

Animal Welfare (Keeping and Breeding of Rabbits in the ACT) Mandatory Code of Practice 2024

Disallowable instrument DI2024-231

made under the

Animal Welfare Act 1992, Section 23 (Mandatory code of practice)

1 Name of instrument

This instrument is the *Animal Welfare (Keeping and Breeding of Rabbits in the ACT) Mandatory Code of Practice 2024*.

2 Commencement

This instrument commences on the day after it is notified.

3 Application

This Mandatory Code of Practice applies to those people who own, keep, care for and breed rabbits in the ACT.

4 Approval

I approve the Code of Practice for the Keeping and Breeding of Rabbits in the ACT, attached to this instrument, as a mandatory code of practice under the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*.

I am satisfied that adequate consultation has occurred in developing this Code of Practice.

Tara Cheyne MLA
Minister for City Services
9 July 2024

Code of Practice for the Keeping and Breeding of Rabbits in the ACT

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Introduction

Purpose

This Code of Practice for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has been prepared with guidance from the ACT Animal Welfare Advisory Committee. Its purpose is to provide information and describe minimum standards of care to achieve acceptable animal welfare outcomes for rabbits.

Sections 109(3)(a), (b) and (c) of the *Animal Welfare Act 1992* provide that the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee has the functions of advising the Minister and participating in the development of approved codes of practice and mandatory codes of practice. Section 22 of the *Animal Welfare Act 1992* authorises the Minister to approve a code of practice related to animal welfare and section 23 of the *Animal Welfare Act 1992* authorises the Minister to approve a code of practice that is mandatory in whole or in part.

This Code is a mandatory code of practice approved under section 23 of the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*.

This Code of Practice includes mandatory standards as well as guidelines that are considered essential for meeting the requirements specified under the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*.

Who is the Code intended for?

This Code is limited in its application to people who own, keep, care for or breed Rabbits in the ACT. Although the basic principles of good animal welfare as outlined in this Code are universally relevant, this Code does not apply to animals other than rabbits.

The overall objective of this Code is that rabbits kept in the ACT are provided with care that maximises their long-term health and well-being; and are protected from pain, distress, danger, illness and injury. This Code provides guidance for rabbit owners as to the appropriate means of caring for pet rabbits.

Welfare Framework

The *Animal Welfare Act 1992* states the main objects of the Act are to recognise:

- a) animals are sentient beings able to subjectively feel and perceive the world around them; and
- b) animals have intrinsic value, and deserve to be treated with compassion, and have a quality of life that reflects their intrinsic value; and
- c) people have a duty to care for the physical and mental welfare of animals.

This Code of Practice sets out guidelines for best practices as well as mandatory minimum standards of care for animals in line with the Objects of the Act.

There are five Domains to which every animal is entitled namely:

1. **Nutrition** — factors that involve the animal's access to sufficient, balanced, varied, and clean food and water.
2. **Environment** — factors that enable comfort through temperature, substrate, space, air, odour, noise, and predictability,
3. **Health** — factors that enable good health through the absence of disease, injury, impairment with a good fitness level.
4. **Behaviour** — factors that provide varied, novel, and engaging environmental challenges through sensory inputs, exploration, foraging, bonding, playing, retreating, and others.
5. **Mental state** — the fifth domain represents the combined effect of the other four domains on the animal's mental state. The aim is for the mental state of the animal to benefit from predominantly positive states, such as pleasure, comfort, or vitality, while reducing negative states such as fear, frustration, hunger, pain, or boredom.

The five Domains for Animal Welfare are welfare principles that provide a model that is applicable across species and situations including the Code of Practice for the Keeping and Breeding of Rabbits in the ACT.

Overall welfare objectives

Since humans can alter and control an animal's environment, animal welfare includes the concept that people have duties and responsibilities towards animals. The greater the level of interference or control of an animal's environment, the greater our responsibility. This Code of Practice aims to give effect to the contemporary understanding of animal welfare including the recognition of sentience and the concept that animals have a right to both mental and physical wellbeing.

Animal welfare considerations are essential in the keeping of animals. This Code is based on established experience and current scientific knowledge and is open to future review as appropriate. Animal welfare in a modern context describes how well an animal is, both mentally and physically. Achieving good animal welfare relies on recognising the five domains of welfare for animals.

Compliance with the Code

The Code of Practice is made under section 23 of the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*, which allows the Minister to approve a Code of Practice, part or all of which has mandatory force.

Failing to comply with the mandatory standards in this Code of Practice is an offence. It is also an offence to fail to follow a direction to comply with this Code of Practice. The following sections of the *Animal Welfare Act 1992* outline these offences and their penalties:

- Section 24A (Reckless failure to comply with a code of practice);
- Section 24B (Failure to comply with mandatory code); and
- Section 24D (Failure to comply with direction to comply with mandatory code).

Sections 24A and 24B of the *Animal Welfare Act 1992* provide that it is an offence to fail to comply with a mandatory code of practice. Compliance with this

Code is compulsory for all owners and careers of rabbits in the ACT. For penalty units see *Legislation Act 2001*, section 133.

Structure of the Code

This Code of Practice includes **mandatory standards** that must be met.

Mandatory standards

In this Code of Practice there are minimum standards that must be met for the appropriate care and welfare of rabbits. These standards appear under the heading *Mandatory standards* and include the word “must”. They are outlined in a rectangular box.

Mandatory standards must be complied with, and non-compliance can constitute an offence under the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*.

Guidelines

In this Code of Practice, Guidelines are recommended practices to achieve desirable animal welfare outcomes. The guidelines complement the mandatory standards and should be used as guidance for all owners. Guidelines use the word ‘should’. Non-compliance with one or more guidelines will not in itself constitute an offence under law but may be used to help inform decision-makers of what is considered appropriate care in the event of prosecution.

Relation to other Codes

Several Codes of Practice for animal welfare have been published over time by the ACT Government. Taken together, the Codes create a matrix of animal welfare provisions that provide guidance on most of the important animal welfare issues in the ACT. The Codes are subject to reviews and updates and additional codes may be developed as industries, technologies, attitudes and best practice animal welfare evolves.

Under the *Nature Conservation Act 2014* you are required by law to be the holder of a licence to import, keep, sell or export rabbits, and you must apply for a licence before obtaining a rabbit Licences under Chapter 11 of the *Nature Conservation Act 2014* can be submitted online and are valid for three (3) years.

The Code of Practice for *the Sale of Animals in the ACT other than Stock and Commercial Scale Poultry (2021)* requires that a person rehoming an animal, whether by sale or otherwise, must provide the new owner with relevant information on the care of the animal rehomed.

General guidelines

Rabbits are considered prey animals and as such will often hide signs of injury or illness so as not to appear weak. Thorough daily checks of an animal’s wellbeing and becoming familiar with their normal behaviour is critical in identifying any issues early as changes are often hidden and therefore are subtle.

In the case of a rabbit for whom a new home has been found that information should cover diet, accurate sex of the rabbit, when to desex and vaccinate,

worming, grooming, housing, identification and general health care. Providing this code to the new carer is advisable.

Definitions for this Code

In this Code:

Animal – has the same meaning as in the *Animal Welfare Act 1992* and *Domestic Animals Act 2000*.

Carer – a carer can be, for example, a dog owner, commercial dog walker, or person who has the dog in their current control.

Death – evidence of proof of death **must** be confirmed before disposal of any animal remains. In confirming death, a combination of criteria should be used including absence of heartbeat (determined by lack of pulse or audible heartbeat by use of a stethoscope), absence of breathing, absence of corneal reflex, absence of withdrawal reflexes; greying of the mucous membranes; and rigor mortis.

Euthanasia – humanely killing an animal to prevent or bring to an end to suffering of any kind.

Financial gain – means any monetary or material gain that significantly exceeds the recovery costs reasonably incurred in caring for an animal up to the time of sale.

Humane killing – when an animal is either killed instantly or rendered insensible until death, ensuring that pain, suffering, or distress is minimised.

Owner – an owner of a dog can be a keeper, carer, handler, breeder, or purchaser. Each comes with their own responsibilities.

Rehoming – means any process of finding a new permanent home for an animal other than for financial gain.

Responsible ownership – an owner or carer is responsible for every stage and for all aspects of a dog's life, from birth to death.

Regularly – at appropriate intervals to achieve the expected or desired outcome

Adequate Water – means water that—

(a) is at a temperature and of a quality that the animal will drink; and

(b) is of sufficient quantity and quality to meet the physiological needs of the animal; and

(c) is not harmful to the animal.

1. Responsibilities

Mandatory standards

- S1.1 A person must take reasonable actions to safeguard the welfare of rabbits under their care, to ensure the animals have good mental and physical wellbeing.
- S1.2 A person must take appropriate actions to minimise fear and distress in rabbits under their care and address any risks to their welfare.

Guidelines

- G1.1 It is important that anyone keeping rabbits as pets can identify the signs of fear and distress. Acute signs may include freezing, distress vocalisation, rapid shallow breathing, trembling, biting, and scratching. Longer term, fear and distress may manifest into health issues such as weight loss, dehydration, failure to nest, overgrooming, failure to groom, increased aggression towards humans and fighting with other animals in their environment.

In the case of a rabbit for whom a new home has been found that information should cover diet, accurate sex of the rabbit, when to desex and vaccinate, worming, grooming, housing, identification and general health care. Providing this Code to the new carer is advisable.

2. Environment and housing

Mandatory standards

- S2.1 All rabbits must be provided with a living environment that minimise stress. The following must be provided at a minimum standard:
- a) Adequate space to play, hide, move freely, jump, stretch out and stand fully upright on hind limbs;
 - b) A variety of places to explore and rest;
 - c) Mental stimulation through the provision of enrichment;
 - d) Companionship through regular positive contact with other rabbits or humans; and
 - e) Safety from direct risk of harm, such as being attacked by other animals or humans;
- S2.2 Rabbits must be kept in a cool area and must not be exposed to high temperatures to avoid heat stress and exhaustion.
- S2.3 Rabbits must be kept in an escape-proof enclosure to protect wildlife and the rabbit from harm.
- S2.4 Rabbits must be provided with adequate and appropriate food and water to maintain the animal's good health and comfort;
- S2.5 Wire floors can create serious foot and leg injuries. Hutches or cages with wire mesh floors must always include a sufficient area with soft flooring to allow all rabbits to rest away from the mesh at the same time.

Guidelines

- G2.1 In addition to providing for the rabbit's needs, a keeper or carer has a responsibility to:
- a) Protect them from direct risk of harm, such as being attacked by other animals or humans;
 - b) Minimise the impact of the rabbit on wildlife and the environment through de-sexing and the implementation of appropriate control and/or containment; and
 - c) Provide them with housing that allows them to be protected from heat or cold, and provides appropriate shade, shelter and protection from weather conditions; and
 - d) Provide them with secure housing that prevents the animals from escaping and predators from entering; and
 - e) Provide the animal with adequate and appropriate food and water to maintain the animal's good health and comfort; and
 - f) Provide a level of hygiene that supports good health and prevents illness and disease.

- G2.2 Siblings from the same litter can be housed together for up to three months, at this point males and females would need to be separated or desexed to prevent breeding and fighting.
- G2.3 Rabbits are social animals, and their wellbeing is greatly increased if they can be housed with other compatible rabbits. Sufficient hiding places within enclosures are important as rabbits can be shy, hiding places provide safety and comfort.
- G2.4 Unrelated female rabbits or desexed rabbits can be housed together but should be monitored closely to ensure they are not fighting or dominating feeding, hiding and sleeping spaces.
- G2.5 Entire male rabbits will often need to be separated by about five months of age or earlier to prevent serious injuries from fighting.
- G2.6 A new rabbit should be introduced with care into a household with existing rabbits. The new rabbit should be introduced slowly and under supervision to ensure any conflict over territory or hierarchy is minimised.
- G2.7 Rabbits may be housed in outdoor hutches or enclosures or live indoors where they can be trained to use a litter tray. Litter trays should be lined with wood or paper-based litter or hay or straw; other types can be harmful if ingested by rabbits.
- G2.8 Many products which are marketed as rabbit hutches do not provide rabbits with sufficient room to maintain proper physical and mental health. Daily time outside such housing is required to allow rabbits to move more freely and engage in normal behaviours.
- G2.9 Rabbits may spray their indoor or outdoor territory with urine; desexing rabbits and minimising stress can reduce the incidence of spraying.

Note: When rabbits are indoors, care should be taken to ensure they cannot access power cords, as they will chew power cords, furniture, and carpet. Many indoor plants are toxic to rabbits and should be kept out of reach.

- G2.10 Sleeping areas, whether indoors or outdoors, should include bedding material in the form of straw or hay with an underlay of absorbent substrate such as wood shavings that is kept clean and dry, and is replaced regularly. Bedding made of foam and fabric, such as those used for dogs and cats may not be suitable for rabbits as they may chew and eat them, potentially obstructing the gut.
- G2.11 Rabbits should be kept out of direct contact with wild rabbits (i.e. avoiding nose to nose contact), to reduce the transmission of rabbit fleas which can transmit Myxomatosis.

Note: Saw dust should not be used in litter trays or as bedding for Rabbits as it can cause serious irritation and damage to the eyes. Keep in mind that hay, straw and wood shavings can be a source of external parasites.

G2.12 At a minimum, outdoor enclosures or hutches should allow rabbits to run, hide, turn around and stretch out. It should also:

- a) Provide an enclosed waterproof area (ideally raised off the ground) with only a small opening where the rabbit can hide, nest, keep dry, warm or cool;
- b) Be sturdy and secure to protect rabbits from predators such as cats, dogs, foxes and birds;
- c) Prevent escape; and
- d) Be covered with insect proof mesh to protect rabbits from insects that can spread disease.

G2.13 The position of the hutch should be changed regularly to rest the ground and allow grass to recover; this also provides enrichment for the rabbit and allows for removal of faecal matter.

Table 1. Floor space requirements for pet rabbits agriculture.vic.gov.au/pets/other-pets/rabbits/guidelines-on-keeping-pet-rabbits

* The animal weight provides an indication of the age and activity of the rabbits which is the important determinant of space requirements.

** Minimum area includes the area of any shelving in the animal enclosure that doesn't reduce the total available area. Enclosures must be wide and long enough to permit rabbits to lie fully outstretched — minimum of 80cm clear space in at least one direction, and to provide a clear area to facilitate 1 to 3 complete hops for normal exercise requirements.

*** The minimum height must refer to a cage/pen high enough for rabbits to stand upright unhindered (with ears not touching the roof).

Single or group housing or breeding animals	Animal weight (Kg)	Min. floor area (cm ² per animal)
Single	<2	2000
	2-4	4000
	4-6	5400
	>6	6000
Group	<2	1300
	2-4	2600
	4-6	3300
	>6	4000
Female + Litter	Any weight	9300 per female + litter

3. Handling

Mandatory standards

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| S3.1 | Children must be closely supervised around rabbits to ensure the safety of the child and the animal. |
| S3.2 | |
| S3.3 | Rabbits must never be picked up or handled in such a way as to cause them fear, pain, distress or injury*. |
| S3.4 | Rabbits must never be tethered. This means not securing an animal to an object or running line by means of a leash, chain, rope or other material. An animal fighting against a fixed tether can cause serious injuries that can result in death. |
| S3.5 | Collars must never be placed on rabbits. |
| S3.6 | Aversive training techniques and devices that cause pain must not be used on rabbits for any reason. |

***How to handle a rabbit:**

Techniques used to safely pick rabbit benefit from regular and confident (gentle but firm) handling. They should be handled in a quiet and calm manner, in order to avoid fear, pain, distress or injury. It is important to handle rabbits often, especially when they are young.

Rabbit should be picked up with two hands, one under the chest with the fingers and thumb enclosing the front legs, and one supporting the hind quarters. They must never be picked up by the legs or tail. Incorrect handling of rabbits can result in serious injury to the rabbit and the handler.

Note: All visitors and children should be instructed and supervised while interacting with and handling rabbits.

Guidelines

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| G3.1 | Rabbits should be introduced gradually to accessories such as harnesses, transport cages or exercise balls. The use of positive reinforcement with treats or other positive reward system can help with acclimatising rabbit to new items in their environment and new experiences. |
| G3.2 | Some owners may wish to exercise their rabbit with a harness and a lead. Before taking a rabbit outdoors or into a public space, the rabbit should be trained to accept a harness. |
| G3.3 | Leads should be attached to a harness and collars must not be used. |
| G3.4 | Rabbits should be allowed to familiarise themselves with any new experience or environment. They should also be socialised with other rabbits, animals and humans when it is safe to do so. |

4. Hygiene

Hygiene is important for the health of your rabbit and you as the keeper/carer. Rabbits can harbour disease that can be passed onto humans and other animals, so it is important to maintain high levels of hygiene to minimise the risk of disease.

Mandatory standards

- S4.1 A person responsible for a rabbit must maintain a hygienic environment for the rabbit by:
- a) Regularly washing the rabbit's food and water bowls; and
 - b) Preventing a build-up of faeces and wet substrate or nesting material in the cage; and
 - c) Regularly cleaning the rabbit's cage, including furnishings and accessories.
- S4.2 A person responsible for a rabbit must properly groom and maintain the hygiene/cleanliness of the rabbit.

Guidelines

- G4.1 Regular grooming of rabbits assists with the detection of some diseases and parasite problems. Semi-long-haired and longhaired rabbits should be groomed twice per week. Shorthaired rabbits may need grooming only once per fortnight. Owners should inform themselves on the best methods of grooming for their individual rabbit.

Note: Overweight or geriatric rabbits are less likely to self-groom and may require daily grooming.

- G4.2 Water bowls should be washed daily, suspended sipper bottles at least twice weekly.
- G4.3 Suspended food hoppers for dry pellets should be cleaned at least weekly and bowls every second day.
- G4.4 Uneaten fresh produce should be removed within 24 hours of feeding.
- G4.5 Enclosures should be cleaned and disinfected weekly.
- G4.6 Cleaning and disinfecting agents should be chosen on the basis of their suitability, safety and effectiveness. Bleach or chlorine-based disinfectants are effective against common rabbit pathogens. Manufacturers' instructions for the use of cleaning and disinfecting agents should be followed, an overly dilute solution may be ineffective and too concentrated a solution may be toxic to animals. All disinfectants should be thoroughly rinsed away with water following application.
- G4.7 Faeces should be removed daily from litter trays and from the enclosure in general where needed.

- G4.8 Litter trays should be easy to enter and exit, large enough for the rabbit to turn around, and contain at least 5 centimetres of litter.
- G4.9 Litter trays should be kept separate from food and sleeping areas and should be cleaned using separate cleaning equipment.
- G4.10 Litter should be completely changed every two (2) days or every day if used by several rabbits. Litter trays should be washed, and scalded with hot water every time the litter is changed and cleaned separately from water and food containers. Additional trays may be required when housing multiple rabbits.
- G4.11 The base substrate (not just the litter) should be completely changed at least weekly, ideally at the same time the cage has been washed. If stocking density is high, then more regular replacement will be required. Higher quality substrate allows rabbits to turn over the litter so that the top remains dry, and the soiled moist bedding is underneath.
- G4.12 Nesting material should also be discarded and replaced once per week.
- G4.13 If substrate or nesting material becomes wet i. e., from a leaky water container, it must be replaced quickly to minimise the risk of the rabbits suffering from hypothermia from exposure to wet bedding or illness from mould growing in the cage.
- G4.14 Washing your rabbit too often is not recommended due to the risk of increasing oil production under the skin. At most, rabbits should be washed once per month with a rabbit specific shampoo.

5. Nutrition

Mandatory standards

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| S5.1 | Adequate water must always be available; water must be checked daily and topped up as necessary. |
| S5.2 | Rabbits must have access to a palatable diet that provides the nutritional requirements appropriate for their age and breeding stage. |
| S5.3 | Rabbits must be provided with adequate Vitamin C to maintain good health. Rabbits are unable to synthesise vitamin C (ascorbic acid) and require a daily and reliable dietary source of vitamin C. |

Guidelines

- G5.1 Rabbits are herbivores and require a nutritionally complete and varied diet that is high in fibre. A rabbit's diet should be balanced and include sufficient fibre, protein, fats, carbohydrates, amino acids, vitamins and minerals. A varied diet is critical to the wellbeing of a rabbit.

Note: Roughage also helps to maintain the health of teeth and prevent behavioural problems related to boredom such as hair pulling and barbering. A rabbit's teeth grow continually and chewing prevents teeth from overgrowing. Lucerne and clover hay are not suitable for rabbits as they are too high in calcium and protein. Grass clippings must be fed fresh (same day as clipped only) as they ferment quickly and can cause serious health problems.

- G5.2 A combination of fresh leafy greens and small amounts of citrus fruit or kiwi fruit each day are reliable sources of vitamin C. Vitamin C supplements placed in drinking water or included in pelleted feeds are less reliable as the vitamin quickly degrades when exposed to organic matter or when it comes into contact with metal.
- G5.3 To ensure the rabbit's gastrointestinal tract remains healthy, a fresh supply of roughage (e.g. meadow hay, oaten or Timothy hay) should always be available and should make up 80-90% of the diet. Preferably roughage should be provided in a suspended net or rack to avoid contamination with urine and faeces. Dry roughage should be provided even when rabbits have access to fresh grass.

Note: A guide to the amount of pellets to feed daily is 80 grams per kilo of bodyweight per day. Old, mouldy, wet or contaminated pellets should be removed from the enclosure to prevent illness. Rabbit pellets containing coccidiostats should not be fed to rabbits.

- G5.4 Feed containers should be tended daily to remove pellet dust and to ensure pellets are accessible. The container should be positioned to allow the smallest rabbit to comfortably feed.

Note: To prevent spoilage and contamination by vermin, dry feed should be stored in a sturdy sealed container in a cool location out of direct sunlight.

- G5.5 Rabbits perform coprophagy (eating of their own faeces) as a means of obtaining further nutrients; this is an essential function that rabbits should be allowed to perform for good health.
- G5.6 Quality of food is especially important for rabbits when pregnant or lactating; the amount of food provided may need to be doubled or tripled.
- G5.7 A rabbit's diet should be supplemented with fresh vegetables such as bok choy, broccoli, parsley, pumpkin, celery, carrot tops and cabbage.

Note: Spinach, beetroot, corn, rhubarb, beans, peas, bread and nuts should not be fed to rabbits.

Note: Fresh produce should be washed prior to feeding to minimise risk of parasitic or bacterial infections.

- G5.8 The amount of food a rabbit consumes should be monitored to ensure it is neither overeating nor under eating. Veterinary advice should be sought if there are ongoing issues with a rabbit(s) being underweight or overweight.
- G5.9 Where there are multiple rabbits the access to food should be monitored to ensure that each animal has sufficient space to feed.
- G5.10 Rabbits require 50-100 ml of water daily, or more if the diet is dry.
- G5.11 Water should be provided in a container that cannot be easily soiled or tipped over, such as a suspended water bottle with a sipper tip or ceramic bowl.

Note: Not all rabbits will have learnt how to drink from sipper bottles; other watering container should be used in conjunction with sipper bottles until there is certainty that sippers are being used. Sippers also need to be checked daily to ensure they are functioning.

- G5.12 Water should be replaced daily, kept clean and out of direct sunlight and should be thawed or replaced if frozen.

6. Health

Mandatory standards

- S6.1 Rabbits must be checked daily. When a rabbit's keeper or carer is away from home for longer than 24 hours, alternative arrangements must be in place to ensure the rabbit's needs are met on a daily basis. Examples of such arrangements include:
- a) boarding with a competent third party; or
 - b) providing a live-in carer for the rabbit; or
 - c) having a person provide care for the rabbit at the usual carer's home on a daily basis.
- S6.2 A person responsible for a rabbit must provide ongoing health care to maintain the good health of the rabbit.
- S6.3 Sick rabbits must be examined by a veterinarian.

Guidelines

- G6.1 If any health issues develop, advice should be sought as soon as possible from a vet, ideally with experience with rabbits.
- G6.2 Health care for rabbits should include regular:
- a) Worming
 - b) Vaccinations
 - c) Heartworm prevention
 - d) Flea control.
- G6.3 Rabbits should be desexed around 6 months of age or provided with a reliable hormone contraception under the recommendation of an experienced veterinarian. Rabbits who are desexed will not produce unwanted litters, are less aggressive and have a milder scent.
- G6.4 At a minimum, vaccination against Calicivirus is required every 6-12 months or as advised by a veterinarian, and an effective flea and worm control program with approved products for use on rabbits.
- G6.5 Rabbits who over groom themselves may develop gastric trichobezoars (hair balls in the stomach) which can cause discomfort and a blockage in the stomach. This condition should be treated by a veterinarian as rabbits are unable to vomit and cannot clear the obstruction themselves. Over-grooming should be prevented by ensuring the rabbit is not bored or stressed, has an appropriate high fibre diet, fresh water and adequate exercise. Owners should monitor food intake and be aware if their rabbit is not eating as this can be a sign of blockage and veterinary attention should be sought as a priority.
- G6.6 A rabbit's teeth should be checked monthly to ensure they are wearing correctly.

- G6.7 Rabbits with overgrown teeth may have a condition known as malocclusion; these rabbits will require regular teeth trimming by a veterinarian for their entire life. Rabbits with malocclusion should not be allowed to breed as they will likely pass on this defect to their offspring.
- G6.8 Indoor rabbits are likely to require regular nail trimming on all 4 feet to ensure comfort and prevent damage to the feet and legs. Outdoor rabbits should also have their nail length monitored; higher levels of activity and digging will help keep nails naturally shorter.
- G6.9 Rabbits can suffer from heat stress. Once the temperature exceeds 25°C you must regularly monitor your rabbit and take action to provide a cooler environment once the temperature reaches 30°C. See additional advice above in 'Environment and Housing'.

7. Behavioural and social interactions

Mandatory standards

S7.1 Rabbits are social species and must have companionship.

Guidelines

- G7.1 Companions should be of the same species wherever possible. Where this isn't possible, companionship can be provided by regular positive contact with humans.
- G7.2 Rabbits should receive sufficient time with people. Such contact should take into consideration the psychological needs of the species and the individual animal's behavioural preferences and may include talking, stroking, grooming, and playing in addition to the time spent providing food and water.
- G7.3 Rabbits should equally have time to rest and the opportunity to hide from contact with other animals and people should they choose to do so.
- G7.4 Rabbits should be provided with appropriate environmental enrichment to stimulate normal rabbit behaviour and encourage interaction with their environment.

8. Identification, lost and unwanted rabbits

Mandatory standards

- S8.1 A rabbit must not be abandoned or released into the environment. Where a keeper is no longer able to provide care for a rabbit, every effort must be made to suitably re-home the rabbit or surrender the rabbit into the care of a shelter or reputable rescue or rehoming organisation.

Note: It is an offence under the Nature Conservation Act 2014 (s138) to release any captive animal without a permit.

Guidelines

- G8.1 Rabbits should be micro-chipped by a suitably qualified person such as a veterinarian experienced in the care of Rabbits. Details of the microchip should be registered on a national microchip database.

Note: A microchip enables a rabbit to be checked by veterinarians or animal welfare shelters to enable a quick return to the keeper.

- G8.2 Keepers who lose a rabbit should act promptly to attempt to locate their lost pet for the animal's safety and to minimise the time the animal may be in distress.
- G8.3 Keepers should ensure their contact details linked to a rabbit's microchip are up to date.
- G8.4 Keepers should provide information about their lost rabbit to animal welfare shelters or rescue organisations and private veterinarians in the area.
- G8.5 Persons finding a lost domesticated rabbit should attempt to find the usual carer. This could include taking the rabbit to a local veterinary practice to be scanned for a microchip and contacting organisations that assist with animal rescue and animal shelters.

9. Breeding

Animal shelters and rescue groups are placed under immense pressure to find homes for the large number of unwanted rabbits in the ACT. Serious and careful consideration should be undertaken before allowing rabbits to breed.

Mandatory standards

- S9.1 A person must only allow a rabbit to breed after considering factors such as:
- a) the rabbit's age, physical and genetic suitability for breeding.
- S9.2 Female Rabbits must not be mated before 9 months of age.
- S9.3 Animals intended for breeding must be:
- a) checked by a veterinarian for sound health and physical maturity; and
 - b) not have any known heritable defects.
- S9.4 A person must only allow a rabbit to breed if:
- a) they have obtained veterinary confirmation of the rabbit's age, physical and genetic suitability for breeding; and
 - b) the person has the facilities and knowledge to care for the female and kits properly; and
 - c) the person has pre-arranged suitable and responsible homes for the kits; and
 - d) the person is able to correctly identify the sex of any offspring and separate them into male and female groups to prevent unwanted breeding or has pre-arranged for this to be done by a veterinarian.
 - e) the person's own lifestyle, recognising that it takes time and energy and a significant financial outlay to produce, raise and find homes for every litter.
- S9.5 A person who is in charge of a rabbit must obtain veterinary advice at any time when the pregnancy or birth is not proceeding normally. If the rabbit appears to be experiencing difficulty giving birth (such as strong birthing contractions for 30 minutes without producing a kits), veterinary advice must be sought.
- S9.6 A person responsible for a rabbit must not allow the rabbit to mate with its sibling or parent.
- S9.7 Breeding animals must not be permanently removed from its mother until it is 6 weeks of age and eating solid food, unless on veterinary advice.
- S9.8 Keepers are responsible for finding suitable homes for all kittens produced by their rabbits, including kits of have any known heritable defects such as malocclusion or splayed legs.

Guidelines

- G9.1 Potential breeding animals should be:
- a) Checked by a veterinarian for sound health and physical maturity; and
 - b) an appropriate weight to avoid added risks of dystocia, and
- G9.2 Keepers of entire rabbits should be aware that males (bucks) can reach sexual maturity from 6-8 weeks of age. If they are to be bred, female rabbits should have their first pregnancy before 6 months of age, after six (6) months of age.
- G9.3 Sexually mature rabbits should be kept separate from rabbits of the opposite sex to prevent unplanned pregnancies. Any area of confinement should meet the requirements of Environment and Housing Section 2. For companionship, an entire male rabbit may be housed with a compatible desexed rabbit.
- G9.4 The average gestation period for a rabbit is 63 days. Forty-five days post mating, owners should provide a suitable area for birthing. The area should be clean, safe, quiet, away from other animals and protected from weather.
- G9.5 From about 15 days post mating extra nesting material such as hay and straw should be provided, the doe may also pull fur from her chest, belly, flanks and forelegs to line the nest. Once nest building commences, the nesting area should not be disturbed until after young can leave the nest (approx. 3 weeks). An exception to this is if the doe excessively urinates and defecates in the nest in the lead up to the birth, or the nest becomes wet or unhygienic.
- G9.6 Other rabbits should be removed from the enclosure well before birthing commences to minimise stress on the rabbit and to prevent the birthing area being used as a toileting spot by other rabbits and to prevent death and injury to kits.
- G9.7 Kits will be born fully furred, eyes open, active and can consume semi-solid feed immediately as well as suckling milk from the sow.
- G9.8 A varied semi-solid diet should be available to kits within hours of birth to ensure they become accustomed to eating a range of food. Hay, rabbits pellets and small amounts of vegetables are suitable to feed from a young age.
- G9.9 Large open water containers are not appropriate for pups as they can drown or become soaked and cold, encouraging pups to use a sipper water bottle is ideal. Ensure it is low enough for pups to reach from birth.

- G9.10 If a rabbit does not feed her kits within a few hours of birth then veterinary advice should be sought, as supplement milk feeding may be required.
- G9.11 Mothers feeding a litter should have the opportunity from time to time to escape the attentions of their young. The provision of resting areas in the enclosure that cannot be reached by the kits is ideal.
- G9.12 Kittens are born hairless and blind and obtain everything they require from the doe. Kittens tend to feed once or twice daily and owners may not observe this happening.
- G9.13 Kittens must be checked at least twice daily and closely monitored when they leave the nest to ensure they do not become trapped or injured. while exploring their environment.
- G9.14 Kittens will start to leave the nest and explore their environment at around 3 weeks of age, they will also start to take an interest in solid food and carers should ensure that food and water can be reached by the kittens. Large open water containers should be avoided for kittens as they can drown or become soaked and cold.
- G9.15 Kittens should be able to move freely in and out of the nest. It is normal for the doe to cover the entry to the nest. Young kittens are often unable to return to the nest if they are trapped outside when the doe covers the entry, intervention may be required.
- G9.16 If a young kitten is continually found outside the nest after being replaced by the carer, the doe may be rejecting the kitten, reasons may include the kitten being sick or deformed. Carers should monitor this closely and seek veterinary advice.
- G9.17 The person in charge, such as the owner, is responsible for finding suitable homes for all pups produced by their rabbits, including pups of any unintended breeding or pups with no commercial value.
- G9.18 Pups are best raised where they have extensive contact with their carer to ensure that they will be well socialised as pets. Kittens should be trained to use a toilet tray, to accept grooming, to relate to other rabbits, and to respond positively to humans. Longhaired and semi-long haired kittens should be groomed daily from 5 weeks of age to accustom them to grooming.
- G9.19 Kittens should be weaned, vaccinated (at five weeks) and wormed prior to re-homing. This might not apply if the person has veterinary advice recommending the kitten be removed before the rabbit has reached 8 weeks of age or is eating solid food. Kittens need to be at least 6 weeks old before leaving their mother to facilitate physical, immunological, behavioural, social and mental development in the young animal.

- G9.20 Does may only feed kits once or twice daily and it is common for owners to think that the doe has abandoned her kits. It is unusual to observe a doe suckling her kits. Kits should only be completely hand reared if the doe dies, is too unwell to care for them or is damaging them.
- G9.21 A person should only permanently remove a kit from their mother if the pup has reached 3 weeks of age, except under veterinary advice.
- G9.22 Heritable defects that should be considered include malocclusion or splayed legs.

10. Transport

Rabbits may be transported by motor vehicle, rail, air, by ship or carried by a pedestrian. During transportation rabbits can be subjected to a number of distressing experiences, including loud noises, close proximity to predatory species such as dogs or cats, sudden changes or extremes of temperature, poor ventilation, cramped conditions, motion sickness, thirst and hunger.

Mandatory standards

- S10.1 The person responsible for transporting rabbits must ensure that this is completed in a way that minimises stress, does not cause injury and prevents escape.
- S10.2 A person responsible for transporting a rabbit must:
- a) Confine the rabbit in a travelling box or container which is:
 - i. Large enough to enable the normal posture, the ability to turn around and lie down; and
 - ii. Well-ventilated: there must be multiple holes on at least 3 sides to ensure adequate ventilation.
 - iii. Secure and escape-proof; and
 - iv. Lined with a suitable substrate for comfort and to absorb urine and faeces.
 - b) Provide travelling containers that do not have any projections that may cause injury to the rabbit.
 - c) Ensure the travelling container(s) are secured or restrained in the vehicle;
 - d) Ensure that protection from extremes of heat or cold are provided in the transporting vehicle; and
 - e) Not transport the rabbit in the boot or on the roof of a car; and not leave the animal unattended in a car if there is a possibility of heat stress occurring or in situations of extreme cold.
- S10.3 Transportation must be undertaken in the shortest time possible. If transported for longer than two (2) hours, drinking water must be provided in a water vessel securely fixed to the side of the container. If in transport for four (4) hours or longer, food must be provided. Animals under the age of three months and pregnant females must not be fasted for more than four hours.
- S10.4 Female rabbits with dependent young (<21 days old) or females in the latter stages of pregnancy (over 16 days gestation) must not be transported unless for emergency purposes (e.g. to see a vet).

Guidelines

- G10.1 If transporting a rabbit, the mode of transport will be determined in part by the distance to be travelled, the familiarity of the animal with travel, and its health status. When transporting a found or injured animal there

may not be time or opportunity to follow all the suggestions included in these guidelines.

Note: If transporting animals beyond the ACT the owner should check the legislation and requirements of other states and territories. It is illegal to keep rabbits as pets in some Australian states (e.g. Queensland).

- G10.2 Animals being transported should be confined in a suitable container made of rigid plastics, metal mesh (with soft resting place) or wood. Cardboard boxes should be avoided as rabbits can easily chew and scratch escape holes in cardboard containers.
- G10.3 Containers should have the whole of one face of the container open and covered with bars, metal mesh or smooth expanded metal securely attached to the container. Where multiple cages are transported placement or stacking should not obstruct ventilation.
- G10.4 Containers should be easy to clean and disinfect.
- G10.5 Access to the container should be by a sliding or hinged door adequately secured to prevent accidental opening and escape.
- G10.6 Rabbits are best transported singularly as transport containers do not allow enough space for them to move away from each other and the risk of stress and injury increases.
- G10.7 Advice should be sought from the shipping, airline or railway or coach service when transporting a rabbit interstate or overseas. International transport will be required to adhere to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and International Air Transport Associations (IATA) standards and requirements.
- G10.8 The transport container should have both a label on the top and at least one of the 4 sides with the name, address, and phone contact number of both the sender and receiver and a label saying LIVE ANIMAL, except when a rabbit is travelling with its keeper or carer in a private motor vehicle.
- G10.9 Tranquilising or sedating rabbits for transport is not recommended. Tranquillisers are prescription drugs that may have severe side effects, such as overheating or hypothermia due to disruption of temperature regulatory systems. Such drugs can only be prescribed by a veterinarian, with whom the keeper or carer has fully discussed their use.

11. Ending a rabbit's life

Note: Euthanasia is defined as the act to induce a humane death with the minimum of pain, fear or distress to the animal involved

Mandatory standards

- S11.1 Euthanasia must only occur if justified. Justifiable reasons must include one or more of the following:
- poor health and/or prognosis is poor quality of life, safety concerns; or due to specific animal management regulations and with a good reason.
- S11.2 If a person responsible for a rabbit chooses (in accordance with Standard 11.1) to have the rabbit euthanised the rabbit to be euthanised by a registered veterinarian.

Guidelines

- G11.1 A person should not, without reasonable excuse, choose to have a rabbit euthanised. This applies to rabbits in general, including unwanted rabbits and trapped rabbits.
- G11.2 Circumstances in which it might be reasonable to euthanise a rabbit includes, but are not limited to, where the rabbit is incurably ill, or injured or in pain and cannot be treated, or where a rabbit exhibits uncontrolled behaviour that makes the rabbit unable to be rehomed as set out in Standard 8.1 of this Code.