

A new view of rabbits



There are more than a million pet rabbits in Britain but thinking on their care and housing has changed dramatically since the days of tiny hutches in sheds.

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With rabbits being the most popular of the 'small furies', it's important for retailers to understand the needs of the species, both to help their customers and improve rabbit welfare.

Rabbits remain a popular choice for UK pet owners, with an estimated 1.2 million included in the Pet Food Manufacturers Association's 2013-2014 Pet Population report, so getting it right when it comes to rabbit welfare is a must for retailers.

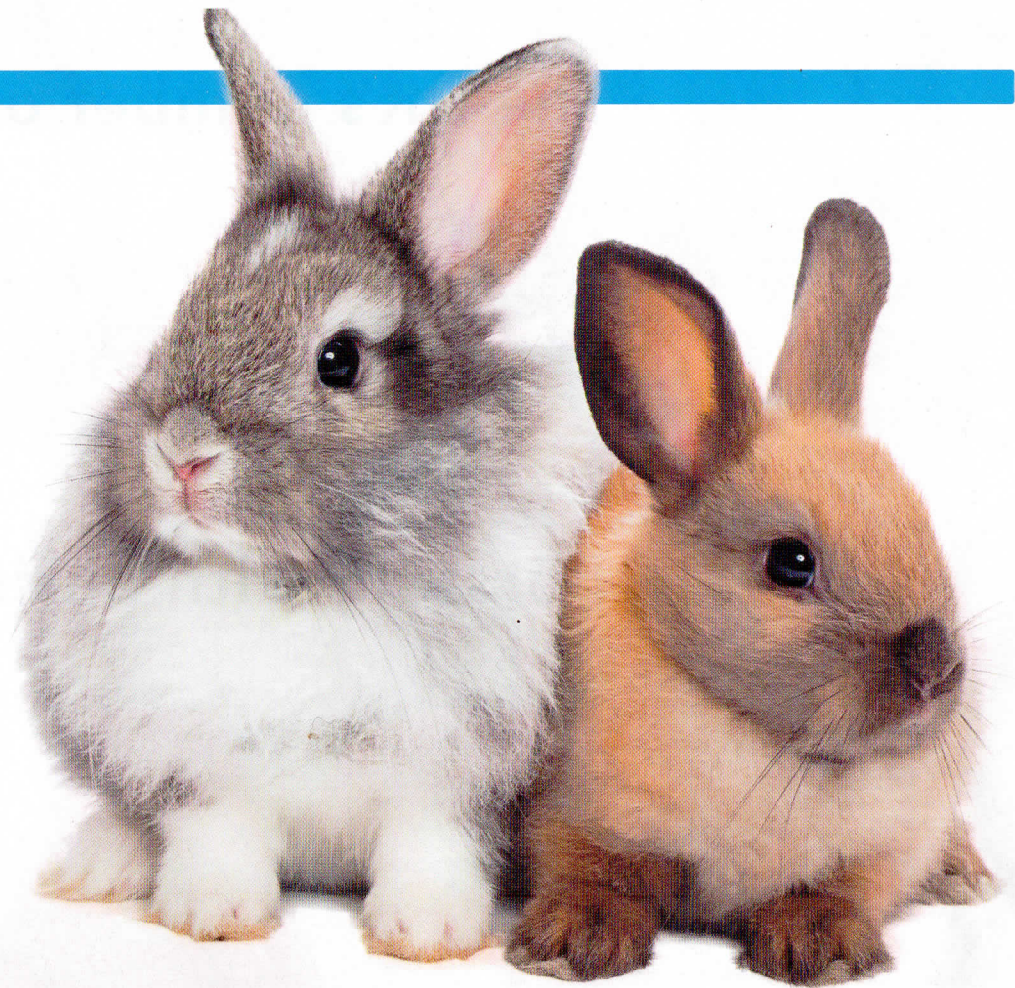
The 'A Hutch is Not Enough' campaign from the Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund (RAWF) has been hugely successful in drawing the attention of owners and retailers alike to the fact that traditional practices around hutch keeping don't meet a rabbit's basic needs, but there's certainly still work to be done.

The Animal Welfare Act 2006

includes legislation that makes owners and keepers responsible for the five welfare needs of animals in their care (environment, diet, behaviour, companionship and health), but the problem comes when rabbit owners misunderstand what the welfare needs of their pets actually are. Retailers can, and should, continue the great work done by organisations like the RWA in educating owners who aren't aware of the needs of rabbits as a species.

1: Suitable living environment

Many people still think of the stereotypical small rabbit hutch when it comes to living environments, but they tend to be so small that rabbits can do little more than just sit there. For a living environment to be suitable for a rabbit, it's recommended that it be spacious enough for a minimum of three hops in a row, as well as allowing the rabbit to forage, dig and fully rear up on its



make sure you stock plenty of it. Hay not only satisfies their nutritional needs, it also caters to their natural foraging instinct, strengthens their teeth and jaws and keeps them busy (they can spend all day chewing on it), so there's less chance of them getting stressed and bored.

3: Exhibiting normal behaviour patterns

Rabbits are highly social, intelligent and active animals, so it's important that your customers understand rabbits' normal behaviour patterns and needs in order to keep them happy and healthy. As we've already seen, having an unsuitable living environment severely limits a rabbit's natural instincts and behaviours – to run, jump, dig, forage, hide and rear up, none of which they can do in a small hutch.

minimising behavioural problems like aggression and spraying.

"I think it is well accepted these days that 'A Hutch is Not Enough' and that keeping a rabbit alone and confined to a hutch is cruel," says Rae Todd, Welfare Exec at the RWA. "There are a lot of great retailers out there that will only sell rabbits in pairs or to be a companion of an existing rabbit, who sell large hutches and runs and give good advice, but sadly there are still far too many that will happily sell a rabbit to live alone and think a 4ft hutch is 'luxury.'"

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1: Suitable living environment

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Rabbits living alone in small hutches are condemned to a life of just sitting there, bored, lonely and unable to display natural behaviours. Retailers can play a huge part in alleviating this by not selling small hutches to begin with, and by advising customers about buying an appropriate exercise run for their rabbits. If you're able to stock runs as well as hutches, even better.

2: Suitable diet

A rabbit's natural diet consists of mainly hay and grass, so pet rabbits should be fed a mainly hay based diet, along with high-quality rabbit pellets and greens (vegetables and/or herbs). Commercial rabbit food is great as part of a balanced diet so long as the owner understands their rabbit's needs and habits, because if they only feed a mixed food and the rabbit only eats certain parts (known as selective feeding), it can cause nutritional deficiencies and illness, which is why pellets and extruded foods are better options for ensuring rabbits eat a balanced diet.

Even if your customers choose a complete rabbit food, their bunnies will still need unlimited access to hay, so

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4: Have appropriate companionship

Keeping a solitary rabbit as a pet is sadly all too common among owners who don't realise that as sociable animals they need companionship of other rabbits, either in a group or, at minimum, as a pair. While interaction with their human 'family' is obviously part of building a good pet/owner bond, rabbits need to be with others of their kind to avoid loneliness and frustration. The best pair is a male and a female (both neutered of course), but two neutered females or even two neutered males could become a bonded pair, if the introductions are done properly.

Retailers who do sell rabbits can promote this very important welfare need by only selling rabbits in pairs, or encouraging owners of a single rabbit to buy a companion. This can be a great cross sale opportunity, as long as the customer's existing accommodation is suitable for two rabbits.

5: Be protected from pain and suffering

The ability to cover the fifth welfare need of pet rabbits, health, comes in part from being able to provide the right care in relation to the other four needs. As well as annual vaccinations and regular veterinary check-ups, it's important that rabbits are neutered – and not only if they're being kept as a male/female pair. In the same way as neutering cats and dogs is essential for good health and behaviour, neutering rabbits reduces the risk of certain cancers, as well as

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Aside from being important to the health and behaviour of the UK's pet rabbit population, Todd stresses that good welfare also equals good business for retailers: "Owners that have a pair of healthy happy rabbits in a suitable set up are ultimately going to enjoy their rabbits for longer and spend more on them."

If your customers end up with a rabbit that's unhappy and hormonal because of neglect caused by a lack of education about rabbit welfare, the end result is likely to be the rabbit being abandoned at a rescue and your business losing a customer. Retailers are in the ideal position to share welfare education, and leaflets about all aspects of rabbit care are available from both the RAWF and the Pet Industry Federation (PIF). 📄

The RAWF's advice for retailers

- Sell rabbits in pairs or to be a companion to an existing rabbit (as long as current accommodation suitable and owners know to neuter)
- Sell suitable accommodation – the bigger the better
- Sell good quality food, hay and bedding
- Ensure staff are well-trained, able to answer questions and correctly sex rabbits
- Prevent impulse purchases
- Give customers appropriate literature to take home
- Give the correct advice about the real expense of owning rabbits, including neutering, vaccinations and routine vet treatment costs

Find out more about the RAWF's retailer charter here: www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk/retailer.htm
Data on the current rabbit and other pet population can be found at www.pfma.org.uk/historical-pet-population