



Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Telephone: 0300 1234 999 [www.rspca.org.uk](http://www.rspca.org.uk)

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# CARING FOR YOUR RSPCA FOSTER RABBITS

## Thank you for fostering rabbits for the RSPCA.

This booklet is designed to help and support you in caring for your RSPCA foster rabbits.

Please read this booklet before you welcome foster rabbits into your home – it includes important preparations which need to be made prior to their arrival, which will help them settle into their new life with you. You should also read this information in conjunction with the *General information on fostering an animal in RSPCA care* booklet. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch with your fostering coordinator.

The number of rabbits you can foster at any one time will be dependent on your facilities, the time you have and the individual rabbits. Your RSPCA fostering coordinator will decide what they feel is best in conjunction with you.

If you already own or foster animals of a different species then the suitability to foster rabbits will need to be considered bearing in mind the individual rabbits, your individual animals and your facilities/time. The fostering coordinator will do this in conjunction with you.



## RSPCA foster rabbits

Rabbits are examined by a vet and behaviour observed before being placed within a foster home. Every effort is made to ensure that fosterers and their families are not placed at unreasonable risk but please bear in mind that it is not always possible to predict an animal's behaviour.

## Preparing for your RSPCA foster rabbits

### Before collecting your foster rabbits

The RSPCA website has lots of useful information on rabbit care so we recommend that you read the information on our website before collecting your foster rabbits at: [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits).

The Welsh Code of Practice for the Welfare of Rabbits can be accessed at: [www.wales.gov.uk](http://www.wales.gov.uk). We recommend that you are familiar with this Code of Practice, regardless of whether you live in England or Wales, so you understand your obligations under the five welfare needs, as defined by the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

## RSPCA Minimum Expectations applicable to rabbit fostering (at the time of publication)

**RSPCA Minimum Expectations are the RSPCA's 'rules'. We expect you to follow these when looking after an animal for us. Deviations are only possible on the advice of a vet or the RSPCA's chief veterinary officer.**

New RSPCA Minimum Expectations are issued by the RSPCA as and when new evidence is presented on the best welfare for the animals in our care. Your fostering coordinator will keep you up to date with any new 'rules' issued.

- Appropriate enrichment is to be provided for each rabbit.
- Each rabbit enclosure is to comprise of at least one shelter and a large, enriched exercise area.
- Information is to be recorded on the rabbit welfare and behaviour observations form.
- Stressful techniques of rabbit bonding are not to be used.
- All rabbits require constant access to fresh, clean drinking water.
- All rabbits in RSPCA care should be fed a diet rich in hay; the majority of the diet is to be hay with some leafy greens and a small amount of nuggets. ○

**PLEASE NOTE: this is not an exhaustive list of all RSPCA Minimum Expectations applicable to rabbits in RSPCA care.**

### Feeding

You will be advised on what to feed your foster rabbits by your fostering coordinator. It's important that you do not suddenly change your foster rabbits' diet. Speak to your fostering coordinator if you wish to change foods.

Rabbits need constant access to hay. You can supplement their diet with leafy greens and a small amount of nuggets. Further information is available at: [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/diet](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/diet).

To help alleviate boredom, we recommend that part of your foster rabbits' daily ration of food is scatter-fed or placed in a feeding device, such as a treat ball or puzzle feeder. You can even make your own feeding device using toilet roll tubes with a treat of leafy greens/nuggets in the middle and stuffed with hay. Rabbits also like to graze on growing grass so do provide them with a grass tray which will give them the opportunity to follow this natural behaviour. Lawn mower cuttings must never be fed. Your fostering coordinator can provide you with a handout on rabbit enrichment.



Make sure your foster rabbits have constant access to clean drinking water. Water dishes are preferable to drinking bottles but some rabbits may only use water bottles so you will need to adapt to the individual animal. If you know how water has been provided in a previous home, continue to use this method.

Monitor your foster rabbits' body condition to ensure they remain at a normal weight. If you have any concerns about any of your foster rabbits' eating habits or weight concerns, talk to your fostering coordinator with a view to seeking veterinary advice. A rabbit which is refusing food should be taken to the vet as soon as possible. ○

### Creating a rabbit friendly environment

#### Accommodation

Whether indoors or outdoors, your foster rabbits' enclosure should comprise of at least one shelter and a large, enriched exercise area. The shelter and exercise area need to be permanently attached, or the shelter should be permanently open and incorporated or placed into the exercise area.

Fosterers should aim to meet the minimum size for RSPCA animal centres – the accommodation must be at least 3 x 1 x 1m (L x W x H), which comprises an exercise area and a sleeping area suitable for a pair of medium sized rabbits (larger rabbits/bigger groups will need larger accommodation). The sleeping area must be 1 x 1m (L x W) and at least 0.75m high. The rabbits must have permanent access to all areas of the accommodation.

The exercise area should be considered the main part of the rabbits' home, providing opportunities to exercise and express normal behaviours every day and ensuring the rabbits' physical and psychological wellbeing. There should be one unrestricted length of



at least three metres to allow rabbits to run and distance themselves from their companion rabbit(s) if necessary.

For indoor rabbits, housing should be sited away from draughts, heat sources such as radiators or constant direct sunlight. All areas that the rabbits will have access to should be rabbit-proofed. Indoor floor pens (without roofs) should have a minimum height of 1.25m and enrichment objects should be positioned away from the sides to prevent rabbits from jumping out of their pens. Pen walls may need to be higher if you are housing very active, large or giant rabbits.

For rabbits kept outdoors, the housing should be sited so that areas of shade are always available. Ideally fostering accommodation should be sited on hard standing (e.g. concrete or paving), which is scrubbed and disinfected for new occupants to limit the spread of disease. Shelter floors could also be lined with lino (use new lino as older types may contain lead) to make it easier to clean, although you'll need to check regularly for damage and replace as necessary. If your foster rabbits are chewing the lino excessively, it will need to be removed to prevent them becoming ill. If positioning the accommodation on grass, they should be repositioned between occupants to limit the spread of disease. The original area of grass should not be used by rabbits for at least three months. Shelters are ideally positioned 20-30cm above the ground and 25cm away from walls to ensure adequate ventilation and reduce the risk of damp.



**PLEASE NOTE: rabbits should not be kept in the same enclosure as guinea pigs.**

There is advice on rabbit housing and exercise areas at: [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/environment](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/environment) and your fostering coordinator can provide you with RSPCA operational guides to assist you with creating accommodation for rabbits.

### Hiding places/platforms

Providing constant access to hiding places within their home allows your foster rabbits to escape and hide (natural behaviour), helping them feel safe and reassured. They

should be provided in addition to your foster rabbits' main shelter. Platforms can act as 'look out' points, allowing rabbits to scan their surroundings for danger and they can help to reduce anxiety.

### Toileting

A good-sized litter tray should be provided. A large cat litter tray or simply a 32 litre storage box with the lid removed will be suitable, as long as the rabbits can safely get in and out. There should be one litter tray per rabbit (ideally with one more in addition). Use newspaper, hay/straw, shredded paper and/or paper-based non-clumping, non-expanding cat litter as a substrate in the litter tray. Rabbits may eat whilst they are toileting, and having a hay rack above the tray encourages more hay-eating, which aids dental and digestive health.

The usual type of rabbit droppings are small, hard, dry, brown faecal pellets, which are almost odourless – mainly made up of indigestible



food. These droppings should be plentiful, round like peas and of a uniform size and shape. If faecal pellets stop being produced, are poorly formed, too small, too hard (like grit), or odd shapes, it could be an indication of possible health problems so speak to your fostering coordinator with a view to getting veterinary attention. If the droppings are strung together like a necklace this can indicate your foster rabbit is ingesting too much fur – your vet will be able to advise on this.

### Caecotrophs

Caecotrophs are dark, smelly, shiny soft droppings that rabbits eat as they emerge from the anus. They are made from the nutritious bits of food that have been sent to the caecum, fermented, then expelled as a nutritious snack. It's really important for rabbits to eat these caecotrophs so don't discourage them. As the caecotrophs are eaten directly from the anus, they should not be seen in the shelter

or exercise area. If you do see uneaten caecotrophs in the litter trays, bedding or stuck to the fur around their bottoms, the rabbit could be poorly. If you have any concerns, speak to your fostering coordinator with a view to getting veterinary attention.

### Preventing escape or loss

It's important that the RSPCA does everything possible to prevent the loss, straying or escape of all the animals in our care. This is even more important for animals which are not in the ownership of the RSPCA, for instance if you are fostering a 'case rabbit' or a PetRetreat rabbit.

Outdoor accommodation needs to be secure to prevent escape, provide protection against predators and deter rodents. If the housing is placed on grass, you should take measures to prevent your foster rabbits from digging out and predators digging in.

All housing should have a roof to prevent predators from jumping in and rabbits from jumping out and secure bolts should be used instead of – or in addition to – twist-close latches. It is really important that you check regularly to make sure any areas you believe are secure are actually secure. ○



## Helping your RSPCA foster rabbit settle in

### Arriving home with your foster rabbit

Many of the rabbits that come into RSPCA care may have suffered abuse and/or neglect and have never experienced a 'normal home environment' – so it may take time for them to settle. Some of these rabbits have genuine dislikes that have been caused by previous negative experiences. Do not attempt to 'cure' them without seeking advice from your fostering coordinator.

We advise that, when you first take your foster rabbit(s) home, you give them as much space as possible and wait for them to build trust in you. It is very tempting to fuss and cuddle them but this can lead to anxiety, stress and possible injury. Allow your foster rabbit(s) time to settle, introducing them to any visitors in a controlled manner to help prevent problems. Consistency and routine are important for keeping your foster rabbits happy and healthy. If all members of the household interact with and care for the rabbits consistently then they should settle into a routine and feel happier. ●

## Learning to live together

### Companionship

Rabbits are highly social, playful and inquisitive and most need to interact and play with other friendly rabbits. You will usually have a pair/group of rabbits placed with you for foster care.

If you have the correct set-up, you may be asked if you would like to bond two or more rabbits to create a pair or group. Stressful techniques of rabbit bonding are not to be used and you will be provided with an operational guide on introducing rabbits which



you will need to follow, along with the support of your fostering coordinator. Bonding rabbits is a skilled task and should only be undertaken by experienced, trained people or with support from experienced, trained people.

### Children

Rabbits can have happy interactions with children but there are some basic rules that should be observed. Advise children to remain calm, quiet and seated when greeting your foster rabbits – all interactions should take place at ground level as this helps reduce the risk of falling and injury. Children should let the rabbits come to them, and allow them to sniff their hands and clothing to become used to the scent before they attempt to touch the rabbits. Start off slowly by letting the child hand feed the rabbits so that they can build trust in them – young children should not pick up rabbits.

All interactions with children and rabbits should be supervised and if a rabbit retreats, prevent the children from following.

### Playtime and enrichment

Provide your foster rabbits with safe toys to play with which allow them to perform normal behaviours, e.g. digging, chewing, chin

marking, and jumping. Different rabbits enjoy different toys so try providing a variety of items until you find the ones they like best – for example, shredded newspaper, paper bags with the handles removed, cardboard boxes with holes cut into them or plastic tunnels.

Your foster rabbits will also need suitable materials that allow digging. A simple solution is a large container, with sides shallow enough to allow the rabbit to enter, filled with children's play sand.

Some rabbits can be taught to respond to commands using positive reward-based training – for more ideas on enrichment

and providing safe toys and objects your foster rabbit may enjoy playing with go to: [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/behaviour](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/behaviour).

Please note: your foster rabbits must never be walked using a harness as this can be stressful for them.

### Signs of stress

You will need to be familiar with the signs of stress and good or poor welfare in your foster rabbits.

Signs a rabbit may be suffering from stress, fear or illness can include hiding, chewing cage bars, over-grooming, altered feeding or toileting habits, over-drinking, playing with the water bottle, sitting hunched, reluctance to move and repeatedly circling the enclosure.

Rabbits that are frightened or in pain may change their behaviour or develop unwanted habits such as aggression or hiding. Seek immediate veterinary advice for a rabbit which is refusing food, sitting hunched and/or looks uncomfortable.

### On the move

When transporting your foster rabbit(s), a suitable carrier should be used that provides enough space for all rabbits to move and stretch out in the carrier if they wish. Put hay into the carrier as foodstuffs whilst in transit and water too. Make sure that the base of the carrier has a non-slip surface and never leave your foster rabbit unattended in a car.



When travelling, efforts should be made to reduce the stress of this experience – for example, turn the radio off in the car and ensure that the carrier is restrained and doesn't slide around by putting a seat belt around it. Bonded rabbits should be transported together to maintain their bond.

The RSPCA has strict rules on the transport of animals, so in addition to this information, you will be given an operational guide on the transport of rabbits by your fostering coordinator. ●

## Keeping your RSPCA foster rabbits healthy

### Disease prevention

Make sure that a strict infection control regime is followed between occupants of foster accommodation. Parasites and disease can be transferred via urine and faeces, so it is vital to thoroughly disinfect housing (shelter and exercise area) and furniture (e.g. toys, bowls, tunnels) between occupants.

All surfaces should be swept free of loose material before being cleaned with suitable solution. It is important to use a cleaning

solution that is effective against bacteria, viruses and spores such as Encephalitozoon Cuniculi. Ark-Klens and F10 are effective cleaners. Always ensure that the manufacturer's instructions are followed when using cleaning chemicals. Steam cleaning may also be useful as it tackles coccidiosis – another parasitic disease.

### Health checks

Each day, your foster rabbits should be given a quick visual check for any signs of illness, injury or disease. In warm weather check fur and skin around the bottom/tail areas twice daily. Urine staining and droppings attract flies, causing flystrike (which can be fatal).

Your foster rabbit requires a monthly health check that is recorded on the RSPCA health check form. You can perform this basic health check yourself as it is a simple tick-box form to complete. The RSPCA has an online health check training module which is available to any RSPCA volunteer with an email address. Let your fostering coordinator know if you would like to do this.

Part of the health check is to weigh the rabbit. We appreciate that fosterers may not have appropriate scales to weigh rabbits, so you will need to speak to your fostering coordinator who may arrange a visit to a local vet, bring scales to you or suggest that you take your foster rabbit to your local RSPCA facility.

### Grooming

Regular grooming keeps rabbits' coats in a good condition and is an excellent way of getting to know your foster rabbit. Be aware that some rabbits are sensitive about certain parts of their bodies. Please make a note of any sensitive areas on the rabbit's paperwork so we can communicate this to animal centres and potential adopters.

Your fostering coordinator can provide you with an operational guide on grooming to give you more information before you start to introduce grooming to your foster rabbit(s). You can find advice on how to handle your foster rabbits at: [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/company](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/company).

### Teeth and nails

A rabbit's top front teeth grow at a rate of three millimetres a week and they are vulnerable to dental disease. Their front teeth should be checked at least weekly and if there is any indication of a rabbit being in pain and/or off their food, they should be taken to a vet, as per your arrangement with the fostering coordinator. Only vets should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth.

Nails should be checked at least weekly. If you are not confident about cutting your foster rabbits' nails, many veterinary surgeries offer free nail cutting by a veterinary nurse so speak to your fostering coordinator.

### Poisons

Products containing phenolic compounds and creosote should never be used to treat accommodation; these are toxic to rabbits. Common household items and plants can also be poisonous to rabbits. Examples include human medicines, foxgloves, rhubarb. More information on poisoning can be found at [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/health](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/health). ●

## Any questions?

If you are unsure about any aspect of fostering or have any queries on your foster rabbits' care, then please do contact your fostering coordinator.



Thank you for volunteering for the RSPCA and for helping us to end cruelty, promote kindness and alleviate suffering to animals.