

Code of Practice for the Welfare of Rabbits



Department of
**Agriculture and
Rural Development**

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AN ROINN
**Talmhaíochta agus
Forbartha Tuaithe**

MÁINISTRIE O
**Fairms an
Kintra Fordèrin**

Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

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Introduction

This introduction, which is not part of the Code of Practice, tells you about the Code and provides advice on owning a rabbit.

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 Welfare of Animals Act 2011 (“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.

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 as they normally live for 7-12 years. You control your pet’s lifestyle so 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 1.

This Code of Practice is issued under section 16 of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011.

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.

Section 1 – Environment

Need for a suitable environment

- 1.1** 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.
- 1.2** 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.

Resting area

- 1.3** A rabbit requires a resting area and an exercise area (which is described later). Your rabbit's resting area should have at least two compartments. A darkened sheltered area for sleeping away from noise and another for eating/relaxing. All areas should be well ventilated, dry and draught free as damp, poorly ventilated, hot or dirty environments can cause illness. The resting area should ideally be permanently attached to an exercise area to which the rabbit has free access at all times.
- 1.4** The resting 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 fully stretched 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 an absolute minimum. *For a fully grown average breed of rabbit this can equate to around 150/180cms in length and 60cms in height.*)

In many cases the resting area is bought at the same time as the rabbit and this is when the rabbit is usually young and not fully developed.

Therefore consideration needs to be given to future accommodation requirements and revising the rabbit(s) living area accordingly as the rabbit grows in size.

NOTE: If you keep more than one rabbit together, there should be enough space so that each adult rabbit can behave as outlined at 1.4 above. There should also be safe hiding places where each rabbit can choose to be alone if it wants to be.

If your rabbit lives outside

1.5 Rabbits can be kept outdoors all year round but ideally their resting area should be brought into a shed or unused garage with natural light and ventilation for the winter months or otherwise protected from bad weather (for example in the form of tarpaulin). In addition to the resting area an exercise run should always be available. Many consider a small shed fitted with a cat flap into a secure run as a good permanent accommodation.

1.6 If you are planning to keep your rabbits outdoors, make sure the resting area is:

- draught-free and fully weatherproof;
- placed in a sheltered position (out of direct sun and prevailing wind);
- sturdy and easy to clean;
- raised off the ground to keep the floor dry;
- protected from predators;
- fitted with secure catches to prevent escape or theft, and
- has an attached safe exercise run.

Never house your rabbits outdoors if you purchase them in late autumn/ winter as they won't have had a chance to build up a winter coat and may not survive. A constant supply of fresh water needs to be provided at all times. It is important to check the water bottle and food bowl as they are prone to freezing in low temperatures. If rabbits are unable to drink they become dehydrated leading to health problems.

Keeping your rabbit inside

1.7 Rabbits can live quite happily indoors and they should be provided with a secure accommodation where they can feel safe, sleep, use a particular area as a toilet, and be confined to when unsupervised. If let loose indoors particular attention should be given to restricting access to areas where there are electrical cables which rabbits may chew through. As rabbits are prone to heat stroke attention should also be given to where their accommodation is situated as central heating systems can cause health problems.

Bedding

- 1.8** 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. Use of wood shavings as bedding material should be avoided.

Exercise area - the run

- 1.9** 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, 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.
- 1.10** Your rabbit should have daily access to an exercise area (the run). 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. The run should be moved regularly to avoid any chance of burrowing out or overgrazing of the grass. Rocks, large terracotta plant pots, logs and chew toys can be provided within the run to prevent boredom. The run 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 if the living area has been brought into a shed or garage during the autumn/winter period an exercise area must also be provided.
- 1.11** 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

- 1.12** Living areas and runs should be secure from predators such as dogs, cats, foxes, rats and birds of prey.
- 1.13** 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.
- 1.14** 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 ideally have more than one entrance.
- 1.15** 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

- 1.16** Rabbits should be protected from bad weather as well as strong sunlight or changes in temperature. This includes your rabbit's living area and run.
- 1.17** Outdoors a cover, blanket or piece of old carpet or other insulation material could offer added protection on cold nights provided there is enough ventilation.
- 1.18** 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 (as rabbits can suffer from overheating) and loud noises.

Hygiene

- 1.19** Part of providing a suitable environment is making sure that it is safe, clean and hygienic.
- 1.20** Newspaper or shredded paper should be used as a toilet area. Alternatively a litter tray can be provided with non clumping, non toxic material. Wood shavings containing pine or clay based cat litters should not be used as they can be hazardous to rabbits.
- 1.21** 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.
- 1.22** 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.
- 1.23** You should:
 - use a good quality, pet-friendly disinfectant that, if necessary, you rinse off and allow to dry before allowing your rabbit to enter, and
 - 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, by recognising its own scent.
- 1.24** 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

- 1.25 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.
- 1.26 In the house, potentially poisonous plants should not be kept or should be placed where your rabbit cannot reach them. Household cleaning materials including liquids, medicines or other products intended for people or other animals should also be kept out of reach. You should contact your vet promptly if you think your rabbit has come into contact with anything that could harm it.

Travel

- 1.27 You may need to transport your rabbit by car or other vehicle. 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.
- 1.28 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. 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.
- 1.29 Your rabbit should have access to food in its carrier and on long journeys you should regularly offer water and the use of a litter tray, but only within the safe confines of the vehicle when it has stopped.
- 1.30 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 unnecessary suffering. The temperature in the vehicle can rise extremely quickly and cause heat stroke or even death in a short period of time.

When you are Away

- 1.31 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 the rabbit's needs every day. When someone is looking after your rabbit in your absence, they are legally responsible for its welfare and you should ensure that they understand its needs and any special requirements it may have. Contact details to deal with an emergency medical situation should be provided.
- 1.32 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.

1.33 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

Need for a suitable diet

- 2.1** 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.
- 2.2** 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 or dried or fresh grass throughout the day and night.
- 2.3** 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 only 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.
- 2.4** 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 mower clippings should not be fed as they can contain metal slivers and oil which can be harmful.
- 2.5** Obesity, teeth and gut problems in rabbits can be caused by inappropriate diets and overfeeding. Root vegetables 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. All fruit should be regarded as a treat item and fed in limited quantities as fruit is high in sugar and can lead to gastro-intestinal disturbance as well as causing dental problems. High-fat or high-carbohydrate foodstuffs should be avoided completely including commercial 'rabbit treats', bread, milk, breakfast cereal, nuts, seeds and chocolate.
- 2.6** Do not make any sudden changes to your rabbit's diet as this could upset its digestive system and make it very ill. 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. You should not feed any plant to your rabbit unless you are sure of its identity and safety. Many plants can be poisonous to your rabbit.
- 2.7** Changes in the amount your rabbit eats may indicate illness.

Water

- 2.8** Your rabbit must always have access to fresh water in either a bowl and/or a metal-tipped bottle. Both will need cleaning daily. Water bottles must be checked for leaks and air blocks. In cold weather, make sure that the water has not frozen. Water bottles can be insulated to help prevent this. Water bowls should be of a non-spill type.
- 2.9** Cater for your rabbit(s) preference in using either a water bowl or water bottle. 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.

Healthy weight

- 2.10** 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 should be weighed regularly to assess any increases or decreases in weight as rabbits that are over or under weight may suffer.

Other Dietary Needs

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

Section 3 - Behaviour

Need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns

- 3.1** Rabbits have several specific behavioural needs that can make them a complex pet to keep. These needs relate to rabbits being prey animals and so easily frightened. Fear is a response that enables an animal to avoid dangerous situations. However, animals that are put in situations where they are constantly fearful become very stressed. This will affect their health and welfare.

Early experiences

- 3.2** 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.
- 3.3** 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.
- 3.4** 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 adult rabbits. Generally, rabbits that are well 'socialised' at an early age will be able to cope with most new situations and people confidently. If your rabbit is likely to come into contact with other animals it is important to introduce and socialise them gradually at an early age. Never leave your rabbit alone with a cat or dog, even if they are familiar with each other.
- 3.5** Once your new rabbit is home you should continue to gradually introduce it to being handled by people and normal sights and sounds, always ensuring it has a safe place to which it can retreat. To lift a rabbit place one hand under the rabbit's chest and the other hand under its bottom. Hold the rabbit close so that it feels secure and it is prevented from falling.
- 3.6** Forcing your rabbit to interact may lead to behaviour problems. A rabbit owner should make new situations as relaxed and pleasant as possible for their rabbit so that it will want to investigate.

Signs of stress

- 3.7** 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.

3.8 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.

3.9 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.

3.10 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.

Boredom and Frustration

3.11 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. It is your responsibility to provide opportunities for your rabbit to satisfy all of its behavioural needs.

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 as rabbits are social animals in nearly every case. (see Section 4);
- the opportunity to investigate and spend time with unfamiliar items (as rabbits are inquisitive animals), and
- providing your rabbit with suitable materials that allow digging behaviour and areas to mark its territory with chin secretions, urine and droppings.

3.12 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).

3.13 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.

Reproductive behaviour

3.14 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

Need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals

- 4.1** This section offers guidance on providing your rabbit with suitable company. Some parts of 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 such as another neutered rabbit, preferably a male/female neutered pair. 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.
- 4.4** Rabbits instinctively fear other kinds of animals. Through careful training and very sensitive handling, pet rabbits can learn to enjoy the companionship of people.
- 4.5** Most 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 and opposite sex. Rabbits of the same sex are more likely to fight.
- 4.6** Rabbits may 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.
- 4.7** 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.
- 4.8** 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.
- 4.9** 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

4.10 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 and you should seek advice from your pet care specialist on:

- 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; their relative size - a smaller or younger one could be injured or bullied by a larger or older companion, and
- the accommodation they live in (rabbits in cramped conditions may fight)

4.11 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 (for example: rabbits kept in cramped conditions will fight) and other welfare problems.

4.12 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 & Welfare

Need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Health care

- 5.1** 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. Only use medicines that have been specifically prescribed or recommended for your rabbit by a vet.
- 5.2** 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.
- 5.3** Prevent your rabbit having contact with wild rabbits or areas where wild rabbits have been.

Illness

- 5.4** Healthy rabbits are alert with bright eyes, dry nostrils and clean, shiny coats. Droppings in their resting area should be small, firm pellets. You should consult a vet if your rabbit shows any signs of illness or a change in behaviour.
- 5.5** 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.
- 5.6** 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;
- finding soft pellets (droppings) on the ground;
- any change in behaviours such as becoming aggressive or wishing to be more alone more often;
- 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

5.7 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.	<p>Nails - check that they are an appropriate length and not damaged.</p> <p>Teeth - ensure the front teeth are of an appropriate length and shape. Only a veterinarian can check a rabbit's back teeth and these should be done at least once a year.</p> <p>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 and the inside of their front paws may be stained.</p> <p>Weight – 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.</p>
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.	
Mouth/chin – check for signs of dribbling as this can indicate problems with overgrown teeth.	
Eyes - ensure they are clear and not weeping. Runny eyes are often signs of dental problems or respiratory infections 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.	
Rabbit's bottom - check your rabbit's bottom, as well as the floor of its living area, for signs of urine staining or diarrhoea. A rabbit with diarrhoea should be seen by a vet promptly.	

- 5.8** 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. If untreated, this will produce shock, severe illness and even death. It is recommended that a daily check for any wounds or injuries is also carried out.
- 5.9** You should contact your vet immediately if you find maggots on your rabbit.
- 5.10 Contingency Planning** – it is important that your rabbit(s) are registered with a veterinary practice and that you understand the out-of-hours system that that veterinary practice operates. That will ensure that appropriate veterinary assistance is available at all times should an emergency occur.

Grooming

- 5.11** 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

- 5.12** 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

- 5.13** 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.
- 5.14** Check your rabbit's front teeth to make sure that they are not misaligned or overgrown. Rabbits' front teeth grow constantly throughout their lives and if they grow too long they can be very painful and feeding can become difficult. 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.

5.15 Dental problems can cause a poor appetite, runny eyes, a wet chin or drooling. If your rabbit is showing any of these symptoms you should take it to see your vet promptly.

Neutering

5.16 One particularly important consideration is getting your rabbit neutered. The benefits of neutering can be discussed with your veterinary surgeon. Neutering 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.

5.17 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.

5.18 If a male rabbit is not neutered it can:

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

5.19 Un-neutered rabbits prevented from breeding may suffer frustration causing behaviour problems.

5.20 Rabbits are very sociable animals, and should be provided with a companion where possible. The best and most natural group is to have two rabbits, one neutered male and one neutered female. 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.

5.21 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.

5.22 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.

Identification

- 5.23** 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.

What to do if your rabbit is missing

- 5.24** You should contact any local animal welfare charities, veterinary practices, and rescue centres to see if your rabbit has been handed in. You may also wish to put up notices locally where legally permissible.

Appendix 1

Sources of Information

The structure and relevant contact details for enforcement of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 is set out in the DARD web site at the following link: [Enforcement for the Welfare of Animals Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)

Legislation

Links to relevant legislation

- [Welfare of Animals Act \(Northern Ireland\) 1972](#)
- [Welfare of Animals Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)
- [Noxious Weeds \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1977](#)
- [The Welfare of Animals \(Transport\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2006](#)
- [Council Regulation \(EC\) No 1/2005 on the Protection of animals during transport and related operations](#)

Additional Information:

- Your vet.
- The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons to find details of vets in your area: 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.bluecross.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.
- USPCA (Ulster Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals): www.uspca.co.uk
- DARD (Department of Agriculture & Rural Development): www.dardni.gov.uk