



14 June 2015

Public Petitions Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh

### **Petition PE1561 – Pet Rabbit Welfare**

Make Mine Chocolate! UK Rabbit Welfare (MMCUK) is a campaign organisation that has been running in the UK since 2006. Originally started in 2002 in America, its' specific mandate is to campaign against the impulse sale and purchase of rabbits around Easter, Christmas, etc and to help educate new and existing owners about the correct care of domestic rabbits.

We welcome the opportunity to submit our views on the above petition, started by Karen Grey on behalf of Rabbits Require Rights (Scotland).

It is evident to rescues and charities the current legislation surrounding domestic rabbits is insufficient; either cumbersome to put into practice or simply out of date; an estimated 67,000 rabbit pass through rescue annually according to the latest RWF figures.

In addition to those rabbits surrendered to rescue, an unknown number of unwanted pet rabbits are released into the wild (to face a certain death as they are ill-equipped to survive), suffer a life-long cycle of neglect or mistreatment, or worse.

The issues surrounding this welfare crisis are complex, but much stems from history, dating back to the Victorian age where rabbits were kept in small hutches in the garden and bred for meat; they were cheap to rear and easy to keep.

Sadly this 'cheap and easy' perception generally remains today, as does the hutch as the primary type of housing sold for rabbits, despite many advances in the understanding of the needs of this complex creature.

Make Mine Chocolate! UK carried out the largest survey (to date) of rabbits entering rescue around the UK during 2010-11. Data from 4235 rabbit entering rescue was obtained, and the following are just some of the findings from the survey:

- 52% of rabbits entering rescue came from a shop/garden centre
- Pet 'superstores' were the most common point of acquisition



- Almost a quarter of rabbits entering rescue were bought for a child, despite rescues and charities making a clear statement that rabbits are generally not suitable pets for children. Education at the point of acquisition is paramount!
- 20% of rabbits entering rescue were originally bought as a single rabbit, despite rescues and charities giving a clear statement that rabbits are companion animals; they need a partner rabbit for their own wellbeing. This is unlike other 'traditional' pets.
- 55% of rabbits entering rescue were originally bought in the spring. This relates to Easter, the 'fluffy bunny factor' and child 'pester power'. That fact that pet shops stock up on young rabbits during the spring and particularly Easter in order to maximise sales helps to exacerbate this issue.
- Only 18% of rabbits entering rescue were originally bought during the *combined* autumn and winter months. This difference to the spring acquisition figure is staggering and endorses the presence of opportunistic sale of rabbits during a time when people are more open to acquisition.
- 34% of rabbits entering rescue did so because their primary carer, a child, lost interest and didn't want the pet any longer.
- The most shocking statistic of the survey revealed that 59% of rabbits entering rescue were surrendered within one year of purchase, with 36% surrendered within 6 months. This shows that many sales and purchases are made without due diligence to the long term commitment required. Education by suitably qualified personnel at the point of acquisition is essential, otherwise a sale should not be made.

This survey has been accepted as credible evidence and data used in the RSPCA's 'The welfare state: five years measuring animal welfare in the UK 2005 – 2009' report, published in 2011.

The survey confirms the views held by many rescues and welfare groups; rabbits are often sold as children's pets, there is a wide misunderstanding as to the level of care needed, and rabbits are often seen as 'disposable' pets.

Without the correct monitoring and control at the point of acquisition, this situation will not improve. Both a licencing and educational regime is required, and only those qualified to provide rabbits should be allowed to do so.

We feel an educational program with qualification for those providing rabbits is best carried out by an independent welfare organisation, such as the SSPCA/RWF etc, rather than a retail-based organisation where there is potential for a trade-off between welfare and profit.

There must be a minimum standard on all rabbit related matters – from care, to products being supplied for their use. Without defined standards it is difficult to apply enforceable legislation, so a broad set of standards relating to all rabbit matters is required.



These standards must relate equally to bricks and mortar pet shops, online businesses as well as 'free ads' and individuals/businesses only supplying via social media sites. A bad practice reporting system should also be created in order for the general public to help highlight any concerns to the relevant body so they may be investigated promptly and acted upon.

Whilst there have been some improvement in rabbit welfare over the last 10 years, progress is painfully slow and overall improvement small. A significant step change in the approach to improving rabbit welfare is now needed to stop the suffering of many thousands of rabbits annually; if the current legislation and welfare acts were working as they should, this petition would not have been needed, but sadly its' need is very clear to all those involved in rabbit welfare.

We fully support this petition and hope that the Scottish government is able to take action in order to improve rabbit welfare.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to submit our view on this matter, and we welcome any opportunity to work together with relevant bodies to help move rabbit welfare in the right direction.

Yours sincerely,

Lisa Whitty

Make Mine Chocolate! UK