

JERSEY CODE OF PRACTICE FOR THE WELFARE OF RABBITS INCLUDING THOSE KEPT FOR BREEDING

THE CODE

The Code of recommendations for the welfare of rabbits including those kept for breeding is intended to encourage those responsible for looking after the animals to adopt the highest standards of husbandry. It takes account of five basic needs, known as the "Five Freedoms".

The Five Freedoms are:

1. FREEDOM FROM HUNGER AND THIRST

- by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour;

2. FREEDOM FROM DISCOMFORT

- by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area;

3. FREEDOM FROM PAIN, INJURY OR DISEASE

- by prevention or by rapid diagnosis and treatment;

4. FREEDOM TO EXPRESS NORMAL BEHAVIOUR

- by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animals' own kind;

5. FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND DISTRESS

- by ensuring conditions and treatment to avoid mental suffering.

INTRODUCTION

1. The welfare of rabbits can be safeguarded under a range of management systems which should promote good health and cater for the behavioural and physiological needs of the rabbit. The number of animals kept at any one time and the way in which they are grouped will depend on the facilities available and the skill of the stockkeeper.

2. Rabbits need individual and frequent attention. It is essential that the stockkeeper should know and watch for signs of distress or disease and take prompt remedial action.

3. The stockkeeper should be able to recognise the signs which indicate good health be able to recognise impending trouble in its earliest stages. Advice or treatment should be sought promptly from your veterinary surgeon.

4. Ailing or injured rabbits should be segregated wherever possible and treated immediately.

HOUSING

5. Accommodation should be designed and maintained to avoid injury or distress to the rabbits. In open-sided buildings or other enclosures which are exposed to the weather, rabbits in cages should be provided with adequate protection from the elements.

6. Shelter from bad weather, including direct sunlight, must be provided. The hutch should be positioned away from draughts and extremes of temperature and, preferably near to the owner's house. In the winter the rabbit hutch can be placed in a well ventilated airy garage or shed although a garage in use is not suitable as exhaust fumes can poison rabbits.
7. Hutches must be kept dry, free of dramatic fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity and be adequately ventilated, but protected from drafts.
8. Internal surfaces of pens, hutches or cages should be of a material which can be effectively cleaned and disinfected, or easily replaced when necessary.
9. The hutch should be raised off the ground, as this will protect the cage and its occupant from damp, and also from vermin.
10. Cages or pens should be made of material that is not harmful to the animals, which is durable and will withstand normal cleaning. Material containing paint and wood preservatives which may be toxic to the rabbits should not be used on surfaces accessible to them. Particular care is necessary to guard against the risk of poisoning from old paintwork or when second hand building materials are used.
11. A secure, private place for raising the young, such as a nest or den, should be provided. Nesting material, nest boxes or a secluded and sheltered area within the pen or cage is required. Nesting material also partially allows the animal to manipulate its own immediate environment (noise, temperature and humidity) and provide a warm nest for the young.
12. Care should be taken to monitor and prevent aggression and to separate individuals if necessary.
13. Stud bucks and breeding does should always be housed individually to prevent fighting.
14. Rabbits should be housed in groups, wherever possible with compatible individuals. Post-weaned rabbits should be kept for as long as possible in compatible groups.
15. If solid sided cages are used, these should be positioned such that rabbits can see other rabbits.
16. The social and behavioural needs of rabbits are often ignored when housed individually in small, wire mesh cages or confined to small hutches. There are many welfare implications associated with keeping rabbits in cages, as they are not able to follow their natural instincts. Environmental enrichment, appropriate to the animal's needs, will allow animals to carry out a range of normal behaviours. Restricted environments can lead to behavioural and physiological abnormalities.
17. There are many ways in which housing for rabbits can be constructed to permit natural behaviour patterns, hence enhancing the welfare of rabbits, for example:
 - Appropriate bedding material will provide rabbits with the opportunity to make nests. The use of good quality hay or a similar substance provides interest in an otherwise sterile cage environment and will provide the opportunity for concealment.
 - Allowing animals to socialise with their own kind, or with handlers, also helps to achieve enrichment of the environment.

- Rabbits prefer to be close to each other and 'interact' with enrichment objects such as hay blocks, chew sticks, parrot toys or balls designed for cats.
- Enrichment in floor pen systems is readily achieved by, for example, making different compartments within a pen and the use of boxes/pipes for concealment.

18. Suitable clean and comfortable bedding material must be provided especially for breeding animals.

19. 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. It has been proved there is a link between confinement and the development of spinal deformities. Exercise helps improve blood circulation and prevent pressure sores. The opportunity to explore is also mentally beneficial. All methods of providing exercise should be escape proof and allow the rabbit to feel secure. Branches from non-poisonous plants or trees, drainpipes, boxes and other enrichment objects can be placed in the pen to provide cover and play. Branches must not come from trees which have been sprayed with chemicals.

Flooring

20. All floors on which rabbits are kept should be designed, constructed and maintained to avoid injury or distress to the rabbits.

Space Allowance

21. When planning new accommodation or modifying existing housing, account should be taken of the size of the breed and natural behaviour of the animals, which includes hopping, sitting with ears erect and playing. Size, shape and fittings of pens and cages should be designed to meet the physiological and behavioural needs of the animals.

22. The floor area must be of sufficient size to allow all the rabbits in the cage to lie comfortably on their sides at the same time and move around without disturbing the others, and eat and drink without difficulty. The rabbits must be able to stand up, lie down and turn around.

23. Hutches should be as big as possible, especially if two rabbits are housed together. Hutches need to be situated in a dry, cool, well-ventilated site protected from wind and rain. Hutches of various designs are available but the essentials are a dry draught free secluded nest area and an area for exercise. A solid fronted nesting area and mesh-fronted living area is usually provided. If kept in the hutch for long periods, the rabbit should be able to perform at least three 'hops' from one end to the other.

24. Accommodation for rabbits over 12 weeks of age should be not less than 45cm high or sufficient height to allow the rabbits to sit upright with ears fully erect, without their ears touching the top of the cage.

25. A cage of minimum height 45cm, with a floor space of 0.56m² can accommodate one breeding buck or doe, a doe and litter up to four weeks of age, or eight weaners until they are sold. Additional height and space will be required for giant rabbit breeds.

26. Accommodation should allow sufficient area so that all rabbits can lie on their sides other than at times when nesting boxes are used.

27. The nest box should be large enough to enable the doe to get into and out of it to feed the young without injuring them. As a guide, the nest box should be about 40 x 25cm; the minimum length of the nest box should be 30cm with a minimum floor area

of 0.8m². A larger area should be allowed for giant breeds. Three walls should be 25cm high and the front 15cm in height.

28. The lowest side or end of an open-topped nest should be low enough to enable the doe to enter or leave the nest without risk of injury to herself or her litter, but sufficiently high to prevent the young from leaving the nest prematurely. The sill in the front of the nest box enables the doe to enter without difficulty, but prevents the young from being drawn out on a teat while suckling if the doe is suddenly disturbed. As a guide, for most breeds, the height of the lowest side or end of the nest box should not be less than 15cm. The nest should have an entrance sufficiently large for the doe to pass through without difficulty or risk of injury.

29. Most nest boxes are made of wood and disinfected before being used again, but some breeders favour stout cardboard boxes which are only used once. The nest boxes are placed on the floor of the cage and most have open tops to allow the young to be inspected easily.

Rabbits kept out of doors

30. Accommodation should be designed and maintained to avoid draughts. Rabbits should have access to a dry-bedded area.

31. Outdoor hutches should be raised off the ground.

32. The hutch roof, which should overhang all sides of the hutch by approximately 10-15cm and slope backwards, should be covered with roofing felt.

33. Shelter from bright sunlight, rain and wind should always be available, and this can be achieved by extending the roof forwards to provide an overhang.

34. Precautions should be taken to protect the rabbits from predators and vermin.

35. Outdoor rabbits must be checked at least once daily, with special attention paid to the area around the bottom in summer months; a build up of faecal material around the bottom, or a rabbit sitting in wet soiled bedding is at high risk from fly strike.

36. Other relevant recommendations in this Code of Practice regarding rabbit husbandry and management are applicable to rabbits kept outside.

Temperature

37. The optimal temperature range for rabbits is 15-20°C. Extremes of temperature should be avoided. Temperature regulation should prevent undue fluctuations to avoid unnecessary stress to the animals or clinical welfare problems. Temperature variations in a 24-hour period should not be greater than 5°C.

38. If welfare problems occur in the animal because of a failure to maintain suitable temperatures, provision of heating and/or cooling will be required.

39. Excessive heat loss can be prevented by providing adequate bedding material; it is essential to avoid conditions which could cause chilling in young rabbits just leaving the nest. The higher temperature needed by baby rabbits can be achieved by providing nest boxes in which the does can make warm nests.

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

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

42. Rabbits are unable to tolerate high ambient 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 do not increase water intake when hot. Appropriate measures must be taken to prevent temperatures rising to the point where heat stress, indicated by prolonged panting, occurs; rabbits are very susceptible to heat stroke.

Lighting

43. During daylight hours, adequate 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 lighting must be available at all times to allow the rabbits to be easily seen and inspected. It may be advantageous to cover the nest box at the time of kitting.

44. Care should be taken to ensure that animals are not placed in direct sunlight.

Ventilation

45. Premises and accommodation must be well ventilated; good ventilation is essential to prevent respiratory disease.

Relative humidity

46. The relative humidity in buildings housing rabbits should normally be maintained between 40-70%.

Noise

47. Rabbits are easily frightened by sudden unexpected loud noise. Care should be taken not to frighten the rabbits with sudden unaccustomed movement or noise, but without placing too much emphasis on quietness.

MANAGEMENT

48. It is essential that all rabbits are carefully inspected at least once a day to make certain they are in good bodily condition and have ample supplies of food and water. The suffering caused by faulty husbandry and disease must never be underestimated.

Feed

49. Wholesome food in sufficient quantity to maintain good health should be provided daily.

50. The rabbit's digestive system is adapted to coping with high fibre foods such as hay, grass, root vegetables and herbage. Feeding a varied diet which takes some effort to eat helps relieve boredom, a factor that is especially important for hatched rabbits, and keeps their teeth in trim. Good quality meadow hay should always be available and form 75% of the daily diet. The remainder of the daily diet should be pellets and fresh vegetables.

51. To keep pellets fresh and discourage vermin, pellets should be stored in an airtight container.

52. All food bowls and utensils should be cleaned daily.

Water

53. Clean fresh drinking water must be easily accessible to all rabbits at all times.

54. 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. Care must be taken to see that the drinkers are working efficiently.

55. All water containers should be cleaned on a daily basis.

Handling

56. Time should be spent grooming and handling the rabbits.

57. 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.

58. The proper handling of rabbits requires skill, and it should be undertaken only by competent persons. A rabbit should be lifted by grasping the loose skin at the back of the neck and its weight supported by placing the hand under the hindquarters. Once held firmly with both hands it can be lifted up and held securely against the handler's chest. Always put a rabbit down gently on a non-slip surface.

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

Hygiene

60. Regular maintenance of housing and a high standard of hygiene are essential for the good health and welfare of the animals.

61. Premises, accommodation and equipment must be kept clean.

62. Droppings should be removed regularly, at a minimum of every two days.

63. Frequent checks should be made on the state of the bedding.

ANIMAL HEALTH

64. Young rabbits must be kept in compatible groups.

65. Rabbits should be inspected at suitable, frequent intervals throughout the day because, once ill, rabbits can deteriorate rapidly.

66. Claw trimming: Claws of confined adult rabbits should be trimmed periodically to prevent toe damage from overgrown nails catching on the hutch or cage. Great care is needed when trimming to avoid damage to sensitive tissue.

67. Overgrowth of teeth can sometimes interfere seriously with feeding and cause damage to the rabbit's lips and mouth. A high fibre diet and provision of wooden gnawing blocks can help to keep teeth in good condition. Problems with teeth should be referred to your veterinary surgeon.

Breeding

68. If you do not wish to breed your rabbit, neutering should be discussed with your veterinary surgeon

69. In general, females are mated for the first time at approximately five months old and are not bred from if over three years of age. Males are often mated for the first time at approximately six months of age.

70. 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.

71. Does kept in good environmental conditions will remain in oestrus throughout the year. A mating between the third and seventh days after giving birth generally leads to conception, but this practice as a routine is not acceptable on welfare grounds.

72. Does should be assessed for continued suitability for breeding before mating.

73. Care must be taken not to overwork a buck; poor fertility can result.

74. In commercial units, a ratio of 1 buck to 10 does is a common figure, although 1 to 15 is probably adequate.

75. Nesting boxes must be provided for breeding does. Bedding, for example good quality hay, must be provided. The box should be available for about one week prior to littering to permit the doe to exhibit normal nesting behaviour.

76. The nesting area should be designed to contain the young rabbits but be of sufficient size to permit suckling.

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

78. The young rabbits emerge from the nest box at 2-3 weeks of age and are generally weaned at six weeks. Young rabbits should not be weaned before four weeks of age.

Safety

79. Accommodation must be secure to ensure the safety of all of the animals.

Disease

80. All reasonable precautions should be taken to prevent and control the spread of infectious or contagious diseases amongst rabbits. Veterinary advice must be sought where a rabbit shows of disease, injury or illness. A competent person must then ensure that this veterinary advice is followed.

81. Facilities for isolation should be available when required. All hygiene precautions such as hand washing must be taken after leaving the isolation facilities and before handling other rabbits.

RECORDS

82. Accurate records should be kept for each breeding rabbit providing the identification of the doe, date of birth, address where she is kept, breed, date of mating and details of sire. Licensed rabbit breeders must also keep a record of any litters, including the sex of the babies, date of birth, weight, description and total number in the litter. The record must also show the details of sale and name and address of purchaser.

83. It is recommended that rabbits are microchipped by a veterinary surgeon. Micro-chipping is an ideal method of permanent identification.

TRANSPORT

84. All vehicles must be secure and should not be left unattended when transporting rabbits. Vehicles use for transportation should have adequate ventilation.

85. All appropriate steps should be taken to ensure that the rabbits are provided with suitable food, drink and bedding material when being transported, this is especially important if confinement is to be prolonged. Time in transit should be kept to a minimum.

86. Animals that are incompatible should not be transported together.

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

88. The number of animals within any one container must be such that animals can travel in comfort with due regard to the likely journey conditions.

89. Containers should be adequately constructed and ventilated and the rabbits must not be overcrowded.

90. Animals that are to be transported should be in good health.

91. Sick or injured animals should only be transported for purpose of treatment or diagnosis.

STAFF TRAINING

92. When staff are employed, a written training policy should be provided. Staff training records should be kept.

EMERGENCIES/FIRE PREVENTION

93. Appropriate steps must be taken for the protection of the rabbits in case of fire or other emergencies.

LEGISLATION

94. The following legislation is of relevance:

- Animal Welfare (Jersey) Law 2004
- Animal Health (Jersey) Law 2016
- Veterinary Surgeons (Jersey) Law 1999

19-01 AWC (05/04/07) (legislation amended 19/10/17)