



## THE RABBIT CROSSING – RABBIT ADOPTION GUIDELINES

### INTRODUCTION

#### About Us

The Rabbit Crossing isn't just a physical place but it's intended to be a 'space' where rabbits and their owners can come and go, passing through and sharing. We do have a physical home but so much of what we do is over the internet, or phone, sharing our friendship, knowledge, experiences and help. We are non-profit making and any donations received go back directly into rabbit care and welfare promotion.

The Rabbit Crossing came about following some time spent volunteering at a domestic rabbit rescue centre local to our home here in Windlesham, Surrey. It became evident from our experiences that there is a massive need in the UK for the improvement in the welfare for the domestic or 'pet' rabbit, and sadly rescues are very much needed. We felt that more had to be done to increase basic rabbit knowledge, whilst trying to assist those rabbits who end up needing to be re-homed.

We are here to offer help and advice from our knowledge base and experience in the care of rabbits and are also able to assist with rabbit adoption, bonding and boarding.

Our own bunny family is made up of 11 groups of bunnies, who have all come, through no fault of their own from a rescue situation or as a stray to our local rabbit savvy vets.

We did not start out as bunny lovers, but came across rabbit rescues by accident but are now totally devoted to promoting their welfare. They are a very much misunderstood and underestimated companion animal and together with many other fellow rabbit lovers, we want to help make a difference and change the way these wonderful animals are treated.

#### About This Guide

We are really pleased you are considering adopting rescued rabbits from The Rabbit Crossing. We want you all to have a long, happy, healthy life together. This pack is designed to give you the information you need to get ready to adopt your bunnies. As an organisation that promotes welfare, we have a responsibility to ensure that the rescued animals in our care go to the best lifetime homes they deserve, which is why we always carry out a physical home check. Please remember it isn't an "exam" or "test" but is an opportunity to get things right for your pets from the start.

In 2007 the long awaited Animal Welfare Act (AWA) will come into force in the UK. This much needed radical shake up of animal rights means that for the first time ever pets will have the full legal protection against suffering that we have always believed they should have. But, more than this, the AWA also means that you as an owner will have a legal responsibility to educate yourself from a reputable source (e.g. rescue/rabbit knowledgeable vet/rabbit welfare organisation) about your animals needs and provide for them in a way that actively promotes their well-being. Every one of our recommendations is made for good reasons and is designed to comply and sometimes exceed RSPCA, Rabbit Welfare Association and the Animal Welfare Act guidelines.

This guide is to help you make sure you have addressed and complied with each of the points below **before** your home check is carried out so you will pass it with flying colours first time around. This also demonstrates that you take the commitment to getting things right for your new pet seriously and shows an understanding of their needs. It might take a bit of effort to get things right, but your rabbits are a long term commitment and a bit of time spent now will pay you back in happy, healthy rabbits in the future.

At the end there is a checklist you can go through to make sure you have met all the requirements. You will also find details of what to do once you are ready to arrange your home check.

If you would like to visit us to get some more ideas, have a chat and have a look at the bunnies and their housing, you are most welcome.

## **GUIDELINES FOR OUTSIDE ACCOMMODATION:**

### **A word about accommodation available in most pet shops/garden centres:**

The accommodation for rabbits that is available in some high street outlets is totally unsuitable for rabbits and is behind the times with regard to the amount of space that they need. Most traditional hutches are manufactured with quick sales and maximum profit in mind. Most high street pet shop or garden centre hutches are made of low quality, lightweight materials and to a size that is easy for customers to transport home in their cars rather than a size that is actually appropriate for the rabbits' health and welfare. Although commonly seen in many shops, it doesn't make them suitable for housing rabbits in.

Always remember that when you enter a pet shop, everything there is geared towards making you buy something and NOT always geared towards animal welfare. Profit and sales driven advice from the staff is not always right or accurate and you will be surprised how little legal protection you have as a customer if you are given inaccurate verbal information by sales staff in store. Be VERY wary of what you are told in pet shops. If you need any help or advice before you purchase or build your accommodation, please get in touch with the rescue and we will be happy to help.



### **A Word about "Traditional" Rabbit Keeping Hutches:**

The tradition of keeping rabbits in hutches is nothing to do with how rabbits would naturally house themselves. Rabbit warrens are very large underground structures and families of rabbits would spend only a few hours a day actually in them underground. The rest of the time, rabbits are designed to run around and forage freely. The notion of keeping rabbits in hutches stems from wartime when meat was rationed so families would keep rabbits for food. They were easy and cheap to breed and by confining them to small housing they were easy to "fatten up". Naturally, some people became attached to them and the rabbit evolved as a pet. Sadly, many years later, most rabbits are still kept in the way that "tradition" dictates and far too many rabbits live out their lives in solitary confinement, locked in small hutches in people's gardens. Rabbits don't actually have to live outside at all. They are easily litter trained and make fantastic companion animals, living inside your house as part of the family. If you choose to opt for keeping your rabbits outside, then your rabbits' housing needs to be a safe retreat to rest and shelter in and NOT a prison they can't wait to get out of.



You don't have to confine your rabbits (or your imagination) to a traditional hutch; rabbits can happily be kept in adapted wendy houses or sheds too.





But sometimes a traditional hutch will do just fine. Here are an RSPCA standard 6ftH x 2ft D x 2ft W hutch and a larger hutch from Kernow Pet Housing based in Cornwall.



Before you invest in new housing for rabbits that you are hoping to adopt, please ensure that it is suitable for the bunnies that you are thinking of and that it will be large enough (see the following dimensions)

### **Rabbit Housing Width**

A relaxed rabbit will fully stretch out with its legs out at the back when resting. The rabbit accommodation should be wide enough to allow your rabbits to lie down together in a relaxed way, with their legs stretched out at the back. This is important for normal social interaction, long term muscle and bone health and allows for plenty of room to turn around in the hutch too. The absolute minimum acceptable housing width for average rabbits is **2 feet** but bigger rabbits will need a greater width for their health and comfort.



### **Rabbit Housing Length**

The rabbit accommodation should be long enough for the rabbit to take at least 3-4 consecutive hops without bumping its nose on the end. Bear in mind that for most rabbits, one hop usually equals one and a half times its own body length. The absolute minimum acceptable house length for average rabbits is **6 feet** but bigger rabbits will need a longer house for their health and comfort.

### **Rabbit Housing Height**

Rabbits stand up on their back legs and “periscope” to check their environment is safe and is an important part of normal behaviour. The rabbit accommodation should be tall enough to allow your rabbit to do this without being hunched over or folding its ears against the roof.

The absolute minimum acceptable house height for average sized “lop” eared rabbits is **2 feet** but “uppy” eared or larger rabbits will need more than this.



### **Rabbit Housing Design**

Rabbits do need an enclosed dark area of their house which they can bolt to if they feel afraid or to shelter from the weather. Most traditionally styled hutches are designed with a “sleeping compartment” already in them but do bear in mind that this division lessens the number of consecutive hops your rabbits can take along the length of the hutch and you may need a longer hutch to account for this. If you are going for a shed or wendy house conversion, you will need to provide a hidey hole or sleeping box inside it. This can be wooden or just a sturdy cardboard box.

Remember the hutch needs to be built of sturdy wood that will last and keep the weather out. Plywood is generally too flimsy and doesn't last well.

Make sure there is a good angle/slope to the roof or you will find that rainwater will begin pool there and quickly start to leak. Avoid “flat roof” designs but go for something like this one.



Hexagonal “chicken wire” is not an acceptable material for enclosing your rabbits' hutch. It is not fox proof and can be bitten through. If you are building your own hutch or run, you must use a heavier gauge weld mesh (like the one shown) and make sure it is secured with U-shaped nails at areas needing strength e.g. at the corners and one along each side. These should be used in addition to any standard staples. This is to prevent a predator from pulling the mesh away from the frame. You can buy weld mesh in sheets or rolls from E-bay and most garden centres or DIY shops.



You must have easy to use bolts on all the opening parts of your hutch and run. “Twist” type catches are not predator proof and are too easily left open. It's no good having the bolts on the hutch however, if you and your family won't use them because they aren't well fitting or are difficult to do up as the wood expands and contracts with the seasons! Choose larger ones that are easy to slide into place and quick to check visually for all the family and make sure these are maintained every few months as the wood moves and settles with the weather. A good range is available at [www.screwfix.com](http://www.screwfix.com) If your hutch has been delivered with “twist” catches fitted, please remove them so that the bolt has to be done up each time to secure the door closed.

### Double Storey vs. Single Story Accommodation

Double storey accommodation is widely available on the market; however, it may not be the best option for your rabbits when compared to single story options:

| Advantages of Double Storey Housing   | Disadvantages of Double Storey Housing   |
|---|--|
| More square footage of space for your rabbits compared to single storey on same foot print area | Reduced consecutive hop length for same area e.g.<br>4x2 ft double story = 16 sq ft<br>OR<br>8x2 ft single story = 16 sq ft of floor space.<br><br>The 4x2 ft might seem like the better option BUT the 4x2 ft is NOT acceptable housing because the 4 ft length does NOT allow any size of rabbits to take the required number of consecutive hops along either level |
| Pushing upwards from their hind legs to scoot up the ramp offers additional exercise.           | If the hole for the ramp access is not large enough for the rabbits, they can catch and bang their spine every time they go up and down leading to long term damage, however, making the access hole large enough may mean quite a large area of the upper floor is missing to make a hole for the ramp access, further reducing the usable floor space                |
| Accommodation is more "compact" with a smaller footprint than single story accommodation        | Rabbits are ground dwelling animals that are not always inclined to climb. Some rabbits may therefore be unwilling to use the ramp making the useable space inside even less.  |

In summary, if you choose to obtain double storey accommodation, when looking to obtain the overall balance of the benefit of additional square footage of floor space, verses the loss of length for the required minimum number of hops, the minimum acceptable accommodation for average sized rabbits is 5 x 2 x 2 ft **on each level**. Depending on its size, obtaining double storey accommodation may also affect the size of the run you will need. See the "runs" section of this pack below.

## Guidelines for Exercise Runs

Rabbits are “diurnal” animals. This means that they are naturally most active during the day and least active at night. They are also crepuscular,

**Crepuscular** is a term used to describe some animals that are primarily active during twilight, that is at dawn and at dusk. The word is derived from the Latin word *crepusculum*, meaning "twilight." Crepuscular is thus in contrast with diurnal and nocturnal behaviour. Crepuscular animals may also be active on a bright moonlit night. Many animals that are casually described as nocturnal are in fact crepuscular. Within the definition of crepuscular are the terms *matutinal* (or "matinal") and *vespertine*, denoting species active in the dawn and dusk respectively.

The patterns of activity are thought to be an antipredator adaptation. Many predators forage most intensely at night, while others are active at mid-day and see best in full sun. Thus the crepuscular habit may reduce predation. Additionally, in hot areas, it may be a way of avoiding thermal stress while capitalizing on available light.

*Courtesy of Wikipedia*

So, rabbits are geared up for the greatest activity levels at dawn and dusk when they are less visible to predators. Their heart rate is higher, their digestion speeds up, they become more alert and their whole body is ready to get out there and play and run around! During the middle part of the day, rabbits will naturally slow down slightly, their energy levels dip and they will choose to spend time grazing, relaxing, dozing and socially grooming one another ready for another burst of energy at dusk. They will usually only return to the safety of their “warren” to sleep deeply between around 1 and 4 am depending on the season.

The happiest, healthiest rabbits have housing that allows them to follow this natural pattern. Unless you really want to get up and move your bunnies to their run area just before dawn each day, we think the very best idea is to attach the run area to the hutch or living space via a hole, ramp or even cat flap. This way, the rabbits can move around freely, exercising to their natural requirements and can return to the safety of their hutch if the weather turns nasty, to seek shade or if they are spooked by something. It also means they can take advantage of gaps in the weather to go outside.

As prey animals, many rabbits will instinctually resist capture and some really dislike the sensation of being lifted clear of the ground. Setting up a cycle of chasing the rabbits, trapping them and carrying them to their run and back will eventually result in a rabbit who does not trust you when you approach them and who will evade you at every opportunity. You will build up a closer more trusting relationship with your bunnies if you are able to sit in their run area with them and they are able to approach you in the safety of their own environment without the need for you to pursue them. This is a much more positive relationship for both of you. Once your rabbits trust you and have learnt their names, they can be taught simple commands like “come here” and “dinner time” that they will respond to and its great to see them respond to you in this way but it takes time, patience and routine. With an attached run area you don’t have to stress your bunnies by carrying them around if they don’t like it. It’s a lot less hassle for you and your rabbits will be happier and healthier for it.



### **Run Size standards – Single Storey Accommodation**

The minimum size of the attached run you will require depends on the size of the attached accommodation. A pair of average sized rabbits (small to medium) will require an absolute minimum total (housing plus run) floor space of 36 sq. ft. For example:

**6ft L x 2 ft W hutch + 6ft L x 4ft W attached run = 36sq ft**

**OR**

**6ft L x 3 ft W hutch + 6ft L x 3 ft W (minimum) attached run = 36 sq ft**

**OR**

**6ft L x 4ft W shed + 6ft L x 2 ft W attached run = 36 sq ft**

Using these guidelines you may prefer to provide very large accommodation in a shed or outbuilding in which case an attached run is not necessarily required (although if you have room to provide some attached outside space for getting the wind in their whiskers and the sun on their ears your rabbits will appreciate it!) for example:

**6ft L x 7 ft W shed (with no attached run) = 42sq ft**

However, this doesn't work in reverse so even if you are able to provide a very large run you must still provide the minimum accommodation so that the rabbits have enough room to shelter, rest and relax, for example:

**8ft L x 8ft W run = 64sq ft, well in excess of the 42 sq ft minimum, BUT must still have 6x2 hutch attached in addition.**

### **Run Size Standards - Double Storey Accommodation**

As mentioned in the previous section relating to it, if you are going to obtain double storey accommodation that is of the minimum size of 5 ft in length, there is a compromise on the number of consecutive hops available *on each level*. To compensate for this a larger run may be needed. Again, the minimum size of the run required depends on the size of the lower floor of the accommodation. A pair of average (small to medium) rabbits require still require a minimum **ground** floor space of 36sq ft (as with single storey accommodation). So to calculate what size you need, just take the surface area of the bottom level of the hutch into consideration.

For example:

For a 5ft L x 2ft W double storey hutch: **5ft L x 2 ft W ground floor + 6.5ft L x 4ft W attached run = 38sq ft**

For a 5ft L x 2.5ft W double storey hutch: **5ft L x 2.5ft W ground floor + 6ft L x 4ft W attached run = 36.5sq ft**

**Please note:** Larger breeds/cross breeds e.g. French Lops/German Lops/New Zealand/Continental Giants will require far more space and will normally only be re-homed to sheds/wendy houses or very large hutches e.g. Forsham Ark's "Really Big Hutch" (each set up will be adjudged on a case by case basis)

### **Run safety**

We will not re-home rabbits to exercise in "open topped" runs. All runs should have a secure "lid" so that your rabbits cannot jump out and nothing else can jump or fly in. Check that this is sturdy enough to take the weight of a cat or fox sitting on top of it.

The lid of the run must be fastened closed with a bolt or hasp and staple to prevent predators from "nosing" the lid open. If you don't want to use a padlock with it, a karabiner clip makes a good alternative to use with the hasp and staple.

It's easy to build your own run or we can supply details of suppliers of the necessary materials.

If you are going to build your own run, please speak to us for advice as we have built lots of runs with different designs and can advise you what you will need. If you are going to DIY, follow the above guidelines on hutch design and safety and remember these important points

Use pressure treated wood so it is less likely to rot and treat it with a safe water-proofer before you start. Check the label says "Safe for use around children, plants and pets".

Use a good quality weld mesh and NOT chicken wire.

Use good quality, long staples to fix the mesh to the wood and use u-shaped nails in the corners and along any long sides for extra strength.

### **Hutch and run positioning**

It's a good idea to position your bunnies housing and run in a sheltered area such as close to or against your house or a fence or out building.

Try to avoid positioning in areas that will have direct sun during the hottest part of the day during the summer.

Wherever possible, position the housing and run on a patio or hard standing as this eliminates any safety concerns about the rabbits digging out and predators digging in.

Digging is natural behaviour for rabbits and as they cannot do this on hard ground it's a good idea to provide a digging box. This can be a simple cardboard box filled with hay or something more permanent such as a large cat litter tray with holes drilled in the bottom (to stop it filling with rain and becoming a bog!) containing earth/ organic compost/ soil from the garden or play sand. This can simply be swept up if it is dug too far around the run! You could also provide a large tray with turf and herbs planted in it for extra grazing and digging fun!

### **Static Runs on the Grass and Attached to Accommodation:**

If your bunnies housing and run combination has to be placed onto a grassy area, you can make this safe by fitting weld mesh to the bottom of the run, lifting the turf in that area, placing the run in position and then laying the turf back down over the top of it. The benefit of this is that the mesh is not in contact with the rabbits' feet but they cannot dig out and predators cannot dig in. The grass roots will grow through the wire mesh so it can be watered and will grow as normal. The turf is also easily replaced if your bunnies dig it up or the grass becomes sparse.

### **Mobile/Moveable runs on grass**

Some owners like to have a second run that is **not** attached to the accommodation and can be moved around to give their rabbits some time on the grass in the summer months. There are several problems with this arrangement, which is why we do not accept this as your rabbits' *only* primary run area:

The rabbits need to be watched all the time as your bunnies cannot choose to seek the shelter of their housing if they feel threatened or if the weather turns bad. In other words, your rabbits cannot be left in a moveable run all day while you go out to work or the shops.

If your rabbits are usually to be housed on a hard standing and are therefore not used to eating unlimited fresh grass you **MUST** limit the amount of time they are given in their grassed run area and build it up slowly each day.

Rabbits digestive systems are VERY delicate and suddenly allowing unlimited access to any food group, even one as natural as grass, can spell disaster causing very serious and life threatening problems such as bloat or gastric stasis.

As it is natural behaviour for them, rabbits can dig out of their run very quickly. A few minutes are all it takes. So they must be closely supervised even while in the run.

So, if you are looking at this option please discuss the safety aspects with us before you request your homecheck.

### **Free Range Rabbits**

Our rescue is very concerned about the safety implications that allowing rabbits free range and unsupervised access to gardens pose. We have a "safety pack" that goes with this rehoming guide. Please make sure you have read it and understand all the points within it.

## **General Health, Safety & Education**

Think about general garden security. Make sure that human intruders cannot access your bunnies and that they are not visible to passing traffic or pedestrians. There have been increased numbers of reports of rabbits being stolen, released by a third party, or being killed/injured by people who have gained access to unsecure gardens where rabbits are known or seen to be kept. We'd rather not think about what happens to them in any of these situations; don't let it happen to yours. Locks on your garden gates and a little bit of thought will make sure your bunnies are safe.

In line with RSPCA and Cavy Trust guidelines, The Rabbit Crossing will not re-home rabbits to share accommodation or exercise areas with guinea pigs. If you also own guinea pigs please demonstrate during the homecheck that you understand their differing needs and that you have hygiene standards in place to avoid bordetella cross infection. [www.cavycages.com/rabbits.htm](http://www.cavycages.com/rabbits.htm). This link gives a good overview of just a few of the reasons that rabbits and guinea pigs shouldn't live together.

Most rabbits prefer to have a litter tray to use as a toilet and generally they will choose to go in a corner. There are specialist corner trays available but a large cat litter tray is fine too. Providing a tray means it can be easily cleaned out and checked daily as changes to your bunnies' urine and faeces are often the first indicators of illness. You can use purpose made cat litter trays or simply buy something like an under-bed storage box, which will do the same task.

Sawdust or wood shavings are not an appropriate litter box filling for rabbits. It is dusty and very drying and long-term exposure can lead to lung problems and skin disorders because of the wood phenols released when in contact with the ammonia in your bunnies' urine. Instead, you can use just newspaper and hay and most bunnies like this as most bunnies like to eat while on the loo..."Chew and poo" as we say here. If you want to put something between the newspaper and hay for greater absorbency, then a kiln dried pulped paper product like Megazorb by [http: www.megazorb.co.uk](http://www.megazorb.co.uk), Bed O Linum (hemp bedding) by Bunny Nature or Carefresh by Supreme Science makes a much better alternative to shavings. A 15kg bag of Megazorb is available from some saddlers/farm shops for around £8.00, or online for about the same cost (we recommend The Hay Experts [www.thehayexperts.co.uk](http://www.thehayexperts.co.uk)). A pellet paper based cat litter such as Bio-Catoleet, Yesterdays News, or Bob Martin Recycled Litter can also be used.

If you want to use shredded paper, please make sure it is cross cut. If it's not, the ribbons of paper can be quite strong and will tend to get caught around your rabbits legs.

Don't buy clumping, silica or clay based cat litters. If your bunny eats some it will swell in their stomachs and can cause gastric blockages. If you are not buying bedding/litter from The Hay Experts or us please buy it before your home check so your checker can make sure it is suitable.

## **Preparing for the Weather**

Extremes of weather can make your bunnies at the least uncomfortable and at worst put them at risk of illness or death. You must demonstrate during your homecheck that you have thought about keeping your bunnies cool in the summer and warm and dry in the winter. So, even if your home check is in the summer, you will need to have your winter-proofing methods available to see and vice versa. Think about where you position the housing so that it is sheltered, free from draughts and out of the midday sun.

## **Rain Proofing**

It's important that your bunnies are able to use the full extent of their housing every day regardless of the weather. If it is attached to the housing, your bunnies can pop in and out but if you want to, you can make your own rain covers for your run for example from wood sheets covered with roofing felt or with tarpaulins, corrugated plastic sheets or shower curtains. If you would prefer something already made then [www.scratchandnewtonshop.com](http://www.scratchandnewtonshop.com) have waterproof and insulation covers for hutches and runs. They can even produce custom made ones if your run isn't one of their standard sizes.

## **Sun Proofing**

A reflective car windscreen sunshade, wet towel or a beach grass mat placed over the roof can be used to keep the temperature down inside your bunnies hutch in the summer and in VERY hot weather you should provide total shade, a fan if possible (ensure they cannot reach the wires of course) and extra water bowls with chilled water. Watch your bunnies very carefully for signs of heat stroke.

## **Cold Proofing**

**www.snugglesafe.co.uk** sells microwavable heat pads which are safe for use with animals as they cannot be chewed. The special gel inside the pad gives off heat slowly over 8 hours keeping your little ones snug and warm on colder winter days and nights. Well worth having on hand in case they are ever unwell too. When the weather is frosty, cover their accommodation with a thick blanket and provide extra deep bedding. If you have a shed with an electricity supply you might want to install a frost proof heater to keep the temperature above freezing. Make sure this, and its wires, is positioned so your bunnies cannot reach it.

## **Insulation**

Why not think about fitting silver backed bubble wrap insulation in the roof of your rabbits' house. It can stay there all year round and will keep the warmth in, in the winter and the heat out in the summer. See **www.screwfixdirect.com**

## **GUIDELINES FOR INSIDE ACCOMMODATION:**

Rabbits can make excellent house pets and most rabbits can live happily inside as part of your family. Ideally your rabbits' personalities will be matched to suit your particular set up and family dynamic. Timid rabbits may not be best placed in a household with young exuberant children and other pets, whereas confident outgoing buns can often handle everything from the vacuuming around them to the barking dog, shouting children and loud television. Having your rabbits in your home with you can mean that you really get to know your bunnies, allow their personalities to shine and develop a stronger connection with them. Keeping rabbits indoors should not be seen as a way around the commitment of having to purchase suitable accommodation or bunny proofing your gardens, it should be seen as a way to encourage a strong relationship, that can continue through the seasons, in particular when winter arrives and humans are less likely to spend a long time in the garden.

Even free range house bunnies must have somewhere they can go to use as their home base. This should be somewhere your rabbits can spend some quiet time and which everyone in the family respects as your bunnies signal that they want to be left alone. Preferably there will be a dark enclosed area for hiding in. This can be a hutch, cage, dog crate or puppy pen enclosure, which they can come and go to as they wish. Most bunnies like to have their litter tray/hay box, food, water and toys in this area too.

If you are going to provide a cage that your rabbit will be shut into for short periods of time (no longer than a few hours) it must be large enough for them to move around and lay down inside. The largest plastic cage on the market is made by Ferplast and is called a "Rabbit 140". It measures just under 5 feet by 2 feet by 2 feet. Having a cage can be very useful, especially when you have visitors around, maybe workmen, or are doing work where doors might be left open.





Even large cages or dog crates do not offer enough space to shut your rabbits into for extended periods of time. If you do need to enclose your rabbits at night or while you are at work, its best to choose to shut them into a room where they can't get into too much mischief such as the kitchen or utility area rather than shutting them into the cage.

Cages that are smaller than the one mentioned above are fine to be used as a base to retreat to as long as you have removed the door and your bunnies are not ever to be confined or shut in the cage.

Show your home checker that all wires and chew hazards are safe using chew proof trunking or are moved out of the way by running them under carpets etc. see [www.screwfix.com](http://www.screwfix.com) for a good range of trunking. Rabbits will instinctively chew cables – thought to resemble tree and plant roots, so you must expect them to display their natural behaviour and you must ensure that all cables are protected. A rabbit chewing through a mains cable will almost certainly be a dead rabbit.

Your house plants should either be safe for bunnies to nibble (such as herbs) or placed well out of bunny reach. Many household plants are either poisonous or at toxic, so make sure you know what you have and that bunny can't eat them.

Think about any other hazards such as doors that could slam on your bunny in a draft or doors or windows that could be left open by accident and result in escape or predators entering. In some cases, it might be worth investing in automatic soft door “closers”, doorstops or child safety devices.

Make sure you have told your family and any visitors about your bunnies to make sure they don't inadvertently do anything that puts your bunnies at risk. We find a “watch out, bunnies about” sign is very handy for the back of the outside doors to remind people who are coming and going to be careful to close doors behind them.

Your household cleaning products must be out of bunny reach or in a cupboard and remember when cleaning that aerosols and trigger sprays can put chemicals in the air that could be detrimental to your rabbits' health, so think where your bunnies are before using. Same goes for perfumes, deodorants, hairsprays and air fresheners.

If you don't keep the doors closed to the bathroom then keep your loo seats DOWN for obvious reasons.

House rabbits may be unwilling to use their litter tray in their new home if it doesn't contain the litter they are used to using. Some bunnies are fussy about the type or shape of tray they use. Be prepared to have to buy a few different types and clean up a few accidents until to find out what works for your new bunnies.

Some bunnies will not use hard or slippery flooring and will stick to rugs or carpets. Please bare in mind that a rabbit who is unsure about hard floors or who has problems with muscles or joints can actually injure themselves if they slip. Hip dislocations are not uncommon and so providing mats or carpets tiles can be very important. Rabbits that are prone to Pododermatitis (sore hocks) can suffer greater damage on carpet as the finish can be abrasive on the rabbits' heels. Heavy (and overweight) rabbits and rex coated buns are particularly susceptible and so if you have to have them as house rabbits, you must be prepared to provide suitable floor coverings to make your rabbits at less risk of increased sores. Rabbits living indoors will also need their nails clipping more frequently as they won't be worn down as they would be outside in a garden situation. Long nails = increased risk of sore hocks.

House rabbits will not grow a winter coat in the same way as bunnies kept outside in a hutch or shed. Rabbits aren't able to cope with extremes of temperature so during winter, don't be tempted to put your house rabbits in the garden to play if the difference in temperature is going to prove a problem. A rabbit with a coat built for a nice centrally heated winter home, will not cope with winter single figure temperatures.

### **Outdoor Playtime for Indoor Bunnies**

Please ensure that you follow the guidelines and sizing standards for runs given in “Outdoor Accommodation” above, should you wish to consider giving your bunnies garden time. Free ranging for your rabbit is not an acceptable form of unsupervised exercise, so you will still need to provide a secure spacious run if you intend for you rabbits to visit your garden.

## **Toys and Accessories**

Assemble any toys/litter trays/bowls etc before your home check so that your checker can see them and check they are suitable. If you're unsure what bunnies can have to play with, ask us for some ideas. Bunny aimed toys are available from:

[www.willowwarren.co.uk](http://www.willowwarren.co.uk)

[www.thehayexperts.co.uk](http://www.thehayexperts.co.uk)

Be imaginative when enriching your bunnies' home. Think like a bunny. They like to tunnel, dig, chew, throw & hop onto things. Toys need not be expensive, cardboard boxes, cardboard loo rolls stuffed with hay, bundles of fruit tree twigs and old phone books all make inexpensive and good fun bunny toys. You can also search at car boot sales or charity shops for baby toys. Most baby toys that are baby safe can be safe for bunnies too. Avoid toys with small parts of rubber (bunnies for some reason like to chew rubber). For some reason rabbits seem to like toys that rattle and make noise and so anything with a bell will undoubtedly be a popular choice.



## **Feeding**

Good quality hay is key to your rabbits' dietary health and because poor quality hay often contains mites and fungal spores, which can lead to skin and lung problems, you should know what to look for when you buy it. Please buy your hay before your home check so your checker can assess the quality. Good quality hay will be green and have a slight moisture (but not dampness) to it which means it is soft and pliable to the touch. It should be free of dust and smell sweet and fresh, like mown grass. Poor quality hay will be in yellowing, thin, brittle strands that feel either very dry and crispy or damp. It will smell a little like dry earth or may even smell a little moldy. Avoid this; your animals' won't want to eat it and it is more than likely to cause health issues.

Almost all the rabbits at The Rabbit Crossing have their hay diet topped up with a small amount vegetables and an even smaller amount of pelleted food. We always give you a small bag to take home when you collect your bunnies. Please make sure you can buy a suitable pelleted food locally to you as all our rabbits are fed Supreme Science Selective or possibly Allen and Page Natural Rabbit Pellets, Oxbow Bunny Basics or Bunny Nature. Another popular pellet is Burgess Excel, however we are not keen on this high alfalfa based pellet as the fibre content is not as high as the aforementioned pellets and can cause poorer digestive output (poo) than those where the fibre is closer to the 20-23% figure.

For your rabbits' health, you must continue the recommended 80% hay diet when your bunny comes home (unless directed otherwise). Be prepared to show your home checker you understand how important the right diet is.

### Feeding Pyramid



Rabbits, teeth grow very quickly and the only way to ensure good dental health is for them to have a diet with a high percentage of hay. Hay should be available at all times and be fed ad-lib. Rabbits should be eating at least their own body size in hay daily; this keeps the incisors worn by chopping and the molars worn by mashing and grinding from side to side. The teeth will not wear correctly if they are not put to work by eating foods which make them work hard. A diet high in hay (long fibres) will resemble the diet in the wild. In addition to dental maintenance, dietary fibre is vital for good gut movement, with out it, the gut will become sluggish and can even stop, which, if not treated can become fatal.

Rabbits need a good balance of rabbit friendly fresh foods daily and approximately 10-15% of the daily intake can be made up in this way. Please learn which fresh 'green foods' are good for your bunny and how to balance them correctly. Some vegetables are too high in calcium to be fed freely and should only be given in small quantities e.g. spinach, dark greens, Savoy cabbage, parsley, carrot tops, broccoli. All calcium rich foods need to be balanced with those that have phosphorus, helping the calcium to be processed in the body.

Pelleted foods should not be seen as the primary food in a rabbit's diet but in fact is only given as a 'top up'; making up no more than approximately 5-10% of the rabbits daily intake of food.

Unless there are specific health needs that require more, a rabbit should normally be fed approximately **an egg cup of pellets a day only** (dependent on size of the rabbit). Feeding more pelleted food than necessary is likely to cause obesity, a mucky bottom, a lack of desire to eat the correct amount of hay, dental issues related to too little fibre in the diet and a reliance on 'junk food'. Obesity and a mucky bottom can result in serious health risks such as flystrike.



Advice specific to each rabbit adopted will be given to ensure that any regime that has been followed can be maintained for the best dietary health.

Most rabbits far prefer to drink from a bowl than a bottle, it's a more natural head position for them to swallow and they can take in more than the "head-up", licking action required to operate a bottle. Choose a large heavy bowl that cannot be tipped over. If you choose to use a bottle, you must ensure that it is kept spotlessly clean and does not jam in the winter due to frost/ice, or get stuck in summer when it gets hot.

### **Health Care**

Make sure you have found a suitable local vet who takes a special interest in rabbits. Many vets have virtually no training in rabbit care or may have a practice which sees very large numbers of cats and dogs and very few small animals. Rabbits are very specialised animals and many practices quite rightly consider them to be "exotics". You need to find a local vet who recommends vaccinations for rabbits and can advise you of the threat level of both Myxomatosis and VHD in your area. This is important so that you know if your rabbits need vaccinations every 6 months or every year. Please discuss your choice with your home checker.

If you live local to The Rabbit Crossing, we can particularly recommend Ivan Crotaz or Kate Marriot at the Harmans Water branch of Kynoch Vets, who both specialise in rabbits, or Charlotte Lewis and Nick Tremlett, Exotics vets at the Wokingham Branch ([www.kynochvets.co.uk](http://www.kynochvets.co.uk)). Based in Windlesham, we are happy to also recommend Gill Tose at Windlesham Village Vet, who has a specific interest in rabbits as well as having her own.

An information leaflet entitled "Spotting When your Rabbit is Ill" is available on request.

If you are considering pet insurance check the policy carefully to ensure the cover is "lifetime". This means that if your animal were to be unlucky enough to get a long-term illness like diabetes for example, their medication and care would be covered from diagnosis and for their rest of their lives. Some policies try to get round this by excluding any conditions you have claimed for in the previous year when you renew your policy. [www.petplan.co.uk](http://www.petplan.co.uk) offers lifetime cover for rabbits but check the internet for the best deals. Rabbits can be very expensive if they become ill as many vets quite rightly class them as "exotics". At your home-check we won't want to see your pay slips or bank statements, but we do need to know that you have financial provision for caring for your bunnies if they become ill. If you aren't taking out insurance you might want to think about opening a savings account to pay a little into each month in case you ever need it in the event of your bunnies' illness. Please show your home checker you understand the financial responsibility that your rabbits will be.

### **Holiday Care**

You need to think ahead about holiday care for your rabbits and budget for them over and above the cost of your holiday. Expect to pay around £7 -10 per night for a pair of bonded rabbits at a reputable rabbit boarding facility. Please remember it is very unwise to leave your animals in the care of a friend/family member/neighbour who does not know anything about your pet or who cannot visit more than once/twice a day. Often, it is quite subtle changes in behaviour, which will alert you to your pet being unwell, and someone inexperienced with your animals may miss a vital chance to get them treated. Sadly, we hear examples of this all the time and more often than not it could have been prevented if the rabbits were in a proper boarding facility with highly experienced and dedicated staff. We are happy to recommend boarding facilities locally.

Discuss the options for boarding during your home-check. Sadly, there are a number of boarding facilities whose accommodation is small, unsanitary and whose proprietors have very poor knowledge of the rabbits they care for. Many do not even ask for rabbits to be vaccinated. Rabbits going on their holidays can be very stressful for you and for the bunnies, so it's very important that you choose wisely. We recommend you visit ANY boarding establishment you are thinking of using (as a reputable one will be very happy to have you come and check them out).



### **Pre-Homecheck Tick List – Outside Rabbits**

- You understand the need for rabbits to have company of their own kind.
- You are aware of the needs for vaccination for Myxomatosis 6 monthly and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD) annually and agree to ensure vaccinations are kept up to date.
- Housing is a suitable size for the type of rabbit/s you wish to adopt. Ideally it should be 6x2x2 feet or more in dimensions (for single storey hutch) or 5x2x2 feet or more on each level (for a double storey hutch) for small to medium sized rabbits. Housing for larger breeds, along with wendy houses and sheds will be assessed on a case by case basis.
- Rabbit run is of a suitable size (normal minimum 6x4) for the rabbit/s you wish to adopt and when attached to the hutch provide the appropriate amount of space (minimum 36sqft).
- Rabbit run is securely attached to the accommodation.
- Run and housing are fitted with weld/aviary mesh. Please note that chicken wire is not acceptable, as it is not secure and can be bitten through.
- Run and housing are fitted with pad bolts or hasps and staples. 'Twist' catches (turn buttons) are not secure and should be removed.
- Housing is positioned in a sheltered area.
- Housing and run are on a hard standing area to prevent digging out by the rabbits (or in by predators).
- Runs placed onto grass have been meshed under to prevent digging out by the rabbits (or in by predators).
- You have made provision for weatherproofing against damp, heat and cold.
- Any exercise time given to the rabbits out of their run should be in a totally bunny safe area of the garden, with all hazards removed, and all toxic or poisonous plants either removed or screened out of harms way (a list of some bunny safe and unsafe plants can be provided). Rabbits allowed to exercise in this way MUST be supervised at all times. This is not acceptable as the only form of exercise time provided in addition to hutch space.
- You understand the importance of hay in your rabbits' diet and you've found a supplier of good quality fresh hay (much pet shop hay is often not good quality and can be dusty/old). You should have some of your hay available for the home-checker to see.
- You are able to obtain one of the recommended brands of complete rabbit pellets (Supreme Science Selective, Oxbow Bunny Basics, Allen and Page Natural Rabbit, or Supa Rabbit Excel) and do not feed a mix or muesli type rabbit food. Mixes encourage selective feeding and are not recommended.
- You have provided a bowl for dried food and large non-tip water bowl. (Bottles are acceptable but not recommended; it should be understood that they are more difficult to clean out and can drip).
- Litter boxes or litter areas have been provided and you have found an easy to access supplier of the recommended types of litter box filling/bedding, which is NOT wood shavings or sawdust e.g. newspaper, Megazorb, Carefresh, Bio Catolet, Yesterdays News.
- Toys have been provided.
- You have found a vet who takes a special interest and a good amount of experience in treating rabbits.
- You have assessed the financial impact of your new pets and have made provision for any expenses such as vaccinations and emergency treatment. You may wish to consider pet insurance. (Pet insurance is not an essential requirement to passing a homecheck).
- If you live in rented accommodation, you have the landlord's permission to have rabbits and can provide written confirmation.
- You have plans in place for who will care for your bunnies while you are away on holiday.
- You agree, if for any reason you are no longer able to care for the rabbit(s) to return it/them to The Rabbit Crossing for rehoming, and agree not to re-home the rabbit yourself.

### Pre-Homecheck Tick List – Inside (House) Rabbits

- You understand the need for rabbits to have company of their own kind.
- You are aware of the needs for vaccination for Myxomatosis 6 monthly and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD) annually and agree to ensure vaccinations are kept up to date.
- Indoor housing is a suitable size for the type of rabbit/s you wish to adopt. If your bunnies will be confined to a particular area, then they must be able to exercise freely and have a minimum secure area of 32sq ft at all times.
- Your bunnies should be offered somewhere as a 'home base' or hideaway where they can go to be quiet or escape when they feel threatened. This might be a cardboard box, a purpose built box or hutch.
- If your bunnies will be free ranging, then all areas that will be accessed should be made safe by:
  - Ensuring all chew hazards are safe.
  - Ensuring all house plants are bunny friendly.
  - Ensuring all household cleaning products or other harmful substances are safely in a cupboard out of bunny reach.
  - Keeping the bath room door closed (or putting the loo seat down)
  - Ensuring any windows left open for ventilation are safe from predators entering or bunnies escaping.
- An area should be provided in the event you need to restrict the bunnies' movements around the home, e.g. house guests/children visiting.
- Bunnies given unsupervised time outside should be provided with a suitable run detailed below.
- Rabbit run is of a suitable size (minimum 6x4) for the rabbit/s you wish to adopt.
- Run is fitted with weld/aviary mesh. Please note that chicken wire is not acceptable, as it is not secure and can be bitten through.
- Run is fitted with pad bolts or hasps and staples to ensure closure is secure. "Twist catches are not secure and should be removed.
- Run is on a hard standing area to prevent digging out by the rabbits (or in by predators).
- Runs placed onto grass have been meshed under to prevent digging out by the rabbits (or in by predators).
- Any exercise or 'free range' time given to the rabbits outside the home should be in a totally bunny safe area of the garden, with all hazards removed, and all toxic or poisonous plants either removed or screened out of harms way (a list of bunny safe and unsafe plants can be provided). Rabbits allowed to exercise in this way **MUST be supervised at all times.**
- You understand the importance of hay in your rabbits' diet and you've found a supplier of good quality fresh hay (much pet shop hay is often not good quality and can be dusty/old). You should have some of your hay available for the home-checker to see.
- You are able to obtain one of the recommended brands of complete rabbit pellets (Supreme Science Selective, Oxbow Bunny Basics, Allen and Page Natural Rabbit, or Supa Rabbit Excel) and do not feed a mix or muesli type rabbit food. Mixes encourage selective feeding and are not recommended. We will tell you which pelleted food the rabbits you would like to adopt are being fed – they will need to continue on this feed or you will need to wean on to the pelleted food you currently use for your own rabbit(s) if applicable.
- You have provided a bowl for dried food and large non-tip water bowl. (Bottles are acceptable but not recommended; it should be understood that they are more difficult to clean out and can drip).
- Litter boxes or litter area has been provided and you have found an easy to access supplier of the recommended types of litter box filling/bedding, which is **NOT wood shavings or sawdust** e.g. newspaper, Megazorb, Carefresh, Bio Catolet, Yesterdays News.
- Toys have been provided.

- You have found a vet who takes a special interest in rabbits.
- You have assessed the financial impact of your new pets and have made provision for any expenses such as vaccinations and emergency treatment. You may wish to consider pet insurance. (Pet insurance is not an essential requirement to passing a homecheck)
- If you live in rented accommodation, you have the landlord's permission to have rabbits.
- You have plans in place for who will care for your bunnies while you are away on holiday.
- You have a suitable pet carrier to transport your rabbits to the vets/boarding.

### **How to Organise Your Home-Check**

You are welcome to visit The Rabbit Crossing during prior to your adoption if you need any help, ideas or advice.

When you are all ready for your home check please contact us by e-mail [therabbitcrossing@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:therabbitcrossing@yahoo.co.uk) or telephone (01276 474753). The Rabbit Crossing will endeavour to do this as quickly as possible because we know you will be keen to proceed with your adoption but please bear in mind our that all home visits are carried out by one person and sometimes it takes a little while to organise. We thank you very much for your patience.

Once your home check has been completed, any comments or suggestions will be given to you if necessary. Once you have passed your home check, you may then visit The Rabbit Crossing by appointment to collect your bunnies. If you are adopting a single rabbit to live as a friend for your existing bunny, you will need to book your bunny in for "bonding" as soon as it is convenient. To arrange your visit or if you have any questions/ concerns, please email or telephone.

A leaflet about the bonding process that is used, is available on request. It contains useful information about your 'homework' prior to the new rabbit coming home, and what to expect when they do.

The Rabbit Crossing is a supporter of the Make Mine Chocolate! campaign for rabbit welfare

