

## COMMERCE AND EMPLOYMENT DEPARTMENT

### GUIDANCE FOR THE WELFARE OF PET RABBITS

#### MADE UNDER SECTION 13(6) OF THE ANIMAL WELFARE (GUERNSEY) ORDINANCE, 2012

#### GUIDANCE – FOOD AND WATER

##### Food

Rabbits are herbivores and they need a diet that is high in fibre to wear down their continuously growing teeth, keep their intestines functioning properly and to help prevent them from becoming bored.

The first passage of food through the digestive tract does not let a rabbit absorb all of the nutrients that it needs. Partially digested food is passed as soft pellets, which are then eaten by the rabbit and re-digested allowing absorption of nutrients. After a second passage through the digestive tract a rabbit also produces brown round firm droppings that it does not usually eat.

A rabbit must have access to large quantities of hay or dried or fresh grass at all times. This should form 95% of the diet. Green plants and a small amount of high quality specialist rabbit food such as extruded pellet should make up the remainder of the diet.

Fresh grass can be fed to a rabbit if picked from the ground, but it must not be collected from roadsides or places where the grass may have been treated with pesticides or contaminated with animal faeces. Lawn clippings and clover will upset a rabbit's digestive system.

Examples of suitable green plants include broccoli, cabbage, parsley, watercress, celery leaves and kale. Root vegetables or fruit may be given occasionally but, as carrots are especially high in sugar, only the carrot tops and a little of the carrot itself should be provided.

Safe wild plants include chickweed, bramble, raspberry, blackberry and strawberry leaves and dandelion. All green foods should be washed and dried. Twigs from fruit trees such as apple and pear that have not been treated with pesticides can be provided to help a rabbit to wear down its teeth.

Rabbits may eat selectively (i.e. eating only certain parts of food) and when fed a course mix feed (which look like muesli) this habit may result in an unbalanced diet. Therefore course mix diets are not recommended, but providing a plain extruded pelleted feed prevents such selective feeding as each individual pellet is nutritionally balanced.

Specialist rabbit treats should only be provided on limited occasions and sticky, sugary treats should be avoided as they can harm a rabbit's teeth.

Rabbits are very sensitive to any change in their diet so any alterations should be introduced gradually. This is especially so when weaning rabbits and introducing them to green plants.

## Water

Clean fresh drinking water must be available to all the rabbits that are kept at all times and all water containers should be refilled daily.

Water should be provided in water bottles with a sipper tube and ball bearing. Other containers, such as bowls, may be tipped over and may become contaminated with bedding and droppings.

Bottles must be checked in cold weather to make sure that water has not frozen.

## **GUIDANCE – LIVING ENVIRONMENT**

### Housing

Accommodation should :

- a) be escape proof and vermin and predator proof,
- b) include a shelter area of at least one third of the total accommodation space that is large enough to allow every rabbit that is accommodated to shelter at the same time,
- c) provide a rabbit with enough space to:
  - i) take a sequence of at least three unhindered consecutive hops from one end of its accommodation to the other (no smaller than 180cm long x 60cm wide for an average rabbit),
  - ii) allow an adult rabbit to stand on its back legs with ears fully erect without its ears touching the roof (about 75cm high for an average rabbit),
  - iii) allow a rabbit to lie fully outstretched in any direction without touching the sides of its accommodation and to turn around unimpeded,
- d) damp-proof and draught-proof, but well ventilated,
- e) be free from hazards such as sharp objects and constructed with materials that are not hazardous to rabbits or which have not been painted or treated with substances that are hazardous to rabbits,
- f) ideally provide natural light in the living enclosure, but also provide areas of protection from direct sunlight, and
- g) allow continuous access to water and hay or dried or fresh grass.

Any wire that is used should be of strong galvanised mesh of a gauge that prevents the feet and legs of rabbits from becoming trapped and excludes vermin. Wire mesh ½” x ½” (13mm

x 13mm) and 19 standard wire gauge (SWG) to 14 SWG (1.016 mmØ to 1.626 mmØ) is acceptable in most situations but where mice are pests wire mesh of ¼" x ¼" (6mm x 6mm) and 23 SWG (0.610 mmØ) is appropriate.

Outdoor hutches should be of robust, weatherproof construction and raised off the ground to prevent rising damp and sited to provide protection from extremes of weather, draughts, fumes (such as car exhausts, boilers and chemicals) and the midday sun.

A good overhang of a hutch roof will reduce dampness to the sides and rear and limit the ingress of rain at the front.

### Exercise Runs

Ideally a rabbit should have daily access to an exercise run that is separate from its living enclosure. Exercise is very important for the physical and mental health of rabbits. Immobile rabbits are at increased risk of foot and leg ulcers, osteoporosis and spinal fractures.

Rabbits are very active, athletic animals and to exercise appropriately, they must be able to crawl, hop, run and dig. In addition, jumping onto and off raised areas (such as a sturdy platform or a hay bale) helps rabbits maintain their bone and muscle strength. An exercise run should therefore be large enough to allow a rabbit to exercise freely.

A run should be of solid construction and may be covered with strong galvanised mesh on the top and/or sides of dimensions previously described for living enclosures. However some protection from wind, rain and sun must be provided (this may be in the form of a box within the run or tubing which they can use as a tunnel). The bottom of the run should not be wired because it prevents digging which is a natural behaviour but it may be necessary to prevent escape. If you prefer your rabbit not to dig your lawn you should provided it with a digging pit in the form of a large litter tray filled with earth.

A run should be secured to the ground if there is any possibility of dogs or other predators gaining access to the rabbits.

A run should provide access to a grassy area, but should not allow a rabbit access to flower beds or other areas that are may contain poisonous plants.

### Bedding Materials

Bedding must be provided to give a rabbit insulation, somewhere to hide. Hay and straw are suitable bedding materials.

Dust free wood shavings or shredded paper can be used as a toilet area. Alternatively a litter tray can be provided with non clumping, non toxic litter material.

Any bedding must be clean, dry and dust free to avoid respiratory problems and must not have been treated with chemicals which are hazardous to rabbits.

### Cold Conditions

Rabbits can withstand cool weather provided that they have shelter and plenty of bedding material. Thin rabbits with no body fat are susceptible to the effects of cold weather.

In cold weather rabbits must be provided with abundant clean, dry bedding materials and additional protection such as insulation in sleeping areas and hutch covers.

Care should be taken to protect rabbits from draughts in cold conditions.

Outdoor hutches may be moved to an indoor area such as sheds or outbuildings, but the indoor areas should be ventilated to avoid the build up of humidity and condensation.

### Hot Conditions

Rabbits are unable to tolerate high temperatures, which can prove fatal. Hot conditions and direct sunlight with no shade are distressing for rabbits as they cannot sweat or pant effectively and they do not increase water intake when hot.

The optimal temperature range for rabbits is 15 °C - 20°C. If temperatures are likely to exceed 20°C, further precautions to cool accommodation must be taken, such as:

- a) moving it to a shaded area,
- b) using air conditioning or a fan in a shed/outbuilding,
- c) covering it with a wet cloth or sacking (with the edge in a bucket of water or the cloth or sacking regularly wetted), or
- d) placing frozen plastic water bottles (sealed) within bedding.

### Light

During daylight hours, light should be provided to exercise and sleeping areas so that all parts are clearly visible. A proportion of this light should be natural light.

Adequate light must be available to inspect rabbits. Light of an intensity of at least 200 lux is ideal for inspection purposes.

Rabbits housed indoors should be provided with a minimum of 10-12 hours light per day.

### Noise

Rabbits are easily startled and hutches must be sited so that they are not exposed to sudden loud noises.

### Enrichment of the Environment

Rabbits are social animals and normally prefer to be with other rabbits. Ideally a rabbit should be kept with at least one other friendly rabbit. The easiest pairing is a castrated male and a spayed female. It is possible to keep same sex pairs together but they must be siblings that have grown up together and they must be neutered as soon as possible before any fighting occurs. Same sex pairs should never be separated even for short periods.

Environmental enrichment should be provided as it allows a rabbit to carry out a range of normal behaviours. Examples include:

- a) providing good quality bedding and hay to provide a rabbit with the opportunity for concealment or to make nests,
- b) allowing rabbits to socialise with other rabbits or people, and
- c) providing objects such as hay blocks, chew sticks, parrot toys or balls designed for cats

If a rabbit is kept in a pen, enrichment can be achieved by, for example, making different compartments within the pen and the use of boxes and pipes for concealment.

## **GUIDANCE - HEALTH**

### Monitoring Health

Rabbits should be observed at least daily to determine whether they are eating and drinking normally, urinating and defecating normally, expressing usual behaviour, able to move about freely, and have a normal coat.

Specific health checks should include:

- a) nails - that they are an appropriate length and not damaged,
- b) feet – that there are no bald patches and sores,
- c) fur and skin – freedom from parasites, dandruff, patches of baldness, itchy sores, scaly patches, damp or weeping patches and wounds,
- d) teeth – that they are an appropriate length and shape,
- e) eyes - that they are clear and not weeping (runny eyes are often signs of respiratory infection which can easily turn into pneumonia),
- f) nose – that it is not runny (a runny nose is often a sign of respiratory infection which can easily turn into pneumonia),
- g) mouth - for a wet chin or drooling (as rabbits are very clean animals it may not be easily spotted, however, the fur on the chest will be stained),
- h) ears – that they are free of crusty wax, and
- i) bottom – that it is free of signs of diarrhoea (the floor of the living area should also be checked for such signs).

During warm weather, rabbits should be checked at least twice daily underneath and around the bottom for droppings that have stuck to their coat. Having a dirty bottom can increase the risk of fly strike which 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. Veterinary advice must be sought immediately if maggots are found on a rabbit.

### Prevention of disease

Veterinary advice may be sought regarding an appropriate vaccination programme for individual rabbits (requirements vary). Rabbits can be vaccinated against Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD).

Contact with wild rabbits or areas used by wild rabbits should be prevented.

Good hygiene and living enclosure cleanliness may help prevent *Encephalitozoon (Nosema) cuniculi* a widespread protozoal (microsporidian) brain and kidney parasite of rabbits.

## Injuries

Signs of injury include cuts, swollen limbs or abnormal walking. In the case of any severe injuries, the advice of a veterinary surgeon must be sought.

## Illness

Indications of illness in a rabbit 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, loss of weight, discharge from the eye, ear or nose, difficulty in going to the toilet or diarrhoea, pain, such as not wanting to be touched on parts of its body, teeth grinding, flinching, difficulties in breathing, especially if a rabbit is breathing through its mouth rather than its nose, and redness on skin around the belly, bottom or on underside of the feet. This list is not exhaustive.

Veterinary advice must be obtained if a rabbit appears to be ill or in pain and the cause is not clear, or if initial first aid treatment is not effective.

## Grooming

Rabbits naturally moult at the end of the winter and summer, but may moult constantly if exposed to variations in temperatures. A rabbit should be groomed to keep it comfortable and prevent it swallowing lots of fur (as this can cause fur balls in the stomach and mats of fur over the anus resulting in 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 veterinary surgeon or pet care specialist.

## Care of Nails

A rabbit's nails wear down naturally when they exercise on harder surfaces or when digging. However this may not readily occur when rabbits are kept in their living enclosure and it may be necessary to clip nails to maintain them at an appropriate length (5mm longer than the tip of the quick ).

## Care of Teeth

A rabbits teeth will grow continuously throughout its life. Dental health relies on a diet high in hay and grass to wear down teeth. A high fibre diet and the provision of untreated wooden gnawing blocks or twigs can help to keep teeth in good condition.

Teeth may become misaligned or overgrown. Back teeth can grow sharp spurs which can cause pain to a rabbit when it eats. Back teeth cannot be seen easily and should be checked by a veterinary surgeon and only a veterinary surgeon should correct misaligned or overgrown teeth. Drooling, dribbling, suddenly backing away from food are signs of sharp spurs on the back teeth.

## Hygiene

Regular maintenance of housing and a high standard of hygiene are essential for the good health and welfare of rabbits and may help prevent infection with *Encephalitozoon (Nosema) cuniculi* and reduce the risks of fly strike.

The following management is necessary:

- a) wet and dirty bedding and shavings must be removed and replaced daily,
- b) uneaten fresh and green food must be removed daily,
- c) droppings must be removed as a minimum of every two days, (this doesn't prevent rabbits eating the soft fecal pellets of partially digested food because they are excreted and generally consumed immediately),
- d) food bowls and water bottles must be cleaned weekly and rinsed well with disinfectants or detergents which are not hazardous to rabbits, and
- e) the entire living area should be cleaned thoroughly at least once a week.

Exercise runs should be moved to fresh areas or the area where they are put cleaned at least once a week.

Feed should be stored in vermin proof containers.

## Handling

Rabbits can be easily frightened and require careful handling. Handling should be carried out quietly and confidently, with care to avoid unnecessary struggling which could injure the animal.

A rabbit should be lifted using two hands, one supporting the chest and one supporting the bottom. Its head should be slightly higher than its bottom and with the bottom slightly tucked in to the handler's body. This will help prevent the rabbit kicking out backwards or trying to do a forward summersault.

Rabbits must never be held or picked up by the ears; this is extremely painful and distressing for the animal.

## **GUIDANCE BEHAVIOUR**

Rabbits have several specific behavioural needs that can make them a complex pet. These needs relate to rabbits being prey animals and easily frightened.

## Companionship

Rabbits are social animals and should ideally be kept with an appropriate companion (such as neutered rabbit of a similar size and opposite sex). However, in order to ensure a successful relationship, the following factors should be taken into account:

- a) how, where and when companions are introduced,
- b) their gender,
- c) whether they are neutered or not,
- d) their ages, and

- e) their relative sizes (a smaller or younger rabbit could be injured or bullied by a larger or older companion).

Whilst a rabbits will accept a guinea pig as companions, they must not be housed together. The powerful hind legs of even a small rabbit can cause serious internal injury to a guinea pig and rabbits and guinea pigs have different dietary requirements and ways of communicating.

A rabbit, whether kept alone or with other rabbits, should have the opportunity to interact with its owner each day. However as rabbits instinctively fear other kinds of animals and people, careful training and very sensitive handling is necessary for them to become accustomed to the company of people.

Groups of rabbits must be monitored to avoid bullying and aggression between individuals which must be separated if necessary.

### Socialisation

Every rabbit is an individual and some are naturally more confident than others. However, the way each rabbit behaves is largely influenced by experiences following the first few weeks of life. Socialisation with people and rabbits is an essential part of early learning.

Adult rabbits that have not had sufficient or appropriate early social experiences may find it very difficult to cope with interaction with humans or other animals. 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.

Sufficient, but not excessive, handling of young rabbits from the age of 2 weeks will help them to socialise to people. When a baby rabbit or an adult rabbit is introduced to new things and other rabbits, they should always have the opportunity to escape to a safe hiding place.

Never leave a rabbit alone with a cat or dog, even if they are familiar with each other.

### Boredom and Frustration

Rabbits rely on their owner to provide everything for them, including entertainment. If a rabbit is left on its own for long periods of time, it will feel frustrated and its behaviour may change to reflect this stress.

A rabbit should be provided with mental stimulation, such as:

- a) opportunities to foraging for food,
- b) having suitable objects to play or interact with, or
- c) the company of another rabbit or rabbits.

### Signs of stress

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

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. A rabbit should



therefore 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).

Causes of stress include:

- a) novelty (for example the first trip in a car or being handled by a stranger),
- b) fear-inducing stimuli (for example sudden noises),
- c) social stress (for example too many individuals in a small space, loss of a companion, living alone),
- d) 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),
- e) pain, discomfort or illness,
- f) being unable to control environmental factors (for example lighting or temperature), and
- g) lack of space or lack of adequate ventilation.

Signs of stress include:

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

In the case of concern, the owner or keeper should contact a veterinary surgeon.

### **GUIDANCE - BREEDING**

Breeding rabbits should be planned and owners should inform themselves of what is required and ensure that there is a home or a market for the offspring.

#### **Neutering**

If an owner does not wish to breed a rabbit, ideally it should be neutered. Females can usually be neutered when they reach sexual maturity at the age of 4 months and males at the age of 3 months.

If a female rabbit is not neutered it may develop a womb infection or womb cancer (which can be life-threatening).

If a male rabbit is not neutered it may spray urine and mount other rabbits and animals.

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.

### Selection of Breeding Stock

In general, females can mated for the first time at approximately 4 months old and should not be bred if over 3 years of age. Males are can be mated for the first time at approximately 6 months of age.

Only rabbits that are adult, well developed, that are in good health and condition and with a favourable temperament should be used for breeding.

Mating should be supervised, and to minimise the possibility of fighting, does should always be taken to the buck; serious fighting can occur if the buck is taken to the doe.

### Care of Pregnant Does

A secure, private place for raising the young, such as a nest or den, a nest box or a secluded and sheltered area within a pen or hutch should be provided. It must have nesting material (such as good quality hay).

A nesting area must provide enough space to contain young rabbits and to permit suckling.

A nest box must be large enough to enable a doe to get into and out of it to feed the young without injuring them. As a guide, the minimum length of the nest box should be 30cm with a minimum floor area of 0.08m<sup>2</sup>. A larger area should be allowed for giant breeds. Three walls should be 25cm high and the front 15cm in height.

Rabbits are pregnant for 28 to 30 days and a nest box should be available for about one week prior to littering to permit a doe to exhibit normal nesting behaviour.

A nest box should be cleaned and disinfected before re-use or disposed of.

### Care of Young

Litters under a week of age should be disturbed as little as possible.

Young rabbits emerge from a nest at 2-3 weeks of age and are generally weaned at six weeks. Young rabbits should not be weaned before four weeks of age.

A lactating doe with a large litter, close to weaning, may drink up to 4.5 litres of water a day. If she is unable to obtain all the water she needs, her milk yield will be reduced and the young will be underfed.

## **GUIDANCE – EXHIBITING RABBITS**

Rabbits that are exhibited must be of sufficient age (at least 5 months) and maturity, in good health and free from injuries or skin parasites. Pregnant rabbits should not be exhibited.

Rabbits that are exhibited should be provided with a suitable, hay and a source of water. This may be a water bottle or fresh vegetables with high moisture content.

To reduce stress it is essential that a rabbit has been handled regularly prior to being shown.

### **GUIDANCE - TRANSPORTING RABBITS**

Rabbits that are transported should be in good health and sick or injured animals should only be transported to a veterinary surgeon for the purpose of treatment or diagnosis.

Rabbits should be transported in a secure pet carrier. Carrying boxes or containers must be large enough to allow a rabbit to stand up, turn around and lie down and must be ventilated. They must contain bedding and hay.

Boxes or containers should not be packed in a vehicle in a manner which compromises ventilation, should not be placed in direct sunlight or next to the vehicle's heater and should not be carried in the boot of a saloon car.

Adult rabbits must be moved in individual containers to avoid fighting.

Water bottles are unsuitable for use when travelling. On longer journeys vegetables with high moisture content should be provided and rabbits should be checked at regular intervals, especially in hot weather.

Food bowls or other heavy unsecured items must not be placed in boxes or containers as these may cause injury in the event of an accident or sharp deceleration by the vehicle.

A rabbit should not be left unattended in a vehicle unless the environment within the vehicle is maintained below 20°C air temperature in the shade.

This guidance is given by the Department with a view to securing the welfare of pet rabbits. It is additional to the Welfare Recommendations set out in the **Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Pet Rabbits** made by the Department and available from the Department or the States of Guernsey website. A breach of the Code may be relied upon in Court proceedings.

