



PUBLIC PETITION NO.

PE01561

Name of petitioner

Karen Gray on behalf of Rabbits Require Rights (Scotland)

Petition title

Pet Rabbit Welfare

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to:

- Introduce a licensing regime for sellers of young rabbits similar to that for young cats and dogs.
- Initiate a ban on pet shop sales via the implementation of Ordinances Protecting Rabbits as is operational in numerous States & Cities in Northern USA & Canada.
- Create minimum standards for rabbit related products, such as housing and feed.
- Make one body responsible for overseeing and enforcing pet shop licensing regulations, e.g. the SSPCA.

Action taken to resolve issues of concern before submitting the petition

- We have actively campaigned for over 2 years for improved rabbit welfare.
- We undertake regular awareness & educational events.
- We undertake secret shopper style activities in our pet shops & other areas which have shown numerous areas of concern surrounding welfare practises & living standards.
- We have met with several MSP's & MEP's to look at ways to bring about change.
- We have a seat on the Cross Party Group on Animal Welfare Committee at the Scottish Parliament; we are joined by Rachel Todd, COE of RWA (Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund) & our Charity Patron and Veterinary specialist in Rabbit Health, Elisabetta Mancinelli, DVM, CertZooMed, MRCVS Dipl. ECZM (small mammal) as a much needed voice for pet rabbits.
- We have met with officials from the Scottish Government's Animal Welfare division to discuss our concerns & various measures that could be undertaken to improve in the overall Rabbit Welfare situation. As such we are now Stakeholders for Rabbit Welfare for future discussions & plans.
- We have met with the Scottish SPCA to look at ways to improve on the current situation.
- We collaborate with other Rabbit welfare organisations & like minded groups
- I have set up petitions seeking changes to rabbit welfare legislation. Online we have 4,800 signatures and, including the hardcopy petition, we have over 6,000.

Petition background information

Licensing of sellers of Rabbits

We are seeking to improve legislation and raise welfare standards of rabbits more in line with those of cats and dogs.

Currently there are NO controls over the breeding or selling of domestic rabbits & the situation is out of control. With an estimated 67,000 in rescue alone during 2012 (*RWF) – this number does not take into account those 'set free' in the wild - the situation is in need of urgent address to tackle the widespread neglect, over-breeding & availability of the UK's most neglect pet; considering Rabbits are also the 3rd most popular pet this is indeed sad statistic for a nation which prides itself on being one of animal lovers.

Sellers & breeders need to have their activities controlled in order to tackle the widespread availability of these domestic pets thus reducing not just the high numbers in our rescues but the neglect thereof.

This can be done by introducing regulations for the licensing of dealers for Rabbits (as exists for cats and dogs) similar to the Licensing of Animal Dealers (Young Cats and Young Dogs) (Scotland) Regulations 2009.

*RWF study Press Release

<http://www.pressdispensary.co.uk/releases/c993542/Abandoned-rabbits---its-worse-than-we-thought.html>

Ordinances Protecting Rabbits

Until the welfare crises is under control, ban the sale of all rabbits, either on line or in pet stores. This will remove the 'impulse purchase' of rabbits which causes so much neglect and help reduce the numbers in rescue centres waiting for homes.

It is not beyond comprehension nor is it impossible to ban the sale of Rabbits from our Pet Shops & other areas. Numerous States & Cities across N. America have implemented bans on the sale of rabbits, cats & dogs. Selected certified pet stores work with & are only able to offer animals from local shelters & similar organisations to those seeking a new pets, thus limiting the burden on rescue.

These Ordinances imposing bans & other restrictions on Pet Shop sales of Rabbits have been shown to both work extremely well whilst significantly reducing the numbers of sales, abandoned & unwanted rabbits in shelters; San Francisco has had this practise in place since 1978 whilst the most recent ban was introduced in New York City in Dec 2014. These Ordinances are growing in popularity the House Rabbit Society would like to see these measures widened to other areas.

<http://rabbit.org/ordinances-protecting-rabbits/>

Creation of minimum standards for Pet rabbit products

- Housing

Current UK legislation does not require that rabbits are kept in a minimum size

enclosures. Limited reference is made to the fundamental welfare needs of rabbits in the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, Promotion of welfare, Ensuring Welfare of Animals, Section 24. The wording is general with no specific species information, therefore as it stands rabbits are actually not guaranteed these freedoms.

In regards to Rabbits they should be applied as:

(a) Suitable environment - minimum welfare recommendations of 6x2x2ft Hutch / Shed with a secure attached run of 8ft for two rabbits to live comfortably. A similar sized set up is required for indoor living rabbits if not able to live 'free range'.

(b) Suitable diet - Rabbits as fibrevores daily food intake should consist of 80% hay, 10/15% fresh leafy greens & 5% high fibre pelleted commercial food.

(c) Exhibit normal behaviours - ability to graze freely, run, hop, jump, climb, stretch, groom & find comfort in companions.

(d) Housed with (or apart) with other animals (never Guinea Pigs) - as naturally social animals Rabbits thrive on company of their own kind either in pairs or larger groups. All neutered for best outcome.

(e) Protection from suffering, Injury & disease - Rabbits need Vets; they are classed as an Exotic species & should be seen by a Veterinarian competent in Rabbit Health, treatments & emergencies.

This legislation is applicable to all owners, permanent or temporary, therefore we would argue this applies to Pet Shops, breeders, boarding establishments, rescues, schools, petting zoos and so on... and as such have a legal duty to provide for the welfare needs relevant to that species.

This legislation is non-specific in comparison to other EU countries which state a minimum size enclosure is needed. Domestic rabbits are often kept as single pets (44%) and 84% of them are housed in a hutch smaller than the minimum size, 6x2x2ft with a secure attached run of at least 8ft, as recommended by the Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund (RWAFF) and the PDSA. (RWAFF; PDSA 2012) (Mullan SM and Main DC; 2006).

The vast majority of hutches & indoor cages are far too small for the needs of these highly active & intelligent animals & sold with no control over their use nor are sizes enforced under current legislation as the cruel cramped prisons they truly are. Domestic Rabbits, just like their wild cousins, are not designed to live in a confined space. In the wild they cover an area equivalent to 30 football pitches.

Additionally, an animal welfare trivia article published by the RSPCA states that under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, a hutch of less than 2ft interior height is illegal; yet retailers continue to sell, unabated, rabbit housing much smaller than the height stated.

The video below, explains why a hutch is not enough. Video link courtesy of the Happy Hoppers Rabbit Care & Welfare Youtube channel.

http://youtu.be/_vvlb-prX4I

- Diet

As strict Herbivores, Rabbits need a diet high in fibrous materials to maintain good health, namely hay/grasses, which should make up at least 80% of a Rabbit's daily food intake. Yet our pet shops continue to send out the wrong message & show a huge reliance on commercial foodstuffs which in turn can lead to various health issues.

Being fed an improper diet, which generally begins with the breeder, is often followed onto the shop, setting a bad example for any potential owner to follow, can & will lead to many costly health problems for both the Rabbit & the unsuspecting owner.

Recent studies, carried out by The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies has shown that Muesli Mix style commercial foods when fed to rabbits cause considerable health problems to those animals.

Indeed, I myself recently found myself the owner of a (new) rabbit in July 2014. Bought from a very poorly run pet shop, in the period of 4 months from purchase she was hospitalised at the Royal Dick Vet Rabbit Clinic on 4 occasions & underwent 2 invasive operations to return her back to an acceptable level of health, at a cost of £1285! Her health issues were entirely avoidable & caused solely through being fed an inappropriate diet. Reports were made to the appropriate bodies yet no action was taken & my complaint not upheld, even though it quite clearly states in the terms of licence, that the business is not allowed to sell sick animals & to provide for them appropriately.

Additionally, rabbits are not designed to eat egg, dairy, animal derivatives, nuts, seeds or corn yet our shelves are teeming with highly inappropriate & harmful treats as suited to this species.

If there were legal obligations on ALL retailers, on line and in pet stores to sell products that are suitable for rabbits and will not cause welfare issues then welfare would improve dramatically.

Enforcing pet shop licensing

There is no set standard for Licensed Pet Shops & as such wide variations in conditions & welfare practises go on undeterred often leading to poor standards; these issues, relating not just to rabbits but numerous other species, have been previously documented yet still they continue unheeded.

Presently standards differ between LA's and to make this more uniform one body , with a clear understanding of animal welfare legislation and issues should be responsible for this.

We have come across many issues in Pet Stores, where complaints have been made very rarely any action or improvements are undertaken. Overall there seems to be either a widespread reluctance or inability to enforce the terms of licence. Most of which are very basic in nature.

It is in the utmost interest for business & the pet owning public alike for a National standard to be set through the implementation of the Model Conditions for Pet Vending Licensing 2013 across all 32 Local Authorities in Scotland and for one body e.g. Scottish SPCA Inspectors to oversee the terms of Licensing on these businesses.

A recent meeting with the Scottish SPCA it was noted that it is the duty of an Scottish SPCA Inspector & not the LA to investigate & oversee Pet Shop Licensing in Inverness. This has been shown to work well with little to few areas of concern for the animals, public or businesses alike. If this is true, and agreeable with SSPCA, then it would be in the paramount interest that their Inspectors take over this role, their own CPD (Continual Personal Development Training) to include Rabbit Welfares & to set a Nationwide standard for all pet shops.

Further to this, for the purposes of enforcement specific to Rabbit Welfare, it was stated that they (SSPCA) would require clear Codes to enable them to apply the appropriate legislation to run alongside proposed Rabbit Welfare Guidance via Scottish Government.

Unique web address

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/GettingInvolved/Petitions/PE01561>

Related information for petition

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/o3mxyntyvsym5do/AADlhWHw0ISWDLtobdulYLBia?dl=0>

Do you wish your petition to be hosted on the Parliament's website to collect signatures online?

YES

How many signatures have you collected so far?

1

Closing date for collecting signatures online

10 / 04 / 2015

Comments to stimulate online discussion

Please sign this petition & help us change the fact that pet rabbits are the most neglect pets in the UK despite being the 3rd most popular. We all have very busy lives and often see things that upset us but we don't think we can make a difference, but we can! Just by taking a moment to sign this petition you will be helping towards ending the common place neglect suffered by many thousands of pet rabbits'.

There are 1.3 million pet rabbits in the UK but a whopping 97% of people surveyed did not realise how expensive they are to care for over their lifetime. (PDSA PAW report 2014).

Thousands of pet rabbits in the UK spend their entire lives confined to hutches or indoor cages the same size, or smaller than, the DEFRA guidelines - which state that hutched meat rabbits should have a minimum space of 0.75m². This equates to a hutch with a floor space of 4ft x 2ft, and as hutches this size or smaller are commonly available it will shock many rabbit owners to discover their own pet is in fact worse off than a battery rabbit.

All the while the rabbit owning public continue to be sold neglect at every turn & by buying these products, continue to believe we are doing right by our pets; why else would they be for sale if harmful?

Many breeders and sellers continue to give the wrong advice and tell new owners that rabbits are happy kept alone and to spend the majority of their time in a hutch when both of these things are in fact cruel.

As such the sale of the animals, breeding, services & the sale of related products which are detrimental to their health urgently needs to be addressed, regulated & their welfare needs actively enforced & protected by law.

With an estimated 67,000 rabbits in Rescue during 2012 (RWAFF study) our re-homing centres throughout the UK are struggling to cope both financially & emotionally, not

only due to sheer number of rabbits needing new homes but the numerous complex health issues many arrive with. There simply aren't enough new homes to allow this practise to continue unheeded & as such, this 'industry' must be regulated.

As a nation of Animal Lovers, Scotland has the powers to set a precedent for the rest of the UK to follow by both tightening existing legislation & introducing new powers to ensure the welfare needs of these long suffering domestic pets are met and by doing so put an end to this out of control cycle of neglect.

We need to wake up to the fact that Rabbits are endearing, highly intelligent, inquisitive, active, agile, clean, funny & loving animals, which makes them the ideal companion pet for numerous owners & as such should be given the same level of protection as our cats & dogs enjoy & be treated accordingly. Rabbits have specific & complex needs; they are neither 'caged' pets nor suitable for children & as such these outdated viewpoints simply have to change!

Whilst improved education & awareness into the many issues that surround Rabbit Welfare is key, more proactive measures in the form of legislation to protect their welfare is required to not only curb the high numbers of rabbits available in our marketplaces, but reduce the burden on our rescues & lessen the high levels of (unintentional) neglect thereof.