 - **Living area** refers to the resting and sleeping accommodation (e.g. a cage or hutch).
 - **Run** refers to the exercise area.
- 1.3 A rabbit's environment is where it lives - not just where it sleeps, eats, exercises and goes to the toilet, but any place that it has access to. The environment also includes all the objects a rabbit comes into contact with and the materials, such as bedding, that it needs to make use of to stay healthy and happy. Consideration should be given to providing sufficient space with adequate ventilation, with protection from predators and extremes of temperature.
- 1.4 A rabbit should have access to appropriate places and provisions to do all of the following:
 - Rest and sleep in comfort;
 - Eat and drink undisturbed;
 - Exercise and explore safely;
 - Hide when afraid or feeling insecure;
 - Shelter from the weather including wind, cold, rain and sun;
 - Interact with (and escape from) companions;
 - Play if it wants to;
 - Chew whenever it feels the need;
 - Mark its scent on solid objects; and
 - Look out for companions or danger.

Living area

- 1.5 Your rabbit's living area should have at least two compartments: a darkened sheltered area for sleeping and another for eating / relaxing.

- 1.6 The living area should be as large as possible. At least:
- big enough for your rabbit to lie down and stretch out comfortably in all directions;
 - be high enough for it to stand up on its back legs without its ears touching the top; and
 - be long enough so that it can move around, feed and drink. As a guide, your rabbit should be able to take three hops from one end to another as a minimum.

If your rabbit lives outside

- 1.7 Your rabbit's living area should be:
- sturdy, water proof and easy to clean;
 - raised off the floor; and
 - placed in a sheltered position.
- 1.8 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.

Keeping your rabbit inside

- 1.9 House rabbits should be provided with a secure area where they can feel safe, sleep, toilet and be confined to when unsupervised.
- 1.10 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.

Bedding

- 1.11 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.

Exercise Area – the run

- 1.12 Rabbits are very active, athletic animals. To exercise appropriately, they must be able to crawl, hop and run about. Jumping on and off raised areas, such as appropriate sturdy platforms or hay bales, helps rabbits 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.

- 1.13 Your rabbit should have daily access to a run where it can run and jump. The run should be as large as possible to allow your rabbit to stretch upwards to full height and to run, as opposed to just hop. The run should contain raised areas for jumping and preferably should be outside with access to a grassy area. It should be escape proof and secure enough to prevent any threat from predators. The run should provide shade and protection from the wind, and rain.
- 1.14 Where more than one animal is kept together, there must be a sufficient number of areas to shelter from the sun, wind and rain so that all the animals can shelter and choose to be in contact with others or to be alone.

Indoors and outdoors: protection from predators

- 1.15 Living areas and runs should be secure from predators such as dogs, cats, foxes, rats and birds of prey.
- 1.16 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 Section 4).
- 1.17 There should always be at least the same number of hiding places in any enclosure as there are animals.
- 1.18 Hiding places should be an appropriate size for your rabbit and should have more than one entrance.
- 1.19 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.

Ventilation and temperature

- 1.20 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.
- 1.21 Outdoors a cover, blanket or piece of old carpet could offer added protection on cold nights provided there is enough ventilation.
- 1.22 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.

Hygiene

- 1.23 Part of providing a suitable environment is making sure that it is safe, clean and hygienic.
- 1.24 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.
- 1.25 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.
- 1.26 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.
- 1.27 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.
- 1.28 Run areas should be changed, or the area where you put the run regularly cleaned.
- 1.29 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.

Protection from poison and other hazards

- 1.30 You should be careful when using either herbicides or pesticides.
- 1.31 You should not allow your rabbit access to flower beds or other areas that are likely to contain poisonous plants.
- 1.32 If your rabbit is indoors, it should not have access to electrical cables as they may harm themselves by chewing through them.
- 1.33 Household cleaning materials, medicines or other products intended for people or other animals should be kept out of reach.

- 1.34 In the house, potentially poisonous plants should not be kept or should be placed where your rabbit cannot reach them.
- 1.35 You should contact your vet promptly if you think your rabbit has come into contact with anything that could harm it.

Travel

- 1.36 You may need to transport your rabbit by car or other vehicle.
- 1.37 Rabbits should be transported in a secure pet carrier of adequate size and with good ventilation.
- 1.38 Your rabbit should be familiar with the carrier to help it feel at ease and reduce the stress of transportation.
- 1.39 The carrier should be secured firmly in place with a seat belt, or wedged in the foot well of the car, making sure there is adequate ventilation.
- 1.40 The carrier should not be placed where your rabbit will become too hot, such as in direct sunlight or next to the car's heater. Do not put the carrier in the boot of a saloon car.
- 1.41 On long journeys you should regularly offer food, water and the use of a litter tray, but only within the safe confines of the vehicle when it has stopped.
- 1.42 Rabbits should not be left unattended in a car or other vehicle in warm weather. **This can be life threatening and you could be prosecuted for causing cruelty.** The temperature in the vehicle can become very high extremely quickly and cause heat stroke and even death.

When you are away

- 1.43 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.
- 1.44 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.

- 1.45 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.

Section 2: Diet

Its need for a healthy diet

2.1 This section offers guidance on providing your rabbit with a healthy diet.

Food

2.2 It is your responsibility to ensure that 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.

2.3 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.

2.4 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.

2.5 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.

2.6 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.

2.7 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.

2.8 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.

- 2.9 Changes in the amount your rabbit eats may indicate illness. See Section 5.

Water

- 2.10 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.
- 2.11 In cold weather, make sure that the water has not frozen.
- 2.12 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.
- 2.13 If the water is presented in a new way, your rabbit may refuse to drink and become dehydrated.

Healthy weight

- 2.14 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.

Other Dietary Needs

- 2.15 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.

Section 3: Behaviour

Its need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns

- 3.1 This section offers guidance about your rabbit's behaviour.
- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 Fear is a response that enables an animal to avoid dangerous situations. However, animals or people that are put in situations where they are constantly fearful become very stressed. This will affect their health and welfare.

Early experiences

- 3.4 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.
- 3.5 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.
- 3.6 Adult rabbits that have not had sufficient or appropriate early experiences may find it very difficult to cope with day-to-day life. They may find it very stressful and be very nervous, hiding away a great deal of the time. This may lead to fear-related aggression towards owners when they try to handle their rabbit.
- 3.7 When introducing a baby rabbit or an adult rabbit to new things, you should always provide it with the opportunity to escape to a safe hiding place. Forcing your rabbit to interact may lead to behaviour problems. A rabbit owner should make situations as relaxed and pleasant as possible for their rabbit so that it wants to investigate.
- 3.8 A prospective owner should be satisfied that the rabbit they are thinking of getting is old enough to live without help from its mother, which is when it is over 8 weeks of age. The rabbit should be bright and alert and should not

appear stressed or lethargic. You should find out what breed it is so you know how big it will grow.

- 3.9 Once your new rabbit is home, you should continue to gradually introduce it to being handled, people and normal sights and sounds, always ensuring it has a safe place to which it can retreat.

Signs of stress

- 3.10 Rabbits that are content will be calm and relaxed. They will nibble food, sit or lay out stretched and will be happy to approach and interact with people, other rabbits, and other animals and objects.

- 3.11 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.

- 3.12 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.

- 3.13 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.

- 3.14 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 (see Section 5);
- 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 (see 1.20)

Getting away from danger

- 3.15 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.
- 3.16 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).

Boredom and Frustration

- 3.17 Rabbits rely on you to provide everything for them, including entertainment. You should ensure that your rabbit has enough mental stimulation from you and from its environment to avoid boredom and frustration. A rabbit with nothing to do will quickly become unhealthy, unhappy and possibly aggressive.
- 3.18 It is your responsibility to provide opportunities for your rabbit to satisfy all of its behavioural needs.
- 3.19 You should provide your rabbit with the opportunity to be mentally stimulated. Suggestions include:
- foraging for food and having suitable objects to play with are excellent ways of ensuring a rabbit is kept properly occupied;
 - the company of another rabbit where appropriate (see Section 4). Rabbits are inquisitive animals and should be given the opportunity to investigate and spend time with unfamiliar items that are safe for them to chew; and
 - providing your rabbit with suitable materials that allow digging behaviour and areas to mark its territory with chin secretions, urine and droppings.

- 3.20 You should supervise the introduction of any new object to make sure that your rabbit is not frightened or stressed by its presence (see above for signs of stress).
- 3.21 Never shout 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.

Reproductive behaviour

- 3.22 Reproduction is one aspect of a rabbit's natural behaviour. However, owners should consider neutering pet rabbits for the reasons outlined in Sections 4 and 5.

Section 4: Company

Any need it has to be housed with, or apart from, other animals

- 4.1 This section offers guidance on providing your rabbit with suitable company. This section may not apply if you are planning to breed from your rabbit.
- 4.2 If you are planning to breed from your rabbit, you should seek advice from your pet care specialist. Unless a rabbit is being kept for breeding it should be neutered (see Section 5).
- 4.3 Rabbits are social animals and should ideally be kept with an appropriate companion.
- 4.4 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.
- 4.5 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 (see Section 3).
- 4.6 Many rabbits will choose to spend much of their time in the company of another friendly rabbit. An appropriate companion is a neutered rabbit of a similar size.
- 4.7 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.
- 4.8 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.
- 4.9 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.
- 4.10 A rabbit, whether kept alone or with other rabbits, should have the opportunity to interact with its owner for several hours a day.

Introducing and keeping rabbits together

- 4.11 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.

4.12 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.

4.13 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.

Section 5: Health and welfare

Its need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

5.1 This section offers guidance on the health and welfare of your rabbit.

Health care

5.2 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.

5.3 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 (see Section 2);
- provision of the right environment that minimises the risk of injury and disease (see Section 1);
- prompt action if a rabbit becomes ill or shows a change in its behaviour; and
- checking your rabbit daily.

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

Illness

5.5 You should be aware of the signs that indicate your rabbit is not well.

5.6 You should consult a vet if your rabbit shows any signs of illness or a change in behaviour.

5.7 Rabbits are prey animals and, to avoid attracting attention from predators, they often do not look ill until they are very unwell. They can become worse very quickly, so you need to act promptly.

5.8 Indications of illness may include:

- a change in behaviour, such as sitting still and hunched up;
- a change in eating and drinking habits, such as a lack of appetite or excessive drinking;
- signs of injury such as a swollen limb or walking in an abnormal way;
- signs of disease or illness, such as a discharge from the eye, ear or nose, difficulty in going to the toilet or diarrhoea;
- signs of pain, such as not wanting to be touched on parts of its body;
- teeth grinding;
- flinching;
- difficulties in breathing, especially if your rabbit is breathing through its mouth rather than its nose; and
- redness on skin around belly, bottom or on underside of feet.

Routine Health Check

5.9 You should check your rabbit regularly for signs of ill health. Listed here are the main health checks you should undertake:

Daily checks	Weekly checks
Behaviour - watch your rabbit at least once a day to ensure it is behaving normally as well as eating and drinking its usual amount.	Nails – check that they are an appropriate length and not damaged.
Feet – check for bald patches and sores.	
Fur – check for parasites, dandruff, patches of baldness, itchy sores, scaly patches, damp or weeping patches and wounds.	Teeth – ensure they are an appropriate length and shape.
Eyes – ensure they are clear and not weeping. Runny eyes are often signs of respiratory infection which can easily turn into pneumonia.	
Nose – ensure it is not runny. A runny nose is often a sign of respiratory infection which can easily turn into pneumonia.	
Ears – check for crusty wax.	Mouth – check for a wet chin or drooling. As rabbits are very clean animals it may not be easily spotted. However, the fur on their chest will be stained.
Rabbit's bottom – check your rabbit's	

bottom, as well as the floor of its living area, for signs of diarrhoea. A rabbit with diarrhoea should be seen by a vet promptly.		
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5.10 **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.

5.11 You should contact your vet immediately if you find maggots on your rabbit.

5.12 If your rabbit is having problems with soiling itself you should:

- ensure its fur is clean;
- ensure the floor of its living area is clean;
- ensure there is plenty of fibre (such as hay, but not grass cuttings) in your rabbit's diet;
- reduce the amount of vegetables and fruit in the diet; and
- seek professional help promptly.

5.13 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. Potential problems may include:

- painful stress on their joints;
- sore feet;
- a decreased ability to exercise;
- heat stress;
- inadequate diet as they are unable to reach to catch the soft pellets from their bottom that they need to eat in order to get all the goodness from their food; and
- it can lead to fly strike as it cannot clean itself properly.

Grooming

5.14 Rabbits naturally moult at the end of the winter and summer but our varying temperatures, as well as central heating, means that many rabbits are constantly moulting (shedding fur). Regular grooming is needed to keep your rabbit comfortable and prevent it swallowing lots of fur as this can cause a blockage of the bowel. Rabbits with a short coat should be groomed weekly but longhaired rabbits should be groomed at least once a day to avoid matts

and tangles. Longhaired rabbits can also be clipped by a vet or pet care specialist.

Nails

5.15 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.

Dental Care

5.16 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.

5.17 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.

5.18 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.

5.19 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.

Neutering

5.20 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.

5.21 If a female rabbit is not neutered it can:

- be aggressive to other rabbits;
- try to make a nest by digging, which can damage its nails; and
- develop a life-threatening womb infection or cancer.

5.22 If a male rabbit is not neutered it can:

- be aggressive to other rabbits;
- spray urine; and
- mount other rabbits and animals.

- 5.23 Un-neutered rabbits prevented from breeding may suffer frustration causing behaviour problems. These are some of the reasons why rabbits not kept for breeding should be neutered.
- 5.24 Rabbits are very sociable animals, and should be provided with a companion where possible (see Section 4). Animals that have not been neutered might not be able to be kept with other rabbits. The age when rabbits can be neutered varies with the rabbit's gender and breed. Females are usually neutered when they reach sexual maturity at the age of 4 months and males at the age of 3 months.
- 5.25 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.
- 5.26 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.
- 5.27 The pros and cons of whether to neuter your rabbit, as well as timing, should be discussed with your vet.

Identification

- 5.28 You should not allow your rabbit to escape. However, if it does escape and is found, then permanent identification such as a microchip will assist in re-uniting you with your rabbit. If your rabbit is to be permanently identified, this should be done by a suitably qualified person.

What to do if your rabbit is missing

- 5.29 You should contact local authority animal wardens, vets as well as local rescue centres. You can also put up notices locally.

Appendix 1

The Law

The Animal Welfare Act 2006

The following sections of the Act are referred to in the Code and are set out here for ease of reference:

The boxes below contain extracts from the relevant sections of the Act.

The box shaded grey summarises the relevant offences and penalties in the Act.

Section 3 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 provides:

Responsibility for animals

(1) In this Act, references to a person responsible for an animal are to a person responsible for an animal whether on a permanent or temporary basis.

(2) In this Act, references to being responsible for an animal include being in charge of it.

(3) For the purposes of this Act, a person who owns an animal shall always be regarded as being a person who is responsible for it.

(4) For the purposes of this Act, a person shall be treated as responsible for any animal for which a person under the age of 16 years of whom he has actual care and control is responsible.

Section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 provides:

Unnecessary suffering

(1) A person commits an offence if –

- (a) an act of his, or a failure of his to act, causes an animal to suffer,
- (b) he knew, or ought reasonably to have known, that the act, or failure to act, would have that effect or be likely to do so,
- (c) the animal is a protected animal, and
- (d) the suffering is unnecessary.

(2) A person commits an offence if-

- (a) he is responsible for an animal,
- (b) an act, or failure to act, of another person causes the animal to suffer,
- (c) he permitted that to happen or failed to take such steps (whether by way

of supervising the other person or otherwise) as were reasonable in all the circumstances to prevent that happening, and
(d) the suffering is unnecessary.

(3) The considerations to which it is relevant to have regard when determining for the purposes of this section whether suffering is unnecessary include –

- (a) whether the suffering could reasonably have been avoided or reduced;
 - (b) whether the conduct which caused the suffering was in compliance with any relevant enactment or any relevant provisions of a licence or code of practice issued under an enactment;
 - (c) whether the conduct which caused the suffering was for a legitimate purpose, such as –
 - (i) the purpose of benefiting the animal, or
 - (ii) the purpose of protecting a person, property or another animal;
 - (d) whether the suffering was proportionate to the purpose of the conduct concerned;
 - (e) whether the conduct concerned was in all the circumstances that of a reasonably competent and humane person.
- (4) Nothing in this section applies to the destruction of an animal in an appropriate and humane manner.

Section 9 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 provides:

Duty of person responsible for animal to ensure welfare

(1) A person commits an offence if he does not take such steps as are reasonable in all the circumstances to ensure that the needs of an animal for which he is responsible are met to the extent required by good practice.

(2) For the purposes of this Act, an animal's needs shall be taken to include-

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

(3) The circumstances to which it is relevant to have regard when applying subsection (1) include, in particular –

- (a) any lawful purpose for which the animal is kept, and
- (b) any lawful activity undertaken in relation to the animal.

(4) Nothing in this section applies to the destruction of an animal in an appropriate and humane manner.

Section 14 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 provides:

Codes of Practice

...(3) A person's failure to comply with a provision of a code of practice issued under this section shall not of itself render him liable to proceedings of any kind.

(4) In any proceedings against a person for an offence under this Act or an offence under regulations under section 12 or 13 –

(a) failure to comply with a relevant provision of a code of practice issued under this section may be relied upon as tending to establish liability, and

(b) compliance with a relevant provision of such a code of practice may be relied upon as tending to negative liability.

Offences and Penalties

A person who is convicted of an offence under section 4 of the Act may be imprisoned for a maximum period of 51 weeks* and/or fined up to £20,000. If they are convicted of an offence under section 9 (failing to ensure the animal's welfare) they can be imprisoned for the same maximum period and fined up to level 5 on the standard scale – the maximum is currently £5000.

Proceedings may be brought up to 3 years after the offence was committed but must be brought within 6 months after sufficient evidence on which to base the prosecution becomes available to the prosecuting authority. Criminal prosecutions under the Act will proceed in the Magistrates Court.

*The maximum period of imprisonment will be 6 months until section 281(5) of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 comes into force (when it will be 51 weeks).

Sources of 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 the 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
 - Welsh Assembly Government: www.wales.gov.uk/animalwelfare. This website provides information on the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and enables you to download copies of the Code of Practice for the Welfare of Rabbits and for other types of animal.

Although this Code is only applicable to owners and keepers of pet rabbits, a Code of Practice for the Welfare of Livestock - Rabbits can be downloaded from <http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/welfare/farmed/othersps/rabbits/pb0080/rabcod e.htm>