

Animal Welfare: Codes of recommendations for the welfare of livestock - Rabbits



Welfare Codes are intended to encourage stock-keepers to adopt the highest standards of husbandry. This new Code has been produced following advice by the independent Farm Animal Welfare Council and after consultation with a very wide range of organisations interested in the care of farm livestock.

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An Introduction by Ministers

The Code, which has the approval of Parliament, has been compiled along similar lines to those previously issued for cattle and pigs and takes account of five basic needs: freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition; appropriate comfort and shelter; the prevention, or rapid diagnosis and treatment of, injury, disease or infestation; freedom from fear; and freedom to display most normal patterns of behaviour. Included in the Code are recommendations on accommodation design, space standards, stockmanship and emergency precautions.

The preface to the Code identifies good stockmanship as a key factor in farm animal welfare. We are convinced that this Code is an essential tool for everyone concerned with the rearing of rabbits. We therefore ask you, and all involved with rabbits on your farm, to read it carefully and to bear its recommendations in mind at all times. The note on the opposite page explains the status of the Code in relation to the law of the land.

Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

Secretary of State for Scotland

Secretary of State for Wales

Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968 Part I

Note

The following Code, comprising paragraphs 1 to 55 is issued with the authority of Parliament and has been prepared following consultation as required by section 3 (1) of the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968 which reads as follows:

3(1) The Ministers may from time to time, after consultation with such persons appearing to them to represent any interests concerned as the Ministers consider appropriate-

(a) prepare codes containing such recommendations with respect to the welfare of livestock for the time being situated on agricultural land as they consider proper for the guidance of persons concerned with the livestock; and (b) revise any such code by revoking, varying, amending or adding to the provisions of the code in such manner as the Minister thinks fit.

The following further extracts from the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968 explain the status of the Code in relation to the law of the land:

1(1) Any person who causes unnecessary pain or unnecessary distress to any livestock for the time being situated on agricultural land and under his control or permits any such livestock to suffer any such pain or distress of which he knows or may reasonably be expected to know shall be guilty of an offence under this section.

3(4) A failure on the part of any person to observe a provision of a code for the time being issued under this section shall not of itself render that person liable to proceedings of any kind; but such a failure on the part of any person may, in proceedings against him for an offence under section I of this Act, be relied upon by the prosecution as tending to establish the guilt of the accused unless it is shown that he cannot reasonably be expected to have observed the provision in question within the period which has elapsed since that provision was first included in a code issued under this section.

The Code came into operation on 1 September 1987.

Preface

This preface is not part of the Code, but is intended to explain its purpose and to indicate the broad considerations upon which it is based.

The basic requirements for the welfare of livestock are a husbandry system appropriate to the health and, so far as practicable, the behavioural needs of the animals and a high standard of stockmanship.

Stockmanship is a key factor because, no matter how otherwise acceptable a system may be in principle, without competent, diligent stockmanship the welfare of the animals cannot be adequately catered for. The recommendations which follow are designed to help stockmen, particularly those who are young or inexperienced, to attain the required standards. The part that training has to play in the development of the stockman's awareness of welfare requirements cannot be overstressed. Detailed advice on the application of the Code in individual circumstances is readily available through the official advisory services and in advisory publications.

Nearly all livestock husbandry systems impose restrictions on the stock and some of these can cause an unacceptable degree of discomfort or distress by preventing the animals from fulfilling their basic needs. Provisions meeting these needs, and others which must be considered, include:

- comfort and shelter;
- readily accessible fresh water and a diet to maintain the animals in full health and vigour;
- freedom of movement;
- the company of other animals particularly of like kind;
- the opportunity to exercise most normal patterns of behaviour;
- light during the hours of daylight, and lighting readily available to enable the animals to be inspected at any time;
- flooring which neither harms the animals, nor causes undue strain;
- the prevention, or rapid diagnosis and treatment of vice, injury, parasitic infestation and disease;
- the avoidance of unnecessary mutilation; and
- emergency arrangements to cover outbreaks of fire, the breakdown of essential mechanical services and the disruption of supplies.

Not all husbandry systems in use for rabbits equally meet the physiological and behavioural needs of the animals. An attempt has therefore been made, on the basis of the latest scientific knowledge and soundest current practices, to identify those features which could place the welfare of rabbits at risk unless precautions are taken. The Code sets out what these precautions should be, bearing in mind the importance to the animals of their total environment and the fact that there is often more than one way in which their welfare can be safeguarded.

Certain aspects of livestock husbandry can present hazards to the health and safety of the stockman. Advice on these matters is available from the local Agriculture Safety Inspector of the Health and Safety Executive.

Code of recommendations for the welfare of rabbits

Introduction

1. The welfare of rabbits can be safeguarded under a variety of management systems. The system employed should be appropriate to the health and behavioural and physiological

needs of the rabbit. This, together with the facilities available and the skill of the stockman, will determine the number of animals kept at any one time and the way in which they are grouped. Rabbits are animals which need individual and frequent attention. It is essential that the stockman should watch for signs of distress or disease and take prompt remedial action.

2. The signs which, taken together, indicate good health in a rabbit colony are set out in paragraph 3. The stockman should be able to recognise impending trouble in its earliest stages and may often be able to identify the cause and institute remedial measures, failing which veterinary or other expert assistance should be quickly obtained.

3. Important indications of health are alertness, clear bright eyes, good posture, vigorous movements if unduly disturbed, active feeding and drinking, firmish dark-coloured pelleted stools, clean and healthy fur and skin, and grooming. Earmite infestation is a common debilitating and disfiguring disease of rabbits and it is important that the external ear canals and ears should be free of debris and encrustations. Attention should be paid to any departure from the normal.

4. The signs of ill-health may include listlessness, dullness in the eyes, tucked-up posture and grinding teeth, shaking of the head (suggesting ear canker), loss of appetite, running eyes and tear-stains, nasal discharge, abdominal distention, scouring, stained fur, the presence of wet droppings, sneezing and snuffles, scratch marks (suggesting ectoparasites), swelling of the face (suggesting myxomatosis), sore hocks and lameness.

5. Ailing or injured rabbits should be segregated wherever possible and treated or, if necessary, be killed humanely without delay.

Housing

General

6. Advice on welfare aspects should be sought when new buildings are to be constructed or existing buildings modified.

7. Problems can arise if total air space in the rabbitry is either inadequate or excessive and the building is not correctly ventilated, and therefore careful attention should be paid to these aspects of welfare during planning.

8. Internal surfaces of housing, pens, hutches or cages should be of materials which can be effectively cleaned and disinfected, or easily replaced when necessary.

9. Ventilation, heating, lighting, feeding and watering equipment, electrical installation and all other equipment should be designed, sited and installed so as to avoid risk of injuring the rabbits.

10. Material containing paint and wood preservatives which may be toxic to rabbits should not be used on surfaces accessible to them. Particular care is necessary to guard against the risk of poisoning from old paintwork in any part of the building or when second-hand building materials are used.

Fire and other emergency precautions

11. Farmers should make advance plans for dealing with emergencies such as fire, flood or disruption of supplies, and should ensure that all staff are familiar with the appropriate emergency action. At least one responsible member of the staff should always be available to take the necessary action.

12. Fire precautions should be a major priority for all stockmen. The provisions of Section 1.3 of British Standard BS5502 relating to fire precautions should therefore be followed. Expert advice on all fire precautions is obtainable from fire prevention officers of local fire brigades and from the Fire Prevention Association.

13. In the design of new buildings, or alteration of existing ones, there should be provision for livestock to be released and evacuated quickly in the case of an emergency. Materials used in construction should have sufficient fire resistance and adequate doors and other escape routes be provided to enable an emergency procedure to be followed in the event of a fire. Where possible straw storage should be separated from livestock accommodation to reduce the risk of stock from fire and smoke.

14. All electrical, gas and oil services should be planned and fitted so that if there is overheating or flame is generated, the risk of flame spreading to equipment, litter or straw (where used) or to the fabric of the building is minimal. It is advisable to site main power on/off controls outside buildings. Consideration should be given to installing fire alarm systems which can be heard and acted upon at any time of the day or night.

15. In case a 999 call has to be made, notices should be prominently displayed in rabbit houses stating where the nearest phone is located. Each phone should have fixed by it a notice giving instructions to the Fire Brigade on how to reach the rabbit houses.

16. There is usually some warning if interruptions in the supply of feedingstuffs and, so far as possible, arrangements should be made to lay in adequate stocks of feed or water to offset the worst effects of such a contingency.

Accommodation

17. Accommodation should be designed and maintained so as to avoid injury or distress to the rabbits.

18. The type and arrangement of accommodation should allow for efficient working and for each rabbit to be properly inspected.

19. 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.

Floors

20. All floors on which rabbits are kept should be designed, constructed and maintained so as to avoid injury or distress to the rabbits. For welded wire floors, mesh of suitable size should be used. Square mesh should not exceed 19 mm x 19 mm and rectangular mesh should not exceed 75 mm x 12.5 mm. Wire of not less than 2.64 mm diameter is recommended and should not in any case be less than 2.032 mm. The mesh should be flat and any rough spots arising during manufacture or from wear during subsequent use should be smoothed off.

21. The adults of some strains, particularly of the larger breeds, may need to be kept on solid floors. Wherever solid floors are used an ample supply of clean bedding should be provided to ensure a dry lying area. Likewise, in other systems, the use of straw or similar material in the lying area is strongly recommended.

Ventilation and temperature

22. Ventilation rates and house conditions should at all times be adequate to provide sufficient fresh air for the rabbits. In particular accumulations of ammonia, hydrogen sulphide, carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide and dust should be avoided. Care should be taken to ensure that the ventilation system allows adequate air flow below cages, and dwarf walls or solid sides should be avoided wherever possible. There should be an alarm system to warn

the stockman of failure of any automated equipment. Expert advice may be necessary to ensure correct temperature, airflow and humidity.

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

24. Extremes of temperature should be avoided. Excessive heat loss should be prevented by the structural insulation of external walls and roof of the building, or by the provision of adequate bedding. It is essential to avoid conditions which could cause chilling in young rabbits just leaving the nest. Appropriate measures should be taken to prevent temperatures rising to the point where heat stress, indicated by prolonged panting, occurs. As a general guide the aim should be to achieve a temperature range of 10C - 20C.

Lighting

25. During the hours of daylight the level of indoor lighting, natural or artificial, should be such that all rabbits can be seen clearly. However it may be advantageous to cover the nest box at the time of kindling. There should be a period of darkness in each 24 hour cycle. In addition, adequate lighting should be available for satisfactory inspection at any time.

Mechanical equipment and services

26. All equipment and services including feed hoppers, drinkers, ventilating fans, heating and lighting units, fire extinguishers and alarm systems should be cleaned and inspected regularly and kept in good working order. All automated equipment should incorporate a fail-safe device and, where the rabbits' welfare is dependent upon such equipment, an alarm system to warn the stockman of failure. Defects should be rectified immediately or alternative measures taken to safeguard the health and welfare of the rabbits. Alternative ways of feeding and of maintaining a satisfactory environment should therefore be ready for use.

27. All electrical installations at mains voltage should be inaccessible to rabbits and properly earthed.

Space allowances

28. When planning new accommodation or modifying existing buildings account should be taken of the size of the breed and natural behaviour of the animals, which includes hopping, sitting with ears erect and play.

29. The total floor area should be sufficient to enable the rabbits to move around and to feed and drink without difficulty. Accommodation should allow sufficient area so that all rabbits can lie on their sides other than at times when nesting boxes are used. The following space allowances, which are in use commercially, should be regarded as absolute minimum:

SYSTEM	MINIMUM FLOOR SPACE
In cages	
Doe and litter to 5 weeks of age	0.56 m ² total area
Doe and litter to 8 weeks of age	0.74 m ² total area
Rabbits 5 to 12 weeks of age	0.07 m ² per rabbit
Rabbits 12 weeks and over (other than those used for breeding) (multiple occupation cages)	0.18 m ² per rabbit
Adult does and bucks for breeding	0.56 m ² per rabbit
In hutches	
Doe and litter to 5 weeks of age	0.75 m ² total area
Doe and litter to 8 weeks of age	0.93 m ² total area
Rabbits 5 to 12 weeks of age	0.009 m ² per rabbit
Adults does and bucks for breeding	0.75 m ² per rabbit

30. Accommodation for rabbits over 12 weeks of age should be not less than 45 cm high, or of sufficient height to allow rabbits to sit upright with ears fully erect.

31. 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 a minimum length of 30

cm and have a minimum floor area of 0.08 m² but a larger area should be allowed for giant breeds.

32. 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. As a guide, for most breeds of rabbits the height of the lowest side or end of the nest box should not be less than 15 cm. The nest should have an entrance of not less than 0.023 m² in area and be sufficiently large for the doe to pass through without difficulty or risk of injury. Sunken nests have the advantage that very small rabbits can find their way back to the nest.

Feed and water

33. Whatever feeding is adopted, all rabbits should receive a daily diet which is nutritionally adequate to maintain health. A new type of feed should be introduced over a period of a few days.

34. A plentiful supply of clean fresh water should be easily accessible to the rabbits at all times. For example a lactating doe with a large litter, close to weaning, may drink up to 4.5 litres of water a day. To enable all rabbits to drink satisfactorily the nipple drinker should be about 25 cm from the bottom of the cage. Efforts should be made to minimise the risk of drinking water freezing.

35. Stale or contaminated feed or water should not be allowed to accumulate.

36. Where bowls are used for either feed or water they should be of impervious material and of a design which cannot be knocked over and can be cleaned easily.

37. When fed by any system which does not allow continuous and unrestricted access to feed, all rabbits in the group should be able to feed at the same time. The feeding of a small quantity of hay or straw in addition to normal diet may be beneficial and provide activity for the rabbits.

Management

General

38. Each rabbit should be inspected frequently during the day because, once ill, rabbits deteriorate rapidly.
39. It is desirable to establish a regular work routine. Care should be taken not to frighten the rabbits with sudden unaccustomed movement or noise, but without placing too much emphasis on quietness.
40. Adequate control measures should be taken to avoid disturbance by rodents and other animals.
41. Frequent checks should be made on the state of the bedding (see [paragraph 21](#)).
42. Premises and equipment should be regularly cleaned and thoroughly dried before restocking. Thorough disinfection should be carried out at suitable times to reduce the danger of continuing infection.
43. Vaccinations, injections and similar procedures should be undertaken by competent, trained operators. Care should be taken to prevent injury and unnecessary disturbance of the rabbits.
44. Artificial insemination is a highly skilled procedure and should be carried out with the advice of a veterinary surgeon by competent, trained personnel maintaining a high standard of hygiene and taking care to avoid injury and unnecessary disturbance of the rabbits.
45. Mating should be supervised, and to minimise the possibility of fighting, does should be taken to the buck.
46. Litters under a week of age should be disturbed as little as possible and young rabbits should not be weaned before four weeks of age.
47. Overgrowth of incisors can sometimes interfere seriously with feeding and cause damage to the rabbit's lips. The provision of wooden gnawing blocks particularly for breeding stock,

can avoid the necessity to undertake tooth-trimming. Where tooth-trimming is necessary, it should be performed by a veterinary surgeon or by a competent trained operator.

Toe nail trimming

48. Toe nails of confined adult rabbits should be trimmed periodically to prevent toe damage from overgrown nails catching on the hutch or cage. Care is needed when trimming to avoid damage to sensitive tissue.

Marking

49. Where it is necessary to mark rabbits for permanent identification, tattooing is preferable to tagging which may result in damage to the ear being caused; a ring above the hock may be used but must be checked regularly to ensure it does not become tight, causing injury. Marking should be carried out by competent operators taking care to avoid unnecessary pain or unnecessary distress to the rabbits.

Handling and slaughter of stock on the premises

50. The proper handling of rabbits requires skill, and it should be undertaken only by competent persons. Rabbits should be lifted by grasping the loose skin at the back of the neck and supported by placing the hand under the hindquarters. Handling should be carried out quietly and confidently exercising care to avoid unnecessary struggling which could bruise or otherwise injure the animal.

51. When rabbits are killed on the farm this must be done humanely.

Rabbits kept out of doors

52. Attention is drawn to the relevant recommendations in paragraphs 33 - 51 inclusive.

53. Precautions should be taken to protect rabbits from predators.

54. Shelter from sun, rain and wind should always be available, and the hutch or pen roof should be extended sufficiently to ensure this.

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

References

(1) Training courses which follow the Code recommendations are arranged for stockmen by the Agricultural Training Board, Agricultural Colleges and local education authorities. Proficiency testing in relevant subjects is carried out in England and Wales by the National Proficiency Tests Council, and in Scotland by the Scottish Association of Young Farmers' Clubs.

(2) The Health and Safety Executive recommends that, for human safety, the following gas levels should not be exceeded:

Name of Gas	Long term exposure limit (ppm) (8 hour day)	Short term exposure limit (ppm) (10 minutes)
Ammonia	25	35
Carbon Monoxide	50	400
Carbon Dioxide	5,000	5,000
Hydrogen Sulphide	10	10

(3) The Welfare of Livestock (Intensive Units) Regulations 1978 (SI 1978 No 1800) require stock keepers of intensive units to inspect their livestock and the equipment upon which such stock depend at least once daily.

(4) Any installation or extension involving mains electricity should comply with the Regulations for the Electrical Equipment of Buildings issued by the Institute of Electrical Engineers.