**Guidance on specific conditions – breeding rabbits**

**1. Definitions**

*“adult rabbit”* means a rabbit aged 3 months or more,

*“kit”* means a rabbit aged less than 3 months,

*“nesting box”* means a fully-enclosed indoor area in which a rabbit can rest and sleep,

*“exercise area”* means a secure area where rabbits can hop, scratch, forage and stretch to their full height,

*“breeding”* when used in the context of *“breeding rabbit”* means any adult rabbit intended to be used, being used or that has been used for the purposes of producing offspring.

**2. Advertisements and sales**

***Condition: No kit aged under 8 weeks may be—***

***(a) sold, or***

***(b) permanently separated from its biological mother.***

***Condition: The condition regarding permanent separation from the biological mother (para. 2(b) of schedule 8) does not apply in relation to a kit if separation is necessary for the health or welfare of the kit, other kits from the same litter or its biological mother, or if the kit’s biological mother is deceased.***

**Guidance:**

Kits must remain with their mother for the first eight weeks of life unless the mother dies or there is a health risk to the kit or its littermates or the mother from remaining with her. Where necessary, a veterinarian may certify that it is in the best interests of the animal to be removed earlier, **but it must not be sold**. The local authority should be satisfied that licence holders retain records that are sufficient to demonstrate compliance with these conditions.

Where an inspector finds a kit less than 8 weeks old that has been separated from its mother, they must take steps to determine why and any evidence provided to justify the separation should be supported by veterinary advice.

***Condition: Any advertisement for the sale of a rabbit must—***

***(a) include the number of the licence holder’s licence, and***

***(b) specify the local authority that issued the licence.***

**Guidance:**

Local authorities should ensure that the licence holder understands that “any advertisement” includes ads placed on social media platforms, ad sites like Gumtree, Pets4Homes etc., and any other web site on which the licence holder advertises animals for sale to the public.

Local authorities should, where practicable, verify that ads posted by the licence holder meet the above requirements and take steps to ensure compliance where it becomes clear that this condition of licence is not being met.

**3. Number of breeding female rabbits**

***Condition: The number of breeding female rabbits kept in relation to the licensable activity of breeding rabbits at any time on the premises specified in the licence and on which the licensable activity is carried on must not exceed the number specified by the local authority in the licence.***

**Guidance:**

Regulation 6(6)(b) of the Regulations requires local authorities to specify in any breeding licence granted the maximum number of breeding does that can be kept on the premises for the licensable activity. During any inspection local authorities should determine as far as possible that the licence holder is complying with this condition and where more does are found on site than are permitted by licence action must be taken to establish the status of any additional does and whether they are or have been used for breeding purposes (again as far as this is possible). Veterinary advice should be sought where this is considered necessary.

**4. Suitable environment**

***Condition: Each rabbit must have access to—***

***(a) a clean, dry and warm sleeping area which is free from draughts, and***

***(b) an exercise area.***

**Guidance:**

Rabbits kept for the licensable activity must be kept in housing that ideally has two separate areas- a larger general area where the rabbit can stretch out, play, hop and stand on their hind legs fully stretched out and generally relax. The second area should be the sleeping area which must protect the rabbit from the weather, draughts etc. Sleeping and exercise areas do not however need to be separated by a physical barrier if rabbits are housed inside in pens of suitable design and sufficient size to allow a clean, dry, warm and draught free area for sleeping to be available at all times.

Ideally, the rabbit’s enclosure will have an outdoor run directly attached to it to allow the rabbits to exercise and engage in normal activity. Runs must be secure and protect the rabbits from weather. If an attached run is not possible then ideally a free-standing run of appropriate size should be made available where it is practical to do so. If rabbits are not able to access an outdoor run then additional forms of environmental enrichment should be provided.

***Condition: Each rabbit must be provided with sufficient space in the sleeping area to—***

***a) lie down fully stretched out,***

***b) hop, and***

***c) turn around***

***without touching another rabbit or the walls of the sleeping area.***

**Guidance:**

The minimum acceptable kennel/enclosure sizes are as set out in Annex I.

***Condition: The exercise area must not be used as a sleeping area unless the rabbit chooses to do so.***

**Guidance:**

Local authorities need only confirm that both a separate sleeping area and exercise area are provided for each rabbit kept for the licensable activity and that these meet the needs of the rabbits. Where it is not practical to provide each rabbit with its own dedicated exercise area it is acceptable for licence holders to have an allocated exercise area which rabbits are provided with daily access to on a rotational basis.

If rabbits are kept in indoors pens where the sleeping and exercise areas are not separated by a physical barrier they must be of suitable design and sufficient size to allow a clean, dry, warm and draught free area for sleeping to be available at all times.

***Condition: For each breeding female rabbit, there must be—***

***(a) a nesting box to give birth in and which is lined with suitable nesting material such as dust-free wood shavings or grass hay, or***

***(b) a plentiful supply of such nesting material available to the rabbit.***

**Guidance:**

Pregnant does should be given access to a nesting box (where used) around 5 to 7 days before the kits are expected to allow the doe to start to prepare her nest. Nest boxes should not be too large, it only needs to allow for the doe to stand up and comfortably turn around. The doe must be provided with suitable nesting material such as dry wood shavings and she should have a fresh supply of grass hay, water and her regular feed. The nest box should be located in a quiet location away from other rabbits and sources of disturbance. Where a breeder’s preference is not to use nest boxes they must ensure that a plentiful supply of good quality nesting material is made available to the doe so that she can prepare her nest prior to birthing.

***Condition: The nesting box must not be accessible to other rabbits when being used by a breeding female rabbit to give birth in.***

**Guidance:**

Does must be provided with a nest box (or good quality nesting material) that is in a quiet area, separate from other rabbits to ensure that she can give birth in peace and without any unnecessary disturbance. Sudden loud noises can spook a doe during the period of birthing, causing the doe to accidently injure or kill the new born kits. Breeders should be aware of this and take all practical steps to minimise such risk.

**5. Training and exercise**

***Condition: Opportunities to exercise which benefit the rabbits’ physical and mental health must be provided, unless advice from a veterinarian suggests otherwise.***

**Guidance:**

Rabbit enclosures should ideally have an exercise area adjoining that is of appropriate size for the size and numbers of rabbits housed. Alternatively, a separate suitably sized exercise run must be provided to permit the rabbits to exercise and exhibit natural behaviours, or, where rabbits are kept in pens indoors, they should be provided with additional forms of environmental enrichment, following veterinary advice as appropriate.

Where it is clear that either opportunities to exercise or appropriate environmental enrichment are not being provided, the local authority should seek to find out why this is. Proof of veterinary advice against exercising a rabbit or a group of rabbits or against providing environmental enrichment should be provided by the breeder if so requested by the local authority.

***Condition: All kits must be given suitable and adequate opportunities to—***

***(a) learn how to interact with people, rabbits and other animals where such interaction benefits their welfare, and***

***(b) become habituated to noises, objects and activities associated with a domestic environment.***

**Guidance:**

The licence holder must have in place an adequate programme to socialise kits and prepare them for life in the environment in which they are going to live. Procedures must be in place so that all staff know how to appropriately socialise kits.

Ideally, kits should be handled regularly from shortly after birth for short periods (e.g. gently picking up and examining) to habituate them to human contact and to examine them for any sign of disease and to ensure they are feeding properly. The window of opportunity for habituating kits to human touch is short, so habituating kits to humans and the human environment must start early, ideally between 7 to 21 days old. Interaction should be gradual, frequent and gentle and needs to continue as the kit matures to ensure they become confident and relaxed adults.

***Condition: All rabbits must have at least daily opportunities to interact with people where such interaction benefits their welfare.***

**Guidance:**

Licence holders must make time to interact with adult rabbits kept for the licensable activity on a daily basis where such interaction is welcomed by the rabbits and benefits its overall welfare. Where possible, rabbits should have the opportunity for interaction with more than one person where such opportunities arise. Ideally, further interaction will occur naturally and periodically throughout the day.

**6. Suitable diet**

***Condition: All adult rabbits must have continuous access to clean and safe drinking water.***

***Condition: Each adult rabbit must be provided with feed appropriate to its needs.***

***Condition: Each kit must be provided with feed appropriate for its stage of development*.**

**Guidance:**

Licence holders must have appropriate feeding plans in place for bucks, breeding does and any kits produced. Where advised by a veterinary surgeon, dietary supplements should be given. A supply of clean, fresh drinking water must always be made available.

Licence holders must have a feeding plan in place that ensures kits are being fed a high quality diet appropriate for their age. All reasonable efforts should be made to supervise feeding to ensure that less dominant or smaller kits get their allocated share of the food. Where it is evident that a kit is not eating as expected or is struggling to compete for its share, the licence holder must take steps to address this.

**7. Protection from suffering, injury and disease**

***Condition: All rabbits for sale must be in good health.***

**Guidance:**

Licence holders must not knowingly sell any animal that is not fit, healthy or, where applicable, socialised. Where it is clear that an animal that is for sale is not in good physical or mental health it must be removed from sale and provided with appropriate care, including veterinary care where necessary, until it is considered fit for sale.

In order to meet this licence obligation the licence holder and any staff employed must be adequately trained and experienced enough to identify when a kit or rabbit is unsuitable for sale due to ill-health, injury or another form of suffering. Local authorities should therefore be satisfied that the licence holder has sufficient experience and knowledge to identify such animals and know the remedial action that should be taken. Appropriate procedures should be in place to deal with ill and injured animals.

***Condition: Any rabbit with a condition which materially affects, or is likely to materially affect, its quality of life must not be—***

***a) transferred in ownership,***

***b) offered for sale, or***

***c) moved from the premises specified in the licence and on which the licensable activity is carried on, other than to an isolation facility or veterinary care facility where the animal is in need of isolation or treatment,***

***until it has recovered, ceased to require isolation or, where there is no need for the rabbit to be isolated, been certified by a veterinary surgeon as being in a condition that is suitable for such transfer, sale or movement.***

**Guidance:**

Local authorities should be satisfied that the licence holder has provision on the licenced premises or at another nearby suitable facility to isolate any animal with a condition that is likely to be affecting its quality of life, either short-term or long-term. If the animal is to remain on the licenced premises it should be located in a suitably quiet and safe part of the premises which is readily accessible to allow for regular monitoring of its condition. Veterinary opinion should be sought where necessary, and must be sought, where it is clear that the animals condition is long-term or unlikely to improve. If the animal requires to be transported to a veterinary facility then it should be done in a manner that minimises the stress on the animal.

***Condition: The licence holder must ensure that no female rabbit—***

***a) is mated or artificially inseminated if aged less than 5 months,***

***b) gives birth to more than 4 litters of kits within 12 months,***

***c) gives birth to more than 16 litters of kits in its lifetime,***

***d) is mated or artificially inseminated if aged 6 or more years.***

**Guidance:**

Local authorities must be satisfied that any breeding programme implemented by the licence holder is fully compliant with the above conditions. The conditions set out above are particularly significant in terms of protecting the welfare of breeding does and local authorities should ensure that relevant records are inspected during any inspection to confirm compliance.

***Condition: No rabbit may be kept for breeding if it can reasonably be expected, on the basis of its genotype, conformation, behaviour or state of health, that breeding from it could have a detrimental effect on its health or welfare or the health or welfare of its offspring.***

**Guidance:**

Certain breeds of rabbit show exaggerated conformations such as brachycephaly (flat faces) which can result in chronic health problems associated with jaw misalignments and overgrown teeth causing chronic pain and mouth injuries. Distortion of the tear duct can also cause chronic overflow of tears onto their faces. Breeds such as the Netherland Dwarf and the Lionhead have become increasingly brachycephalic.

Lop ears are associated with a higher incidence of ear infections than normal upright ears.

Before issuing a licence for rabbit breeding local authorities should be satisfied that the applicant has sufficient knowledge of the breeds they propose to breed and the risks of exaggerated conformations. Breeders should select both parents carefully in order to avoid conformational extremes, inherited diseases or negative behavioural traits. In cases where such knowledge or experience cannot be demonstrated, a local authority can still decide to issue a licence to the applicant, but where it does it is recommended that the licence be issued initially for a period of 1 year.

Veterinary advice should be sought where appropriate.

***Condition: Where any other activity involving animals is undertaken on the premises on which the licensable activity of breeding rabbits is carried on, it must be kept entirely separate from the area where that licensable activity is carried on.***

**Guidance:**

Local authorities must be satisfied that where other activities involving animals are being conducted on the premises used for rabbit breeding they are undertaken in a separate area or building. Local authorities should, where possible, seek to confirm the nature of the other activity and whether it is an activity that requires to be licenced and, if so, whether the operator is so licenced.

***Condition: No adult rabbit may be isolated or separated from others rabbits for longer than is necessary.***

**Guidance:**

Rabbits are naturally social creatures that have evolved to live in large social groups. Accordingly, licence holders must only completely isolate a rabbit when strictly necessary. Isolated rabbits can suffer stress when housed alone and this can lead to negative behaviours that are detrimental to the animal’s welfare.

Physical separation of unneutered rabbits is necessary at times to control breeding, avoid fighting and to allow females to nest and rear their young without disturbance but this can be done with individual pens which still allow sight of other rabbits in adjacent pens thereby avoiding feelings of isolation and stress.