



**Rabbit Welfare
Association
& Fund**

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Who are we?

The Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund (RWF) was set up in 1996 with the aim for improving the lives of rabbits kept as pets in the UK. We promote the message that rabbits should live in neutered /vaccinated pairs, in suitable accommodation with an enriched environment and fed a healthy diet.

It is not acceptable to keep a solitary rabbit in a small hutch with little opportunity to exercise. Sadly, at the moment rabbits are the third most popular and the most neglected pet in the UK; tens of thousands end up in rescue every year, and many others live a life of solitary confinement, with little or no space to exercise or display their natural behaviours such as digging and jumping.

The RWF has around 3000 members including many Vet practices. We produce a magazine every quarter called Rabbiting On which is highly acclaimed. We currently have a Vet Resident at Bristol Vet School, hold an annual Vet conference and produce a wide range of leaflets explaining every aspect of rabbit care and welfare. The RWF are part of other committees such as the Companion Animal Sector Council and the Pet Advisory Committee, so we are taken seriously as a welfare organisation and respected as the largest voice in the UK - dedicated solely to improving rabbit welfare.

A Hutch is Not Enough - the Reality of Rabbit Keeping

The RWF works closely with rescue shelters, owners, other welfare groups and the pet trade itself. We have developed a clear picture of how many rabbits are kept as pets in the UK. We know, however, that we can't base our points completely on empirical knowledge. An independent study, (Mullen & Main 2006) found that:

- The majority of rabbits were not housed permanently with a companion.
- 82% of the rabbits were kept in hutches smaller than the then RSPCA recommendations of 1.5m long x 0.6m wide and 0.75m high
- Only 50% of rabbits went out of their hutch and into a run daily

Bear in mind these results are from owners that volunteered for the survey so the results could be bias towards husbandry practices of keen owners. The real picture may be worse, and we strongly suspect this to be the case. Seaman et al (2008) found that rabbits valued companionship as highly as they do food so a companion really is a necessary requirement for them.

Clearly, even the keenest owners don't always know what their rabbit needs to live a healthy and contented life. In a huge number of cases, the only information a rabbit owner receives about the care of their pet is from the retailer. We urge the Pet Retail Trade to continue to take their responsibilities seriously; doing everything they can to improve the level of knowledge amongst rabbit owners. Please help us to ensure that the casual neglect that we see through our work with rescue shelters and owners, and hear about every day on our helpline - becomes a tiny minority, rather than the norm.



Why Good Welfare is Good Business

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| * Rabbits kept in pairs | * Eat twice as much food and hay |
| * Rabbits in a large hutch | * Use more bedding |
| * Rabbits with a large run | * Means an add on sale and sales of toys for run |
| * Vaccinated, neutered, good diet, spacious accommodation | * Live longer meaning customers for longer |
| * Rabbits not bought on impulse, owners committed to keep them for their life | * Could be customers for the life of the rabbits, potentially the next decade |
| * Promoting the right message and selling the right items | * Gaining a good reputation locally |

Happy healthy bunnies = healthier profits

Pet retailers are often the only source of information to owners, so they play an extremely valuable role in educating people on their responsibilities, and preventing the all too common cases of neglect - caused mostly by ignorance - reported by rescues and on the RWF helpline every day. So promoting the keeping of rabbits in neutered pairs, regular vet visits, a good diet and of course suitable accommodation (we recommend a 6ft hutch as a minimum for all breeds, plus an attached run) will be good for rabbit welfare and good for business.

At the point of sale, it's crucial to provide the customer with some information to take away with them. The Pet Care Trust of course has their own information sheets which can be personalised, and we have a range of leaflets available which we would be happy to supply to retailers.

A hutch is not enough.

Quite simply keeping a rabbit alone in a hutch without the opportunity to exercise, display natural behaviour or without companionship is not acceptable. It does not meet any of the animals fundamental requirements, or any of the owners requirements under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

**It is commonly accepted that a hutch should allow a rabbit to do 3 hops (not steps)
For an average sized rabbit this is 6 feet.**



Retailers can help rabbit welfare if they ensure:

- *Rabbits are sold in pairs or to be a companion to an existing rabbit (a cross sale opportunity for the retailer to owners of a single rabbit so long as the accommodation is already suitable for 2 rabbits and owners are aware they need to be neutered)
- *Suitable accommodation is for sale – the bigger the better
- *Good quality food, hay and bedding is available
- *Staff are well trained, able to answer questions and able to correctly sex rabbits (to prevent accidental and unwanted litters)
- *Impulse purchases are prevented
- *Customers are given approved literature to take away with them.
- *All staff give correct advice about the real expense of owning rabbits, including neutering, vaccination and routine vet treatment costs.



The RWF Retail Charter

Why?

Retailers are often the only source of information that the general public use and it is critical that they do get the right message at the time of making a purchase, so we need your support to get the message across. We have a range of leaflets that you may find useful, as do the PCT. Please support this campaign by ensuring your customers are aware of the responsibility they are taking on, and encouraging them to buy the biggest hutch and run they can afford. We want this charter to work, so we believe that it is realistic and achievable.

Ready to sign up?

Please support the RWF and rabbit welfare by signing up to our 'hutch is not enough' retail charter, by agreeing to the following:

1. Not to stock any hutch smaller than 4ft x2ftx2ft and to include something 6ftx2ftx2ft in the range.
2. To stress to customers the importance of a run, even with a large or double level hutch, because rabbits need daily exercise in a secure run or exercise.
3. To include our 'a hutch is not enough' leaflet in with every rabbit related sale (which will be provided free of charge)

In return the RWF will include your store on the roll call on our website, in our quarterly magazine *Rabbiting On* and on our facebook page. We will also include a link to your website so that people can purchase their 6ftx2ftx2ft hutches and runs from you.

We are happy to supply the leaflets to you free of charge. We hope that you will find this independent advice useful to you in persuading your customers to buy as big as possible. If there is anything else that you think we can help with then please let us know.

What next?

We realise that small retailers may have trouble in sourcing a 6ft hutch so we will do what we can to help. To discuss the charter, or to sign up please e-mail us at hq@rabbitwelfare.co.uk or phone the helpline 0844 324 6090.