



RABBITS' HOUSING NEEDS

Rabbits are active, intelligent, social animals; they have complex welfare needs that must be met if they are to be happy and healthy. Providing housing that meets rabbits' complex environmental and behavioural needs is an important part of responsible ownership.



This document intends to:

- 1. Explain the RSPCA's concerns about traditional rabbit hutches.*
- 2. Outline the proactive steps the RSPCA is taking to develop evidence-based housing guidelines.*
- 3. Provide owners with expert-agreed housing advice for the intervening period, until evidence-based guidelines are available (end of 2012).*



OWNERS' LEGAL DUTY OF CARE

Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, rabbit owners are required by law to meet their rabbits' welfare needs; these include providing a suitable environment. There is no one 'perfect' way to care for all rabbits, because every rabbit and every situation is different. Rabbits are now kept indoors as house pets as well as outside. It is up to you how you look after your rabbits but by law you must take reasonable steps to ensure that you meet their welfare needs, which include:

- [Environment](#) - providing a suitable environment,
- [Diet](#) - providing a healthy diet, including fresh water,
- [Behaviour](#) - allowing them to behave normally,
- [Company](#) - providing them with appropriate company,
- [Health](#) - protecting them from pain suffering, injury and disease.



You'll find more information on how to meet rabbits' welfare needs on the RSPCA website at: www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits.





TRADITIONAL HOUSING MAY COMPROMISE RABBIT WELFARE

The limited research regarding pet rabbits' environmental needs suggest that many pet rabbits may be housed inadequately. Indeed, just over a third of the calls to the RSPCA about incidents of cruelty or neglect to domestic rabbits relate to concerns about inappropriate accommodation.

The RSPCA believes the traditional husbandry method of keeping rabbits permanently confined in small hutches is totally inappropriate for the long-term housing of rabbits kept as pets.



Hutches were originally used when rabbits were kept in backyards as a source of cheap meat; rabbits were housed in hutches on short-term basis whilst they fattened up. The traditional method of housing rabbits in small hutches restricts the opportunities available for appropriate interaction with their environment due to the limited space available for the adequate expression of important behaviours, such as hopping, stretching and rearing. As active animals, a lack of exercise and opportunities to perform a range of behaviours can result in weight gain, health and behaviour problems.

There is therefore an urgent need to research and understand the housing needs of pet rabbits and then to develop comprehensive evidence-based housing guidelines for them.



WORKING TOWARDS AN EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTION

In 2007, the RSPCA commissioned the University of Lincoln to undertake a study to investigate the housing needs of pet rabbits. The study concluded that pet rabbits are motivated to have access to more space than is available in a traditional rabbit hutch. Rabbits were more active and spent more time interacting with their environment when housed in larger enclosures. The small floor area and low height of traditional hutches was found to restrict rabbits from expressing important behaviours such as rearing and hopping. The study concluded that traditional hutches may compromise rabbit welfare.



The RSPCA is keen to increase understanding of pet rabbits' housing needs and so is funding a further scientific study at the University of Bristol. This study will investigate the housing needs of pair-housed rabbits and will assist the RSPCA in understanding the housing requirements of a pair of rabbits. This is important because the RSPCA recommends that rabbits are housed in compatible pairs, as rabbits are social animals and normally prefer to be kept with at least one other friendly rabbit.



Both studies will assist the RSPCA in developing practical, evidence-based housing guidance for pet rabbits. The Society hopes to make these guidelines available to the public by the end of 2012. Buying suitable housing that meets a rabbit's welfare needs is difficult at present and the RSPCA hopes to be in a position to offer expert advice to manufacturers and retailers in the future, once the guidelines have been developed.



CURRENT RSPCA HOUSING ADVICE

As research to understand rabbits' housing needs is still ongoing, the following advice has been produced using the available scientific literature, practical experience and the opinion of a panel of rabbit experts (with expertise in veterinary medicine, welfare science and behaviour).

The RSPCA does not have minimum dimensions for rabbit housing that are available to the public at this time. It is anticipated that the housing guidelines published at the end of 2012 will include minimum dimensions for rabbits of different sizes. Please note: *The RSPCA has not endorsed or approved any rabbit housing products at this time.*



Rabbits' environmental and behavioural needs

- Rabbits are active animals. They need the opportunity to hop, run, jump, dig, stand fully upright on their back legs and stretch out fully when lying down. Provide your rabbits with a secure living environment that is large enough for them to exercise in and stand up fully on their back legs without their ears touching the roof.



- You should provide both a large living area and a secure shelter where your rabbits can rest, feel safe and are protected from predators and extremes of weather and temperature. Ensure all areas of your rabbits' environment are well ventilated, dry and draught free. This is important as living in a draughty, damp, hot, poorly ventilated or dirty environment can cause your rabbits to suffer and become ill.
- Rabbits must be able to hide from things that scare them. As they are a prey species, they need to be able to hide in a secure place, away from the sight and smell of predators (e.g. foxes, cats, dogs, ferrets and birds of prey). Make sure your rabbits have constant access to safe hiding places where they can escape if they feel afraid.
- Rabbits need regular and frequent opportunities to exercise. Make sure your rabbits have opportunities to exercise every day to stay fit and healthy.
- Rabbits are intelligent. If your rabbits are bored, and do not have enough to do, they may suffer. Provide your rabbits with safe toys to play with and chew, and regular and frequent opportunities to play with other friendly rabbits and/or people. Provide your rabbits with constant access to good-quality hay; this is important for their dental and digestive health as well as their emotional wellbeing. Provide your rabbits with suitable materials that allow digging behaviour, such as a sand box, and areas to mark their territory with chin secretions, urine and droppings.



- Rabbits are most active in the early morning and late afternoon, and overnight. This is when they like to graze, forage for food and be sociable, so every effort should be made to ensure rabbits have access to a large area to exercise at these times.





- **Give your rabbits' regular (ideally constant) access to a suitable place where they can go to the toilet. If you provide a litter tray, use newspaper, hay/straw, shredded paper and/or natural wood or paper-based non-clumping, non-expanding cat litter. The toilet area(s) should be separate to where your rabbits sleep; a hay rack can be placed over the litter tray to encourage hay-eating.**
- **Rabbits are inquisitive. If there are hazards (e.g. electric wires, house plants, foam, toy stuffing) within their environment they may easily injure themselves. Therefore make sure that where your rabbits live is safe, secure and free from hazards.**
- **Make sure your rabbits can access all the things they need (space, food, water, safe hiding places, companion rabbit(s), toilet area(s) and toys) at all times.**



A living enclosure

A traditional small hutch should not be the sole and permanent home of any rabbit as it will not meet the rabbit's need for exercise and stimulation. **The RSPCA recommends that rabbit housing comprises a living enclosure containing a main shelter, with additional hiding places and enrichment.**



The living enclosure should be considered as the rabbits' home area and should allow the rabbits to perform normal locomotor behaviours such as hopping, running, jumping and foraging. As examples, the living enclosure could be a traditional exercise 'run' outside, an indoor pen or a 'rabbit-proofed'¹ room within the owners' home. Rabbits should have access to the living enclosure at all times unless it is absolutely necessary to secure them in the shelter. Rabbits are most active in the early morning and late afternoon, and overnight. This is when they like to graze, forage for food and be sociable, so every effort should be made to ensure rabbits have access to a large area to exercise at these times.



The main shelter acts as an area for resting and hiding and should be a place where your rabbits feel secure. The main shelter should be large enough for all your rabbits to rest in together if they choose to. It could be a large hutch or a robust box inside, or attached to, the living enclosure.

The living enclosure and shelter should be securely connected at all times (except to secure the rabbit in the shelter if absolutely necessary).



¹ A 'rabbit-proofed' room means a room where hazards such as electrical wires have been covered to prevent rabbits chewing them, any indoor plants and valuables have been placed out of reach and any 'no-go' areas are blocked off.



First principles in rabbit housing

As an *absolute minimum*, each of your rabbits should be able to perform the following behaviours within the enclosure and shelter at any time they choose:

1. Stand up on their hind legs without their ears touching the roof [For a medium sized rabbit this behaviour requires a height of at least 75cm].
2. Lie fully outstretched in any direction.
3. Take an unhindered sequence of consecutive hops².
4. Turn around unimpeded.



Check that your rabbits, when fully grown, will be able to perform these four behaviours within each section of their housing (both the main shelter and the living enclosure) as an absolute minimum. The RSPCA does not recommend that owners of baby rabbits buy 'starter homes' for their pets, but would encourage owners to buy or build a home that will be large enough to house all their rabbits for the whole of their lives.



Social housing



Rabbits are social animals and normally prefer to be with another friendly rabbit. The RSPCA recommends that rabbits are kept with at least one other friendly rabbit in compatible pairs or groups. Whilst there are exceptions where an individual rabbit must be housed alone this should only be for a good welfare reason, as advised by an expert, such as a vet or qualified animal behaviourist.

When choosing housing for your rabbits, bear in mind the number of rabbits it is intended for. The more rabbits kept, the larger their housing will need to be as they will need space both to interact with one another, and be alone for a while if they choose.



Suitable materials and housing design

The housing must be robust, draught-proof, damp-proof, escape-proof and predator-proof, contain shady areas and be well ventilated (allow a free flow of air). Materials must be chew resistant and any waterproofing/preservative treatments must be non-toxic to rabbits.

Scientific studies have found that rabbits show a preference for having separate areas for eating, resting and toileting. Therefore separate areas should be provided for these

² N.B. The [Welsh Code of Practice for the welfare of rabbits](http://www.welshcodeofpractice.org.uk/) states that as a guide a rabbit should be able to hop three times from one end of the shelter to the other end, as a minimum.





different activities within the rabbit housing. The housing should provide enough space for the number of rabbits living in it to all perform each activity comfortably within the designated area at the same time.

No pet rabbit housing should have wire/barred floors. Scientific studies have found that rabbits have a clear preference for solid flooring and in addition rabbits can get sore feet and hocks if kept on wire floors. Therefore solid, non-slip flooring is needed for all rabbit shelters [See below for information on securing living enclosure floors].



Protection from predators

Outside shelters should be raised above the ground to help deter predators and to prevent the shelter from becoming damp. Any wire mesh on the shelter or the outside living enclosure should be of a heavy gauge to prevent potential predation and deter rodents, and any fastenings should be strong. The RSPCA does not recommend living enclosures or shelters with wire floors (see above). However, living enclosures should be secured in a way that prevents the rabbits from escaping (e.g. by digging out) or predators from entering. One possible option includes digging down and placing a wire bottom to the run below ground level and then covering this with soil and grass.



Location of the housing

Rabbit housing should not be situated near draughts or in direct sunlight. Areas of shade should be provided in the living enclosure. Housing should be located away from the sight and smell of potential predators, such as foxes, birds of prey, ferrets and unfamiliar dogs and cats, and several hiding places should be included with the living enclosure to ensure rabbits can hide when afraid. Housing should be located in a quiet and calm part of the owner's home or garden, away from areas where children play (except when children are supervised). If rabbits are housed indoors, their housing should be located away from noisy household appliances (televisions and stereos emit frequencies that may distress rabbits) and the temperature should be monitored carefully to ensure rabbits do not become too hot, as rabbits are prone to heatstroke.



Cleaning the housing

The toilet area(s) should be cleaned every day. The whole home should be thoroughly cleaned regularly, approximately once a week. [Please note these cleaning frequencies are given as a guide, if excessive soiling occurs, the affected area / whole home should be cleaned when found]. Cleaning is potentially stressful for rabbits so after cleaning, a small amount of the used bedding should be placed back into the toilet area / housing as this will smell familiar to the rabbits and help to reduce the stress caused by cleaning. Only non-toxic cleaning products should be used and the housing should be dry before the rabbits are replaced in it.





Inspecting for damage

Housing should be inspected regularly for damage and any potential injury points or hazards. Housing should be repaired or replaced as necessary.

Providing bedding

Appropriate, safe absorbent substrates and bedding materials should be provided in the shelter and toilet areas to keep the rabbits comfortable and warm. Suitable absorbent substrate materials include newspaper and dust-free (non cedar) wood shavings. Suitable insulating bedding materials include dust-free hay and shredded paper.



Providing safe hiding places

Rabbits are prey animals and therefore need safe hiding places within the living enclosure to allow them to hide, rest and withdraw from their companions when they want to. These hiding places should be in addition to the main shelter. Suitable hiding places can include cardboard boxes and tunnels.

There should be at least as many hiding places as there are rabbits with preferably one more in addition. Some hiding places should be large enough for all the rabbits to hide/rest together if they choose to, whilst other hiding places should be small enough to allow one rabbit to hide/rest alone. Hiding places should ideally have at least two openings to prevent dominant animals becoming territorial or subordinates becoming trapped inside.

The hiding places should not take up so much space in the rabbits' enclosure that rabbits cannot move around freely (i.e. they must be able to run, hop and jump unimpeded).



The quality of the space – Providing an interesting environment

It is not just the quantity of space that is important - The quality of the space is also very important in ensuring rabbit welfare.

Rabbits are inquisitive and need a stimulating and interesting environment that allows them to perform normal activities and behaviours. Ensuring your rabbits have an interesting environment can include providing:

- **safe toys that allow normal behaviours such as chewing, digging and chin marking on objects;**
- **additional hiding places;**
- **different levels and platforms (provided the rabbits are physically fit to avoid injury);**
- **opportunities for rabbits to interact and play with other friendly rabbits and/or people;**
- **additional hay to encourage natural foraging behaviour. Hay can be provided in a variety of ways, including via hay racks and within cardboard tubes and boxes;**





- and presenting food in a more stimulating way to promote natural foraging behaviour (e.g. scatter feeding pellets amongst the hay, placing pellets in puzzle feeders, stuffing hay into cardboard tubes).



USEFUL LINKS:

- **Rabbits' welfare needs** : www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits
- **Rabbits' environmental needs** : www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/environment
- **Animal Welfare Act** : www.rspca.org.uk/in-action/changingthelaw/whatwechanged/animalwelfareact
- **Find a vet** : www.rspca.org.uk/findavet
- **Find a clinical animal behaviourist** : www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist
- **Winter care advice** – PDF available to download from the **rabbit health webpage** : www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/health
- **Welsh Code of Practice for the welfare of rabbits** : <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/animalwelfare/pets/codesofpractice/codeofpractocewelfarerabbits/?lang=en>



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