

# Code of Practice for the Welfare of

## Rabbits



States of  
Guernsey

# Understanding the Animal Welfare (Guernsey) Ordinance, 2012 - Introduction to the Code

Owning and caring for rabbits can be a source of great enjoyment, but you should be aware that rabbit ownership is a major responsibility. Typically, rabbits can live for about 8-12 years. Consequently, you should think carefully about all factors that will affect your ability to care for rabbits long term and whether rabbits are suitable for you. Would you be able to provide for all of their needs? You will need to consider the size of your property, the financial and time implications of having rabbits as pets, and their exercise needs. Caring for rabbits can be expensive and you should consider whether, for instance, you would be able to afford the cost of both routine and unexpected veterinary treatment, and pet health insurance.

Being able to own a pet is not a human right. If you are a tenant, you must ask permission of your landlord before you take on ownership of a rabbit. Some landlords require enhanced deposits from pet owners to insure against the increased risk of damage to the property by pets.

Even the best laid plans can go wrong, we are all susceptible to the unexpected, be it loss of a job or family member, a personal illness, an expensive bill, a relationship breakdown or even imprisonment. Changes in an owner's circumstances can impact on their ability to meet their pet's welfare needs. While you cannot plan for every eventuality it is good to have someone who would be able to step in to help. If you are unable to care for your rabbits at any time, you must make arrangements for another suitable person to look after them on your behalf. Furthermore, if you are the head of the household of a child under the age of 16 years old, you are responsible for any animal that a child looks after or owns. If you own or are responsible for any animals and fail to meet their welfare needs or cause them unnecessary suffering, you may be prosecuted under the Animal Welfare (Guernsey) Ordinance, 2012 (the 'Ordinance').





There is no one “perfect” way to care for all rabbits because every rabbit, and every situation, is different but they all have the same needs. It is up to you to find out what your rabbit’s precise needs are and how to meet them. Under Section 8 of Ordinance, owner or keeper of an animal owes a duty to take such care as, in all circumstances, is reasonable to see that the animal is –



**Free from thirst, hunger and malnutrition, by access to a diet to maintain full health and vigour and free access to water**



**Free from discomfort, by providing an appropriate environment including suitable shelter and a comfortable resting area**



**Free from pain, injury and disease, by prevention or by the provision of timely veterinary diagnosis and treatment**



**Free from fear and distress, by ensuring conditions and treatment to avoid mental suffering, and**



**Free to express normal behaviour patterns, by providing sufficient space, environmental enrichment and companionship, whether that be of the animal’s own kind, a compatible species, and especially in the case of dogs, human company.**





## How to provide a suitable diet for your rabbit

**Diet includes water, and rabbits always need access to fresh, clean drinking water to keep them hydrated. Without water to drink, a rabbit will become distressed and seriously ill, especially during hot weather.**

A rabbit needs constant access to good quality, dust and mould free hay. Diets designed for other animals may not be suitable for rabbits, and some foods commonly found in the home, such as avocado, onion, grapes, raisins and chocolate can be harmful or even fatal to rabbits.

An individual rabbit's nutritional needs depends on their age, the type of food, bodyweight and level of activity. Some rabbits, such as those that are pregnant, nursing or in poor health will have special dietary needs.

If rabbits eat more food than they need, they will become overweight and may suffer. If you underfeed your rabbits, they will lose weight and may become ill. Healthy adult rabbits should maintain a stable body weight that is neither too thin nor too fat.

Sudden changes in their diet can make your rabbits ill. Any dietary changes, including treats, should be made gradually over a period of time.

### What you should do:

Provide your rabbit with fresh, clean drinking water at all times in a way that they are used to, ideally a gravity fill drinking bottle. Provide several bottles so that all your rabbits can drink at the same time. Keep the water vessel clean and frequently refreshed.

Make sure your rabbit eats a balanced diet suitable for their individual needs and maintains a stable weight that is neither over nor underweight for their age, level of activity, sex, breed, and state of health.

Recommended diets for rabbits consist of 85% good quality hay, 10% leafy greens and 5% commercial food. Rabbits should also have a constant supply of good quality, fresh grass (not clippings).

Read, and be guided by, the feeding instructions relating to any commercial rabbit food you buy. Adjust how much of this, and any greens are offered, depending on your individual rabbits but never restrict the amount of hay or grass offered,

Remove any uneaten food and change the amount so that they eat all of it and stay a healthy weight.

Do not change their diet suddenly. Any new foods, or changes, to the diet should be made gradually over several days.

Be aware that any change in the amount your rabbit eats or drinks may be a sign of ill health. If your rabbit's eating or drinking habits change, consult your vet.

If you are uncertain what to do, you should seek advice on feeding your rabbit from a vet, veterinary nurse, or other reliable source.



## How to provide a suitable environment for your rabbit

**Your rabbit needs a safe environment and, whether they live inside or outside, they need protection from hazards. Examples of hazards include open windows and balconies, which may be inadequately protected to prevent your rabbit from falling from them; household and garden chemicals; and poisonous plants.**

Rabbits are naturally inquisitive, and a rabbit may put themselves in danger if they are left to explore unsupervised.

Your rabbit needs a safe, comfortable place to rest, situated in a dry, draught-free area. Living in a cold or damp place can lead to suffering. If your rabbit lives outside, they will need protection from adverse weather or other threats.

Rabbits must be able to avoid things that scare them. All rabbits need a place to hide where they feel safe. If unable to hide and avoid threats, your rabbit will become stressed which can lead to ill health.

Rabbits are most active at dawn, dusk and overnight. Rabbits should have permanent access to all areas of their accommodation, which allows them to display natural behaviours such as burrowing and digging.

Rabbits need a wide variety of enrichment items such as tubes, platforms and lots of bedding such as hay, shredded paper and hemp bedding.

Rabbits are a prey species, and their accommodation must be secure enough to protect them from predators, such as dogs, cats, ferrets, and birds of prey. They should be housed so they are unable to see, hear or smell predator species.





## What you should do:

Provide your rabbits with a comfortable, safe, clean, dry, quiet, and draught-free environment with appropriate ventilation, temperature control and lighting (either natural or artificial) where they can rest undisturbed.

Rabbits are vulnerable to extremes of temperature. Their enclosure should therefore be located away from any radiators or other heat sources and protected against cold.

To ensure your rabbit can thrive, you should offer as much space, choice, and enrichment as possible. Rabbits that are unable to perform natural behaviours become stressed, unwell and have a reduced lifespan.

All rabbits must be able to perform their natural behaviours simultaneously, including running, hiding, jumping, standing on their hind legs without their ears touching the roof and lying down stretched out without touching the sides of their enclosure. They should also have space to choose to be apart from each other as well as together.

Living accommodation should be provided with dust-free nesting and bedding material and bedding material should cover the floor of the accommodation. Nesting and bedding material must not have been treated with substances which are hazardous to the health of rabbits.

Give them warm bedding which must be safe to eat, such as dust-free hay. Don't use softwood products such as pine, as these can cause illness, or nesting materials that separate into thin strands, such as cotton wool or similar 'fluffy' bedding products, as they can become tangled in them. The best type is dry, dust-free, absorbent wood shavings supplemented with hay to allow animals to tunnel and hide.

Your rabbits' accommodation must be cleaned regularly enough to keep it safe and hygienic, but not so often that they are frequently disturbed. Each day spot clean, remove poo, dirty and damp bedding, and any uneaten food. When doing a full clean, always use a pet-safe disinfectant to clean the cage. Take the opportunity to add some new enrichment for your rabbit to explore.

Always put some old (unsoiled) bedding back after a deep clean so that your rabbits don't get stressed from losing the scent of the cage. Only let your rabbits back in to their home when it is completely dry.

Rabbits are easily startled and may injure themselves if they panic. Cages must be positioned so that rabbits are not exposed to sudden loud noises. Provide your rabbits with a hiding place each which they have constant access to, where they can escape if they feel afraid.

If you are going away, make sure your rabbits are only ever left with a competent person who can meet their welfare needs.





## How to ensure your rabbit is fit and healthy

Rabbits feel pain however, as prey animals, they may not show outward signs of suffering or being in pain. Any changes in the way a rabbit behaves can be an early sign that they may be ill or in pain.

### They may:

- stop or reduce eating and lose weight,
- drink water excessively, less, or not at all,
- become withdrawn and unwilling to exercise or play,
- cry when approached or touched,
- show uncharacteristic fear or aggression when approached,
- try to hide.

### They may also show specific signs of ill health such as:

- discharges from the eyes, ears, or nose,
- excessive salivation, vomiting,
- difficulties passing urine, diarrhoea (wet tail), or constipation,
- coughing or wheezing,
- excessively scratching and developing skin sores,
- hair loss,
- limping or swellings.

This list is for guidance only and is not exhaustive.

Rabbits are vulnerable to a range of infectious diseases, parasites, and other illnesses. Your vet can advise on ways to protect your rabbit's health and welfare including vaccination, parasite treatment and neutering.

Dental problems are common in pet rabbits and include overgrown teeth, spurs, tooth root abscesses, and broken teeth. Only a vet should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth.

Overgrown nails are a common problem in rabbits and can cause pain and much more serious problems if the nails then grow into the pads.

Rabbits produce two types of droppings - hard, dry pellets and softer, moist pellets which they eat directly from their bottoms. Consumption of these droppings are essential to their health.

Rabbits benefit from regular grooming. Long-haired rabbits, or those with specialised coats may require specialised grooming to avoid a matted coat.

Placing rabbits on their back invokes a fear response that causes extreme stress.

If you decide to breed your rabbit, your vet can advise on the risks of inherited conditions and exaggerated features that could affect the welfare of the kits. Caring for kits is difficult and time-consuming, and the kits are your responsibility, with the same needs as any rabbit under the Ordinance.

A rabbit which can be easily identified (e.g. by microchip) is more likely to be reunited with its owner if injured or lost. This will ensure they receive prompt veterinary treatment needed if injured. It is important to ensure the contact details held by any database are kept up to date.

## What you should do:

Take sensible precautions to keep your rabbit safe from injury, fear, and distress, including prevention of access to poisonous food, plants, chemicals, medicines, electrical cables, and any other hazards. You should always consult your vet if you are concerned that your rabbit has eaten or come into contact with anything that could be harmful.

Get to know what is normal for your rabbit. Monitor your rabbit daily and watch out for changes in behaviour or signs of injury, disease, or illness. Make sure someone else does this if you are away.

Ask your vet how often your rabbit needs a health check, and about the things you can do to protect your rabbit's health. You should follow the advice you are given.

If you recognise signs and symptoms of disease or suspect that your rabbit is in pain, ill or injured; contact a vet promptly and follow veterinary advice regarding their treatment. If at any time you have concerns about the health or welfare of your rabbit, you should seek advice from a vet or registered veterinary nurse.

You need to familiarise yourself with the size and amount of hard, dry pellets that your rabbits produce daily and note any change to the size or consistency of these. Any uneaten moist droppings in their environment or stuck to them is an indication that there is a health or dietary problem. Veterinary advice should be sought in either event.

Check your rabbit's coat regularly and groom/bath your rabbit, as necessary, to maintain healthy coat and skin. Check your rabbit's nails regularly. Seek advice if you are not confident trimming your rabbit's nails.

Rabbits should be checked over at least daily, twice daily in warmer weather, for any signs of flystrike - maggots. Flystrike can quickly be fatal, so it is important that you contact your vet immediately as your rabbit needs to be seen urgently. Make sure someone else carries out the above daily checks if you are away.





Rabbit teeth should be regularly checked to ensure they are not overgrown or misaligned. Never attempt to treat or trim your rabbit's teeth at home, only a vet should correct these problems.

Seek the advice of your vet if you are considering having your rabbit neutered. They will be able to advise you about the best age and time to have this done.

Seek the advice of your vet before breeding your rabbit and take all reasonable steps to ensure that you will be able to provide the care required during pregnancy, as well as finding suitable homes for the kits before your rabbit is bred.

Wherever possible, all interactions with rabbits should take place at ground level. If it is necessary to pick up a rabbit, only an adult or responsible older child should do this.

Rabbits should be handled appropriately by lifting the rabbit up from underneath, supporting the thorax with one hand and the hindquarters with the other hand. Be careful not to let the rabbit twist, jump or flip as they can seriously damage their spine. Rabbits should never be picked up by their scruff or ears.

Use positive reinforcement training to help your rabbit willingly participate in home husbandry, grooming and vet visits. Seek advice from a qualified trainer who can help you teach cooperative care and management techniques.





## How to provide the right companionship for your rabbit

Cats show variable degrees of sociability. Cats that are friends generally groom and rub against each other and may sleep next to each other. However, many cats are happier living without other cats and can be reluctant to accept new cats.

Rabbits usually get on well with other rabbits when they have been neutered and properly introduced. Other species, such as guinea pigs, are not suitable companions for rabbits.

Rabbits that have been incorrectly introduced to other rabbits, or have been housed with an incompatible rabbit, may be afraid and develop behavioural issues resulting from these experiences. These rabbits may be harder to successfully introduce to a new companion rabbit, however, efforts should still be made to do so.

Rabbits get to know the people with whom they regularly interact and can trust. They can become confused and distressed if the behaviour of people is inconsistent and unpredictable. Provide your rabbit with regular opportunities to interact with friendly people. Ensure those handling your rabbit do so gently and do not frighten them or pick them up by their scruff or their ears.

It is never acceptable to frighten a rabbit, cause pain, injure or encourage them to behave aggressively by teasing or tormenting them.

### What you should do

Rabbits should be kept with at least one other compatible rabbit; good combinations include a neutered male and one or more females, two females or neutered brothers, if they've been reared together.

Rabbits should be introduced gradually on neutral territory, paying attention to the behaviour of both individual rabbits at all times. If chasing, fighting or mounting behaviour occurs regularly, consult your vet or suitably qualified behaviourist.



Rabbits should be provided with the biggest area possible that allows them to be near, and apart from, their companions and express natural behaviours such as sprawling, stretching out, 'binkies' and hopping.

Provide sufficient resources for all rabbits e.g. toys, bedding, toilet areas and hiding places and give them enough space so they can get away from one another if they want to.

You should ensure that rabbits in your care have the opportunity to positively interact with people every day. Rabbits must have space when meeting people so they can choose to move away if they become overwhelmed. Do not restrain them and insist they are petted, as this can create a fear response.

Be consistent, kind, and gentle in the way you, your family, and friends, react to your rabbit. Never leave your rabbits unsupervised with another animal or person who may harm or frighten them, such as young children who may unintentionally do this.

When you are away, make sure your rabbit is properly cared for by a responsible person. When someone else is looking after your rabbit they also have a legal responsibility to ensure its welfare, and you should ensure that they understand its needs and any special requirements that it may have.

If your rabbit shows signs of fear or aggression, calmly remove them from the situation and seek advice from a vet, veterinary nurse, or ethical trainer/behaviourist.







## How to **provide your rabbit's behavioural needs**

**How a rabbit behaves is individual and depends on their age, breed or type, breeding, rearing and past experiences. Rabbits are active, playful, sociable animals and need to live with another rabbit.**

Rabbits are intelligent animals and can suffer from boredom and loneliness. If your rabbits are not mentally and physically stimulated, they will suffer and engage in stress behaviour e.g. chewing their hutch or nipping.

Aggressive displays or changes in behaviour, including hiding or dietary changes, may indicate that something is wrong with the rabbits physical and mental health.

Rabbits experience a range of emotions including happiness, anxiety, fearfulness, and anger. How they behave and their body language can help you understand what they are feeling and whether they are physically and mentally fit and healthy.

Rabbits' natural behaviours include digging, foraging, hiding and standing up on their hind limbs. They must be able to perform all these behaviours in their enclosure.

### **What you should do:**

Make sure your rabbits receive enough mental, social and physical stimulation to satisfy their individual behavioural needs.

Provide your rabbits with safe enrichment items and regular opportunities to interact with friendly people.

Make sure your rabbits have permanent access to their exercise area so they can stay fit, happy and healthy.

Rabbits are crepuscular, meaning they are most active at dawn, dusk and overnight. Keep feeding times, cage cleaning and interactions to these times when your rabbit is most active.

Ensure your rabbits are able to rest undisturbed when they want to. Don't house them in areas that have lots of activity during the day so they can rest undisturbed.

Rabbits need access to safe and secure hiding / resting places that they can access at all times. These should all have more than one entrance and exit to prevent rabbits from being trapped inside or prevented from entering.

Make sure your rabbits can reach all the things they need e.g. bedding, food, water, toilet areas and toys, without having to get too close to things, people or other animals that may scare them.

Never shout at or punish your rabbit. They will not understand and will just become more nervous or scared. You should only use positive reward-based training methods.

Early life experiences can affect how rabbits behave. Rabbits should be very slowly and gently handled when they are young and allowed to experience everyday noises and stimuli that they will likely face when older. Build their trust by letting them come to you.

## Understanding rabbit behaviour

It is important to observe body language in context. Almost all behaviours, when observed on their own, could mean a number of different things in different contexts.

You should know the behaviour of your rabbit when it is fit and healthy and be able to recognise and understand the signs your rabbit, and others, use when they are worried, distressed, frightened or feeling unwell.



### Behaviours that may show your cat is happy:

- Relaxed body
- Being energetic and curious
- Playing, hopping
- Soliciting attention, such as licking, initiating contact
- Doing 'zoomies' and 'binkies'

### Behaviours which may be associated with stress include:

- Making distressed vocalisations
- Hiding to avoid being touched or feeling vulnerable
- Excessive cleaning or chewing of their feet, flanks and fur
- Changes to their feeding or toileting habits
- Over-drinking or not drinking
- Reluctance to move or a change in movement
- Repetitive movements, such as racing back and forth
- Displaying more aggressive communication such as biting
- An absence of behaviour normal for the individual

If their behaviour changes or becomes a problem they could be distressed, bored, ill or injured and you should seek advice from a vet or other suitably qualified rabbit care specialist.



## How to **Safely transport your rabbit**

**A rabbit needs a safe and secure place within a vehicle that is large enough for it to stand, stretch and turn around comfortably.**

The vehicle must maintain a comfortable temperature in the space where the rabbit is kept.

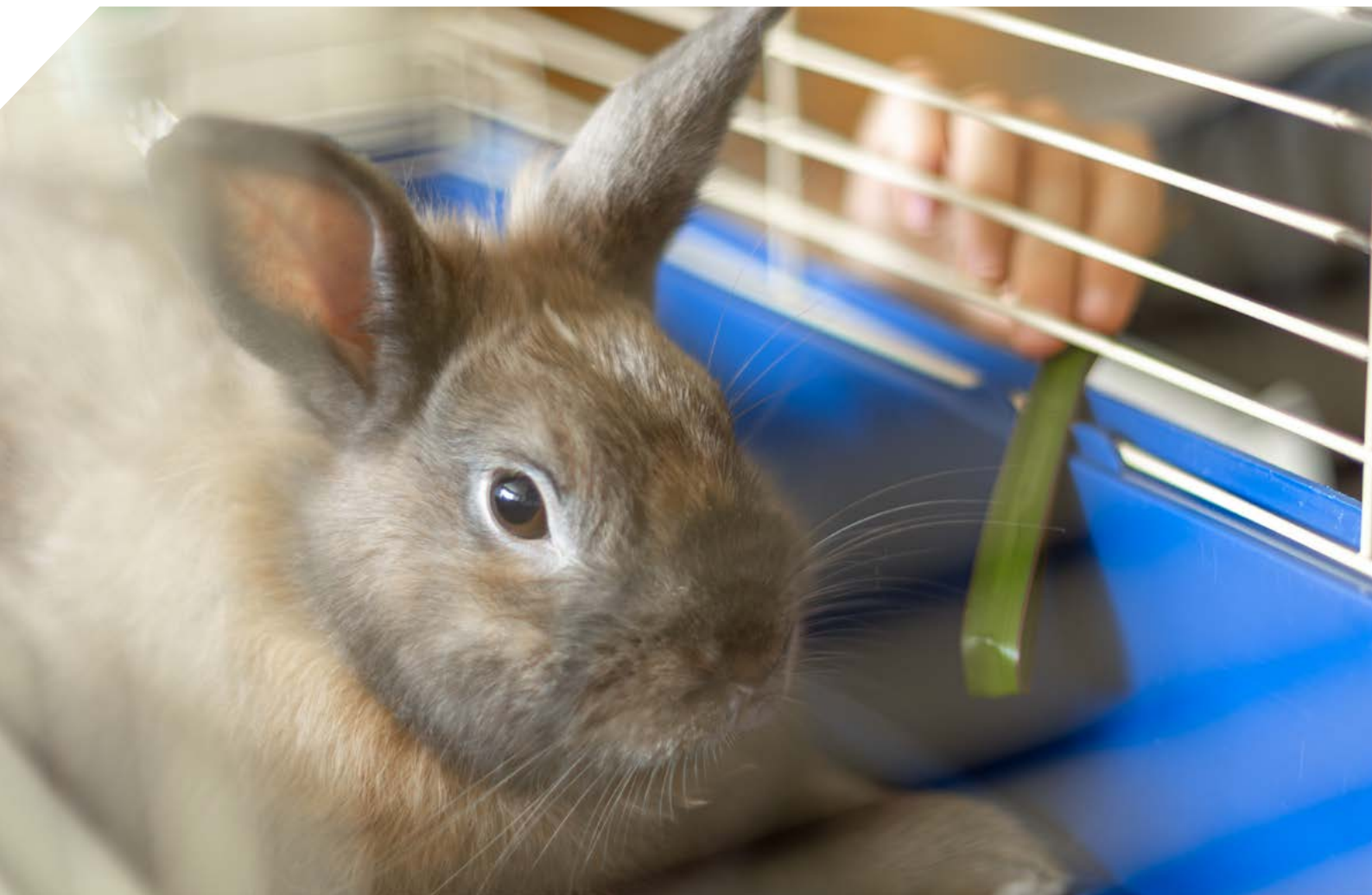
Never leave an animal in a vehicle in direct strong sunshine or high temperatures. The temperature inside a car in full sun on a hot day can quickly rise to double the temperature outside, leading rapidly to distress for any animal in the vehicle. Overheating, distress, and suffering is likely when the temperature goes above 25oC for more than a few minutes.

### **What you should do**

Provide a secure carrier, for your rabbit that is large enough for them to comfortably stand up, turn around and stretch.

Don't transport your rabbit in a way that it could come to harm, e.g. whilst unrestrained in a vehicle with the windows wide open.

Do not leave your rabbit unattended in situations, or for periods of time that are likely to cause them distress or render them unsafe.





# This Code of Recommendation applies to all rabbits.

The purpose of the Code is to provide practical guidance to help you to comply with the provisions set out under Section 8 of the Animal Welfare (Guernsey) Ordinance 2012 ([weblink to the Ordinance](#)). It does not tell you precisely how to care for your rabbits, but it does summarise important things you should know and what to do when making decisions about how best to care for your rabbits.

A failure to comply with the Code of Recommendations may be relied upon in court as tending to establish liability for failing to meet the duty of care.

If you are unsure about anything to do with the care and welfare of your rabbits, you should always seek advice from an expert such as a veterinary surgeon or “other suitably qualified” specialists. These are people who hold the qualifications and experience to provide expert advice on rabbit welfare and behaviour.



