

Rabbit Husbandry

Part One: Good Housekeeping



A domestic rabbit may live on its own, as part of a group, outside in a rabbitry or inside in the home, while the wild rabbit spends nearly two-thirds of its day within a snug burrow so it is not always the size of hutch that is important.

In our first article in this good welfare series we consider the legal implications of good housing

How many rabbits do you intend to keep?

Many a keeper has thought that perhaps half a dozen hutches will be sufficient; only to find a year later that his chosen (but compact) shed is full to overflowing. It is then time-wasting as well as expensive to build on extensions or start again with a larger building.

It is possible to run a successful stud with several hutches – if you intend to stick to one breed. But it is more than likely that you will eventually need at least another fifteen or so.

Begin by roughing out a scale drawing of your garden and rabbit site. Ideally your housing should be placed so that it will avoid strong sunlight during the afternoon, be protected from rain, sleet or snow and be well ventilated.

For hygiene purposes any outdoor hutch, or a rabbitry, should be placed on a concrete base and raised off the floor to prevent damp.

You may decide to place your housing at the bottom of the garden and perhaps screen it with trees. This is fine, if you don't mind going out in all weathers!

Or perhaps it may be convenient to have hutches outside the kitchen door. Again, no problem for the good rabbit keeper who keeps their hutches, feeding containers and equipment in clean and tidy order – with predators well away from your property.

Whatever you choose, it's your choice. Or is it?

The Allotments Act of 1950 makes it clear that no landlord (subject to local authority regulations) can prevent anyone keeping rabbits. However, there are exceptions:

- If the rabbits are kept by way of business.
- If the rabbits can be proved to 'constitute a nuisance'.
- If they are prejudicial to the health of the tenant.
- If they affect the operations of any enactment.

This gives the local authority the power to act on any complaints if they are satisfied that the hutches are a definite eye-sore; if they smell excessively; when they attract rats in numbers; or when the placing of the hutches contradict a definite by-law.

(One example is when hutches are placed against the house occupied by the tenant).

So make sure that your hutches are well built and not unpleasing in appearance and are in good sanitary condition.

Duty of Care

Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 rabbit keepers are required to supply:

- "Sufficient space and proper facilities"

In other words, the hutch should be large enough for the adult rabbit to take several hops in any given direction and stand up on its hind legs; appropriate stimuli within the living area (for example hay racks, cardboard boxes); and also where appropriate, company of its own kind, in order that it can express normal behaviour.

- Rabbits should also be protected from "fear and distress to avoid mental suffering"

Examples are excessive noise, fireworks, or housing the animal in view of predators.

Environmental Protection Act of 1990

This contains two important matters that affect the rabbit breeder. These are:

- (a) The causing of a nuisance.
- (b) The disposal of waste – i.e. hutch cleanings.

A nuisance is caused where any premises are in such a state as to be prejudicial to good health or very unpleasant.

Any fumes, gases or smells, an accumulation of waste, animals kept in poor conditions or in places where they may be prejudicial to health, and so on are considered to be a nuisance.

If a neighbour wishes to make a complaint about an adjoining rabbitry, he or she can contact the local authority who will then investigate the complaint. If they consider there is a nuisance, they will serve a notice (called an "abatement notice") specifying what is to be done.

This would almost certainly say that the nuisance must be reduced, and probably that certain work must be done (e.g. the repairing or rebuilding of hutches or huts, the destruction of vermin, or the removal of hutch waste). It will also give a time limit for the work to be completed.

If the person who gets a notice does not consider it fair he or she may appeal against it. This has to be done to a magistrate's court within twenty-one days from the notice on which he was served with the notice.

If a person contravenes or fails to comply with any of the requirement of the notice, that person would be guilty of an offence and could be fined.

For exhibition stock, the premises must be:

- (a) Clean and tidy.
- (b) Free from vermin.
- (c) Dirty bedding disposed of quickly and not left near the dwelling house or rabbitry.
- (d) The rabbitry is free from odour. This means it must be cleaned out at frequent intervals.
- (e) Sheds, hutches, store places etc are constructed in a "proper and workmanlike manner."



This block of 6 indoor hutches has removable indoor partitions so can be adapted for use for single/multiple occupancy. For example, two partitions can be removed to accommodate a doe and litter in a 12 feet hutch.

This double hutch was designed for a French Lop breeder looking for plenty of hopping space and ceiling height.



Fresh water and hay should always be available. Feeding will be covered in part two.

Hutch Design

The design of the hutch should make it easy for the owner to reach every corner during cleaning. By raising hutches at least 200-300mm off the floor and keeping 250mm between the back of the hutch and wall, air can then circulate, aiding ventilation.

Hutch doors should be heavy enough not to be lifted by predators and the hutch itself should be raised as high as possible to make it difficult for predators to gain a foothold. Rabbit sheds and block hutches should be secured overnight when predators are more likely to strike.



Home Sweet Home for the modern rabbit

Neil Robertson visited his local petshop to photograph what pet owners are buying in 2009. These designs meet the BRC criteria by providing plenty of hopping, resting and exercising space



Recommended Hutch Sizes?

Guidelines can be misleading – one internet source quotes “The RSPCA and Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund recommend a minimum hutch size of 5’ x 2’ x 2’ for an average sized rabbit” while the RSPCA website does not specify a size and the RWAf’s own website and leaflets quote a minimum size for an average sized rabbit of 6ft x 2ft x 2ft.

The question is, what is “average size”? The BRC recognises more than 60 breeds ranging from the Netherland Dwarf at under 1kg to the 7kg adult Continental Giant and these are not placed into “small, medium or large” categories.

We believe that The British Rabbit Council offers the best housing advice on its website (www.thebrc.org) by recommending the following:

- Hutch size will be dependent on the breed of rabbit. It must always be large enough for the rabbit to move around, stretch out full length or make the minimum of three consecutive hops. The height of the hutch must allow the rabbit to sit up on its hind legs. *(Therefore a hutch size width for an adult rabbit could be anything from 3 ft to 7ft or larger for a doe and litter)*
- A hutch may be partitioned into two compartments one providing a resting area and the other an exercise area.
- Breeding hutches should always be large enough to comfortably house the doe with her young for the anticipated period prior to weaning.

Hutch Manufacturers

South Coast Joiney (see advertisement in this issue) will make hutches to order. Owner Nick Austin is a rabbit fancier so just tell him your breed and requirements and ask him to quote.

The Happyhutch Company (see offer on this page) supplies to the public and the trade and will design a hutch to your specifications. For full range and prices visit www.happyhutch.co.uk or telephone 01440 785304.

Also exhibiting at Bradford Excel in January were Bradshaw Timber Animal Housing (01484 843795) and Dawsons Animal Housing (01423 701213).

Change & the Older Fancier
Vic Compton considers his options – see page 52

Disposal of Rabbit Manure and Hutch Cleanings

The Environmental Protection Act of 1990 gives all local authorities powers to define how any type of waste must be stored and put out for collection.

There is a clear duty to care in making sure that the waste is securely packaged and wrapped, whether this is for storage at home until it is composted or transported. This helps to keep flies and vermin away and lessens the possibility of complaints.

Whilst the Act specifically says that ordinary household rubbish is outside the scope of the Act, some local authorities have decided – or may in the future decide – that any hutch cleanings must be treated as “Trade Waste”.

As such they can charge usually quite large sums for its collection; or they will not allow people to dump the waste at their refuse dumps.

A classic way to cause a nuisance is to attempt to burn hutch cleanings in built up areas.

One of the best ways of disposal is to contact one of the 1,500 Allotment Societies affiliated to the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardens (www.nsalg.org.uk). Telephone 01536 266576.

It is also worth contacting your Local Authority if they have extensive allotments; this usually means that there is a full time Allotment Officer who may control nearly 1,000 or more allotments.

The Allotment Officers are usually happy to allow breeders to deposit rabbit waste (not in bags) in the wasteland at the side of the allotment area, provided that it does not obstruct any paths.

Permission must, however, always be sought from the Allotments Officer first.

If you are unable to contact an Allotments Officer, try one of the Leisure Services or Park Amenities departments.

For more information on composting contact Recycle Now by calling 0845 3313131 or visiting www.recyclenow.com/compost

What to do in the event of a Complaint

First, and most important: if a uniformed RSPCA inspector visits you, they have absolutely no rights to be on your property.

Check your rights by visiting the website of The Self Help Group for Farmers & Pet Owners (<http://the->

shg.org). For example, the Group advises:

“Do not let them in! Do not answer any questions. Politely request the inspector to leave and if the police are present you can ask him them to leave unless they have a warrant.

“It is important that you do not enter into any dialogue with the inspectors even if they imply you are under arrest. Ask for the names

and details of any person present and write them down.

“When they have left, take photographs of the rabbits and hutches and contact your vet to request an immediate inspection. Ask your vet to write a report and act immediately on his recommendations. His written report is valuable in the event of further action.”

Contact the British Rabbit

Council immediately. Keep them fully informed and be guided by their advice.

For further information, visit the Defra website. Their advice is that “The RSPCA cannot issue formal improvement notices under the Act. They do, and will continue to, issue their own informal improvement notices. These are not formal notices under the Act and have no power in law.”