

## Welfare indicator: The provision of quality written husbandry information on rabbits in a sample of retail outlets

### RSPCA concern

Rabbits are common pets in many western European countries<sup>1</sup> with an estimated one million rabbits kept as pets in the UK, making them the third most popular mammalian pet after dogs and cats<sup>2</sup>.

The welfare needs of pet rabbits are often poorly understood by potential and existing owners and the RSPCA is concerned that this lack of knowledge, together with many inappropriate traditional housing and husbandry practices, has a detrimental impact on pet rabbit welfare. In addition, the thousands of rabbits abandoned or given up to the RSPCA<sup>3</sup>, and other welfare organisations every year, indicates that the full responsibility of caring for rabbits is often not considered when the rabbit is acquired.

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 in England and Wales places a legal duty of care upon owners to meet the welfare needs of their animals<sup>4</sup>. Before acquiring a rabbit it is essential that the person who will be responsible for its care understands the responsibility and commitment that is involved and considers carefully whether they will be able to provide for the rabbit's welfare needs.

The RSPCA believes that anyone selling or rehoming a rabbit has a responsibility to provide good-quality husbandry advice to help inform potential rabbit owners.

### Background

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 clearly recognises the responsibility of any pet owner to take reasonable steps to meet the welfare needs of the animals in their care<sup>4</sup>. The Animal Welfare Bill's Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) also recognised the responsibility of vendors to help educate prospective buyers in the husbandry and care of animals on sale<sup>5</sup>. The RIA therefore advocated that all commercial vendors of pet animals should issue comprehensive care information to purchasers about the animal that they were buying<sup>6</sup>; a requirement that may be incorporated into new pet vending regulations. Expert reviewed information leaflets were suggested as an appropriate format for delivering this information<sup>7</sup>.

It is estimated that one million rabbits are kept as pets in the UK<sup>2</sup> but very few studies have investigated the source from which rabbits are acquired. In a UK study conducted in 2006, it was found that 22 per cent of the 102 rabbits surveyed were acquired from a pet shop<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, a survey conducted by the Pet Food Manufacturers Association (PFMA) found that 20 per cent of the UK's pets were acquired from a pet shop<sup>9</sup>. A more recent unpublished survey of rescue centres in the UK<sup>10</sup> suggests that the number might be greater, with 52.1 per cent of the rabbits entering rescue centres between January 2009 and July 2010 originally obtained from pet shops, pet superstores or garden centres, where origin was known. Although the actual number of rabbits procured from pet shops is unknown, pet shops can play an important role in helping to educate the pet-buying public about the needs of rabbits and what equipment and long-term care is required once the rabbit(s) is taken home; thereby potentially improving rabbit welfare. In recognition of this, the RSPCA has carried out research into the provision of quality written care information on rabbits in pet shops.



INSUFFICIENT DATA ARE AVAILABLE.

## The indicator figures

A sample of pet shops in England and Wales was surveyed between March and June 2010, to investigate the number of rabbits on sale and the availability of free written information on rabbits in each outlet. The number of rabbits on sale and details of any written information about rabbits on display near enclosures ('signs') were recorded, and a copy of any free rabbit care sheets, available to be taken away for reference by those considering buying or intending to buy a pet rabbit, were collected. Pet shops in England and Wales were identified using the Yellow Pages telephone directory. It is intended for this survey to be carried out on an annual basis.

### ● Information scoring

The type of information recorded and scored was based on the five main welfare needs of animals as outlined in the Animal Welfare Act 2006: an animal's need for a suitable environment; a suitable diet; to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns; to be housed with, or apart from, other animals; and to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

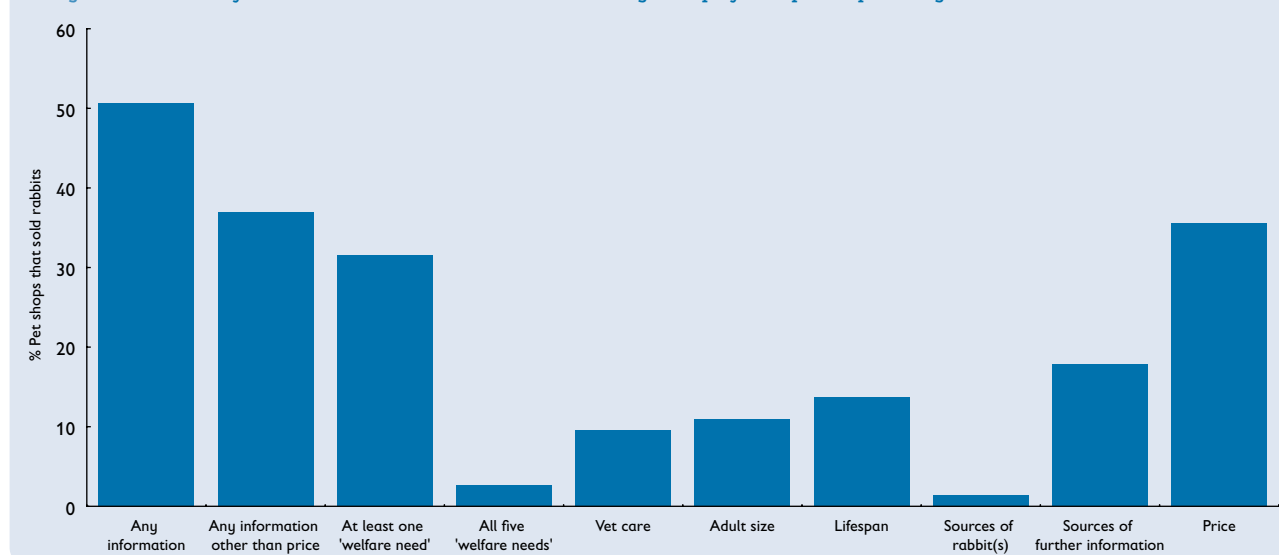
The information on signs was scored according to whether information about the five welfare needs was available. For example, surveyors recorded mention of the required enclosure size, provision of a suitable diet and water, provision of appropriate substrates to allow natural behaviour, appropriate

social groupings and the need to seek veterinary care. The free care sheets were analysed in more detail, by comparing the information provided with the RSPCA's information on rabbits' welfare needs<sup>11</sup>, which was written and reviewed by a panel of experts in rabbit veterinary, behaviour and welfare science<sup>12</sup>. Other issues considered desirable for pet shops to cover included: adult size, lifespan, source, price and sources of further information (e.g. websites, free care sheets, advice from members of staff). Surveyors were also asked to note whether staff approached them and volunteered any care information without prompting.

### ● Rabbits on sale

Out of 175 pet shops investigated, 73 sold rabbits. A total of 301 rabbits were on sale in these pet shops. The average number of rabbits on sale was four, but ranged from one to 13 per shop. Breed of rabbit was recorded for 63 of the 301 rabbits surveyed, with giant, lop and dwarf breeds being the most commonly reported breeds respectively. Although not every pet shop across England and Wales was visited in this study, data gathered from the surveyed sample can be used to get an estimate of the total number of rabbits on sale. Assuming a similar proportion of non-surveyed pet shops sold rabbits, and in similar proportions, it is estimated that there are approximately 4,000 rabbits on sale in pet shops in England and Wales.

Figure 6: Availability of written rabbit-related information on signs displayed in pet shops selling rabbits



Data source: RSPCA.

● **Care information provided to potential buyers – on signs**

Results relating to the availability of rabbit information on signs in pet shops are presented in Figure 6. Of the pet shops that sold rabbits at the time of the survey, 50.7 per cent displayed some written information about rabbits on signs. However, only 37 per cent of pet shops displayed information in addition to cost.

It is important for any potential rabbit owner to know how big their animal is likely to grow so that they can purchase suitable housing, but only 11 per cent of shops displayed information about the likely adult size. Information about the lifespan of rabbits, and therefore the length of commitment required by buyers, was displayed on signs in only 13.7 per cent of shops selling rabbits. Only one pet shop displayed information regarding the source of the rabbits it sold and less than 18 per cent of pet shops selling rabbits displayed signs that mentioned sources of further information.

Information relating to one or more of the welfare needs of rabbits (environment, diet, behaviour, company, health) was found on signs in 31.5 per cent of pet shops that sold rabbits and on 62.2 per cent of all rabbit signs. However only two shops with rabbits for sale displayed information on all five of their welfare needs, equating to just 5.4 per cent of all rabbit signs.

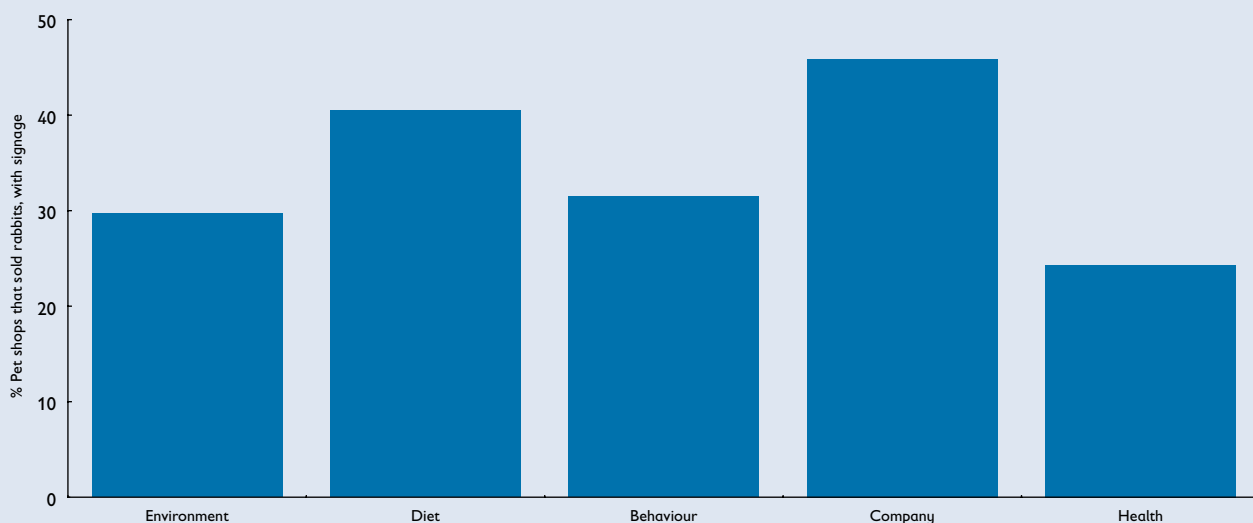
As presented in Figure 7 when rabbit-related signs were available, information relating to some aspect of rabbits' social needs, i.e. company (45.9 per cent) was provided most often, followed by the need for a suitable diet (40.5 per cent), the need to exhibit natural behaviour patterns (35.1 per cent) and the provision of a suitable environment (29.7 per cent). Health-related information was provided least often, being displayed in only 24.3 per cent of pet shops with signage. Fewer than 10 per cent of pet shops with rabbits for sale displayed information on signs regarding the need for veterinary care.

● **Care information provided to potential buyers – free written information to take away**

Results relating to the availability of free rabbit-related care sheets are presented in Figure 8. There were free rabbit-related care sheets available to take away in 33 per cent of pet shops that sold rabbits. In several shops (8.2 per cent) information was provided either verbally or via care sheets when a rabbit was purchased, rather than being available to help inform prospective owners and allow them to make an informed buying decision before the point of sale.

Rabbit-related care sheets were also found in six pet shops that did not have rabbits for sale at the time of the survey. The leaflets from these six shops were excluded from the

Figure 7: Availability of information on rabbits' welfare needs on rabbit-related signs



Data source: RSPCA.

results as the shops did not have rabbits for sale at the time of the survey, although two of the shops confirmed that they normally sold rabbits and both held a care sheet on rabbits. One shop usually held a rabbit care sheet, but this was out of stock at the time of the survey. Therefore, around one-third of the shops that sold rabbits usually held free rabbit-related care sheets.

Many of the care sheets collected were taken from a single pet shop chain, Pets at Home. Out of 19 surveyed Pets at Home stores that had rabbits for sale, 11 had rabbit-related care sheets, meaning that when Pets at Home stores are discounted, only 17.8 per cent of surveyed pet shops held rabbit care sheets.

None of the pet shops that sold rabbits gave details about the price of the rabbits on sale in the care sheets they provided. The responsibility of owning a rabbit was mentioned in care sheets in 26 per cent of shops selling rabbits. The fact that rabbits are prey animals was mentioned in care sheets in only three of the pet shops that sold them; this fact is important in helping owners understand rabbit behaviour and their rabbit's needs. A high proportion of pet shops provided care sheets that included valuable information about the expected lifespan and signs of good health for rabbits. Adult size was mentioned in care sheets in 12.3 per cent of pet shops selling rabbits. The source of the rabbits available for

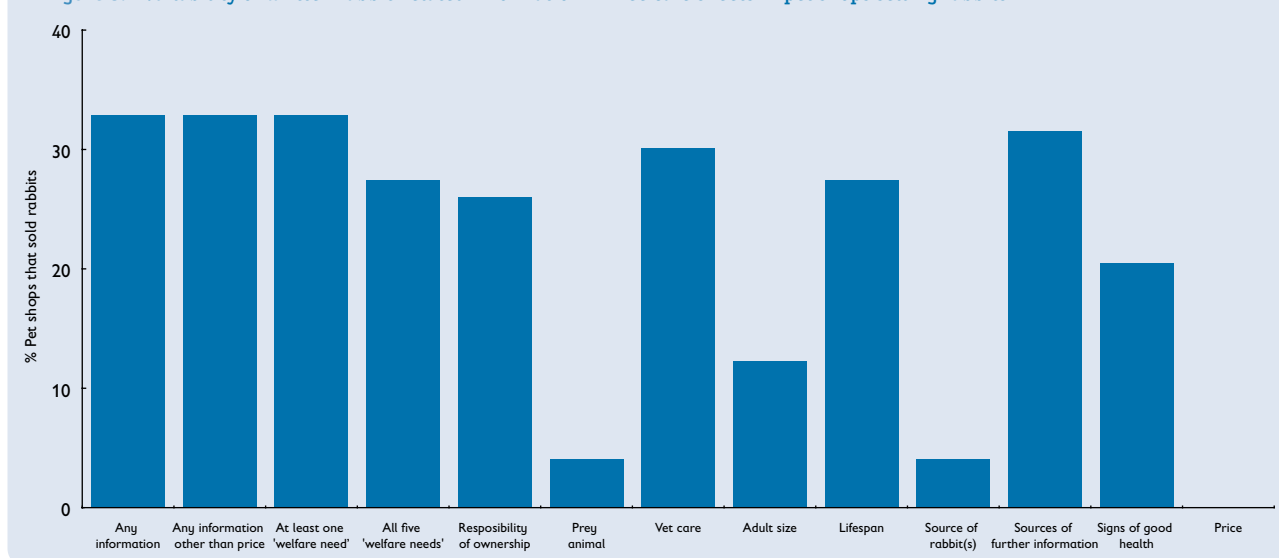
sale was only mentioned in care sheets found in three shops. Sources of further information were given in care sheets in 31.5 per cent of pet shops selling rabbits.

Of the pet shops that sold rabbits, 33 per cent held care sheets containing information on at least one of the five welfare needs and all the rabbit care sheets collected from shops that sold rabbits held some information on at least one need. 27.4 per cent of shops that sold rabbits had care sheets that contained all five welfare needs, whilst 83.3 per cent of the rabbit leaflets collected from shops selling rabbits contained information on all five welfare needs.

When rabbit care sheets were provided (see Figure 9), all of them contained information about some aspect of rabbits' dietary needs, most contained information about environmental and companionship needs (95.8 per cent), whilst behavioural and health needs were covered slightly less often (87.5 per cent). However 91.7 per cent of rabbit care sheets mentioned the need for veterinary care. There is therefore much more information on rabbits' welfare needs provided in care sheets, when they are available, than on signage. However when compared with the RSPCA's expert-derived information on rabbits' welfare needs, it was clear that the information provided in care sheets was not necessarily comprehensive or accurate.

Overall, slightly more information was provided via signs than care sheets, with 37 per cent of pet shops selling rabbits

Figure 8: Availability of written rabbit-related information in free care sheets in pet shops selling rabbits



Data source: RSPCA.

displaying rabbit-related information on signs (excluding those displaying price only) and 33 per cent providing free rabbit care sheets.

Free rabbit information was available in some form (either on signs in store or in free care sheets) in 68.5 per cent of surveyed shops that sold rabbits. When the price of the rabbits on sale is excluded, just over half of the shops that sold rabbits (56.2 per cent) had free rabbit information available in some form (see Figure 10).

Welfare-related information, covering at least one of the five welfare needs was provided in some form in 50.7 per cent of pet shops that had rabbits for sale at the time of the survey. However, only 27.4 per cent of shops that had rabbits for sale had written information available that covered all five welfare needs.

Very few pet shops provided details of the source of the rabbits for sale. Sources of further information were provided via signs and/or free care sheets in just over 40 per cent of shops that sold rabbits.

Overall information on rabbits' dietary needs was provided most often via signs and/or care sheets, being present in 45.2 per cent of shops that sold rabbits (see Figure 11). Information in some form on rabbits' health needs was provided least frequently in only 33 per cent of shops selling rabbits. Only 34.2 per cent of shops with rabbits for sale mentioned the need for veterinary care either on signs and/or care sheets.

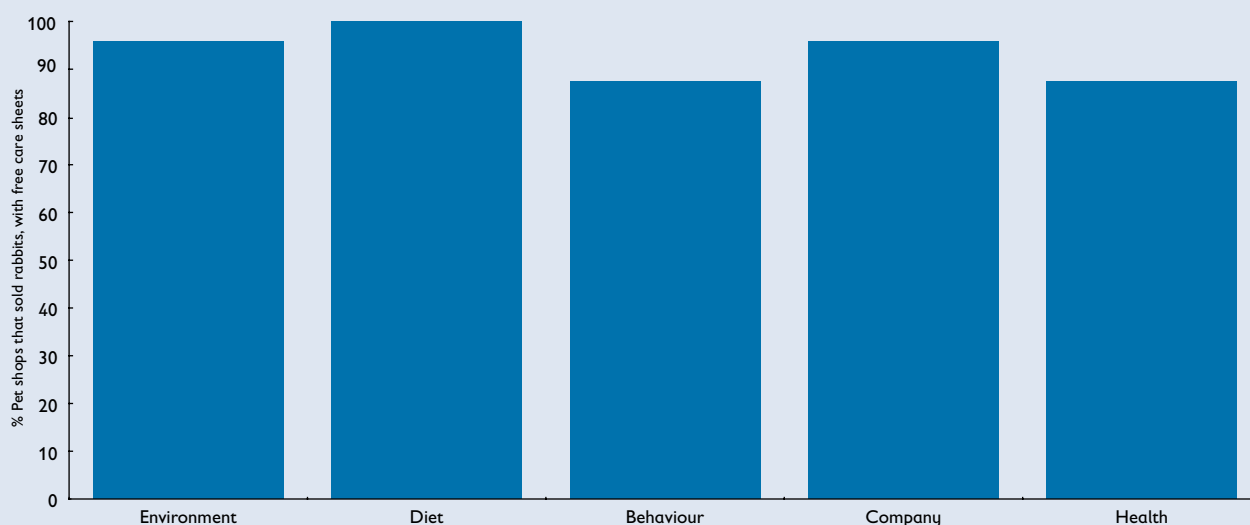
### Information provided by staff

An additional method of information delivery is via staff in store. Surveyors reported that they were approached by members of staff in over half of the shops that sold rabbits (52.1 per cent), and received unprompted advice in 39.5 per cent of these shops. Surveyors described staff in several stores as 'helpful' and in one store as 'knowledgeable' about rabbit care.

Rabbits are popular pets and under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, all pet owners now have a legal 'duty of care' to meet their animals' welfare needs. Despite this, just under half of the pet shops surveyed did not provide any free written information relating to rabbits' needs to help potential owners make an informed choice before deciding to buy a rabbit, and to help them to meet their responsibilities if they obtained a rabbit. Where information was provided, it was not always comprehensive and was sometimes inaccurate.

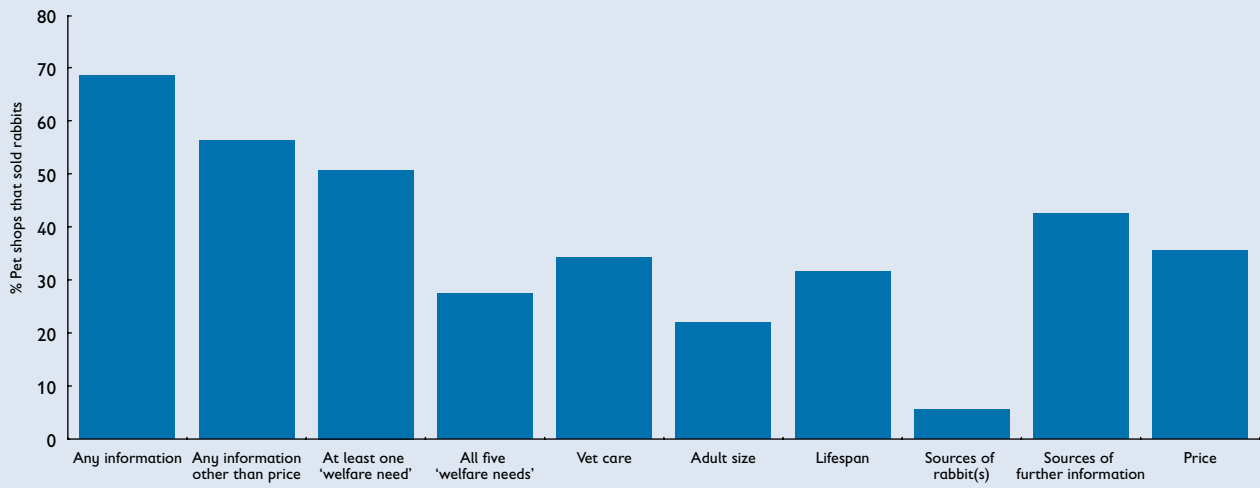
Improvements could be made to the availability, scope and detail of rabbit-related information provided on signs in store and in free care sheets. Ensuring that buyers fully understand the responsibility of owning a rabbit before sale is an important obligation of any seller. Despite potentially having financial implications for stores, free, good-quality care sheets provide an important route of information delivery as potential owners can take them away to read and consider before making the

Figure 9: Availability of information on rabbits' welfare needs in free rabbit care sheets



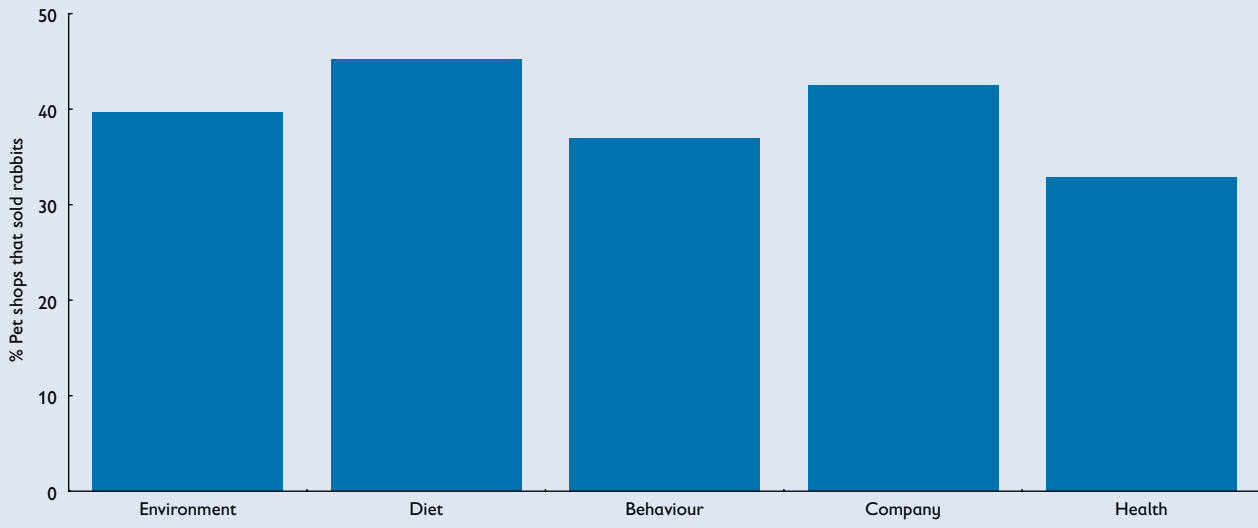
Data source: RSPCA.

Figure 10: Availability of any sort of free written care information on rabbits, in pet shops selling rabbits



Data source: RSPCA.

Figure 11: Availability of any sort of free information on rabbits' welfare needs, in pet shops selling rabbits



Data source: RSPCA.

IN RECOGNITION OF THE FACT THAT THERE IS CURRENTLY LIMITED COMPREHENSIVE, ACCURATE INFORMATION ON RABBITS' WELFARE NEEDS, AND THAT RABBITS' NEEDS ARE OFTEN POORLY UNDERSTOOD, THE RSPCA IS CURRENTLY PLANNING A NATIONAL CAMPAIGN ON RABBIT WELFARE.

decision to purchase a rabbit. Furthermore, freely available information is available from the RSPCA<sup>11</sup> and other welfare organisations.

Pet shop regulations under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 have yet to be drafted. It is hoped that the regulations will improve the availability and quality of care sheets in pet retail outlets.

The Welsh Assembly Government has produced a code of practice on the care of rabbits<sup>13</sup>, which provides details of rabbits' welfare needs and how to meet them, and which could form the basis for care sheets provided by pet shops in Wales.

In recognition of the fact that there is currently limited comprehensive, accurate information on rabbits' welfare needs, and that rabbits' needs are often poorly understood, the RSPCA is currently planning a national campaign on rabbit welfare. Part of this campaign includes funding studies into both the state of rabbit welfare in the UK and the spatial needs of socially-housed pet rabbits.

#### FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Schepers F, Koene P and Beerda B (2009). Welfare assessment in pet rabbits. *Animal Welfare* 18, 477–485.
- 2 Pet Food Manufacturers Association's data (2010): [www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-population-2008.htm](http://www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-population-2008.htm)
- 3 Many thousands of rabbits are abandoned or given up to the RSPCA each year. In 2009 the RSPCA rehomed a total of 4,663 rabbits.
- 4 Animal Welfare Act 2006 S9.
- 5 Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2005). Proposed and possible secondary legislation and codes of practice. In: Fourth Special Report. [www.archive2.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm62/6252/6252.pdf](http://www.archive2.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm62/6252/6252.pdf).
- 6 The RSPCA believes that good-quality husbandry information should be available to prospective owners before the point of sale, to allow them to make an informed decision before buying an animal.
- 7 Defra (2004). Launch of the Draft Animal Welfare Bill, page 75. [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmenvfru/385/38507.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmenvfru/385/38507.htm)
- 8 Mullan S M and Main D C J (2006). Survey of the husbandry, health and welfare of 102 pet rabbits. *The Veterinary Record* 159, 103–109.
- 9 Pet Food Manufacturers Association's data (2008): [www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-pop-08.htm](http://www.pfma.org.uk/overall/pet-pop-08.htm)
- 10 Make Mine Chocolate – campaign to stop the impulse purchase of rabbits. Rabbit rescue survey (May 2010). Further information about the campaign is available at: [www.makeminechocolate.org.uk](http://www.makeminechocolate.org.uk)
- 11 RSPCA (2009). Rabbit welfare needs information available at: [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits) by clicking on the five welfare needs (environment, diet, behaviour, company, health and welfare) listed on the left-hand side of the webpage.
- 12 Details of the experts who contributed to the RSPCA rabbit welfare needs information are available at: [www.rspca.org.uk/sciencegroup/companionanimals/reportsandresources/expertcontributors](http://www.rspca.org.uk/sciencegroup/companionanimals/reportsandresources/expertcontributors)
- 13 Welsh Assembly Government (2009). Code of Practice for the welfare of rabbits. <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/drah/publications/091109rabbitcodeen.pdf>