

Study calls for stricter regulation of elusive rabbit breeding industry

December 13 2018, by Emma Rayner

Rabbits are one of the most popular pets in the UK and yet little is known about where these very cute and appealing animals come from. Now a new study by researchers at the Universities of Nottingham and Winchester has shed light on this elusive industry, calling for more to be done to regulate and improve the breeding of rabbits as pets.

Deliberate over-breeding of some features of rabbits, such as flat faces, can cause distressing [health problems](#) for the animal so the researchers wanted to find out what the demand is for these rabbits, what conditions they are kept in for breeding purposes and what [local authorities](#) are doing to regulate the industry in their areas.

The Rabbit Breeder Survey found that the most commonly-sold rabbits were the extreme breeds with flat faces, around half of breeders provided smaller housing that is recommended and only 1 percent of breeders were licensed. The survey also found that most rabbits were housed singly, against [welfare](#) guidelines, and that most local councils contacted did not use their licensing powers effectively to police commercial rabbit breeding. The full results of the study are published in the journal *Animals*.

Dr. Naomi Harvey from the University of Nottingham's School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, helped to oversee the project and said: "Rabbits are the third most popular pet in the country with an estimated population of 1.5 million so it is vitally important that more is known about how these animals are kept, bred and sold. It was great that 33

breeders responded to the anonymous online survey to help us paint a more accurate picture of the type of breeding going on and also the welfare and husbandry techniques being used. Whilst most of the breeders provided good diets and toys, the fact that many rabbits were housed singly in too small conditions is concerning.

"It is clear from the Freedom of Information request to local councils in the UK that more needs to be done to make them aware of the extent of the industry and what they can do to help improve the rabbits' welfare using their licensing powers."

Rabbit Breeder Project – key findings

- From 3,446 online rabbit sale adverts – 94.5 percent were from England and only 1 percent of breeders were licenced.
- From 33 breeders surveyed – 51.5 percent used smaller housing than recommended and housed most rabbits singly, with males most likely to be housed singly in too small conditions.
- Most breeders provided toys and a diet compliant with recommended guidelines.
- The most commonly bred/sold rabbits were breeds with flat faces (brachycephalic) which in extreme cases can be bad for their health and wellbeing.
- FOI requests sent to a randomly selected but evenly distributed 40 local councils in England, Scotland and Wales revealed inconsistencies in licensing activity and very few licences applied for or granted.

Animal welfare researcher, Emma Gosling (née Gurney), carried out the work as part of her Masters degree on Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law at the University of Winchester. Emma said: "We know from previous targeted surveys that most pet rabbits are bought from pet shops or garden centres, acquired from rescue centres or from friends and

family. But around a third of breeders sell their rabbits online or direct to the public. The majority of breeders in the UK appear to be unlicensed and are therefore untraceable and unaccountable for their animals' welfare. I hope the new information gathered by my research will fill a gap in knowledge about the industry and foster a new awareness of best practice in rabbit welfare as well as improve licensing compliance among breeders and local councils."

The researchers conclude that the wide variety of standards of practice by rabbit breeders in the UK may be partly due to a lack of clear and accessible guidance available on rabbit welfare and husbandry. They are calling on organisations to make use of the new study to create interventions to safeguard the welfare of rabbits used for breeding. The team is also urging local councils to review their policies regarding the licensing of pet shops and pet breeders and step up efforts to regulate the industry.

The prevalence of unlicensed rabbit breeders advertising online is considered by the Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund to be the biggest threat to rabbit welfare right now. Whilst new licensing laws came into effect for animal breeding in October, they still do not contain detailed guidance for licensing pet rabbit breeding. The researchers are calling for the creation of approved guidelines for managing and breeding pet rabbits, particularly in England where the majority of pet rabbits appear to originate, and which currently lacks any approved guidance on how to meet the welfare needs of pet rabbits.

Although it may be a while before the breeding of rabbits can be effectively managed by the authorities, consumers can make a difference. If you're considering buying a pet [rabbit](#) or two, the advice from the researchers is check the Pet Advertising Advisory Group's guide on How to Buy a Rabbit first (<https://paag.org.uk/how-to-buy-a-pet/rabbits/>) and consider

rescuing/adopting from your local rehoming centre if you decide they are the right pet for you.

More information: Emma Gosling et al. The Status of Pet Rabbit Breeding and Online Sales in the UK: A Glimpse into an Otherwise Elusive Industry, *Animals* (2018). [DOI: 10.3390/ani8110199](https://doi.org/10.3390/ani8110199)

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