



# Rabbit Welfare in Public-Facing Settings



## A Brief Overview for Consideration

At Nibbles Rodent & Rabbit Rescue, all of our work is guided by current welfare evidence and our experience caring for hundreds of rabbits and rodents. This includes understanding not just their physical needs, but their behavioural and emotional wellbeing.

## Rabbits Are Prey Animals

Rabbits are naturally cautious, prey species. Their survival instincts are based on avoiding handling, sudden movement, noise, and exposure.

In public-facing environments such as farm parks and petting zoos, rabbits are often:

- Frequently handled by unfamiliar people
- Exposed to unpredictable noise and movement
- Unable to retreat or control interactions

Even when they appear calm, rabbits may be experiencing **fear-based shutdown** or **learned helplessness**, rather than true relaxation.

## Welfare Needs: Space and Control

Modern welfare guidance is clear that rabbits require continuous access to adequate space and the ability to express natural behaviours.

For a pair of standard-sized rabbits, this means:

**A minimum of 3m x 2m x 1m (height) of permanent, accessible space at all times**

This space allows for:

- Running, jumping, and binkying
- Choosing when to interact or withdraw
- Maintaining physical and mental health

Environments where rabbits are:

- Confined to smaller enclosures
- Regularly removed for handling
- Lacking consistent access to safe retreat areas

...do not meet these welfare needs.



*Rabbits need continuous space to move freely, places to hide and feel secure, and enrichment to support natural behaviours.*

## Handling and Public Interaction

Regular handling, particularly by multiple unfamiliar people, can:

- Cause ongoing stress and anxiety
- Prevent natural behaviours
- Lead to long-term welfare issues

There is increasing recognition across the sector that **handling-based interactions are not appropriate for rabbits**, even where intentions are positive.

### Recognising Stress in Rabbits

Rabbits often show subtle signs of stress that can be easily missed or misunderstood. These may include:

- Freezing or remaining very still when handled
- Wide eyes, visible whites of the eyes
- Rapid breathing or a tense body posture
- Flattening themselves against the ground
- Attempting to escape or sudden struggling
- Thumping or excessive alertness
- Reduced appetite or withdrawal after interaction



In some cases, rabbits may appear “calm” or tolerant of handling. This can be a sign of **fear-based shutdown**, where the rabbit has learned that escape is not possible.

Understanding these signals is essential to ensuring their welfare is protected.

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## A Welfare-Led Alternative

Positive change does not require removing rabbits from public spaces entirely. Instead, a shift in approach can significantly improve welfare:

- Moving from **interaction-based experiences** to **education-led experiences**
- Providing **large, enriched enclosures** that rabbits have constant access to
- Ensuring **guaranteed retreat spaces** where rabbits are never disturbed and out of public view
- Ensuring that dogs and other potential predators are **not permitted** to enter areas where rabbits and rodents are housed
- Using **staff-led talks and signage** to educate visitors about rabbit behaviour and welfare
- Incorporating **enrichment-based activities**, such as allowing children to create healthy forage bags which can then be offered to the rabbits, enabling visitors to observe natural feeding behaviours without direct handling - **Create your own forage bag** leaflet

This approach:

- Reduces stress for the animals
  - Aligns with modern welfare understanding
  - Enhances visitor awareness and experience
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## A Growing Conversation

Concerns around rabbit welfare in public-facing environments are increasingly being raised across the sector, supported by organisations such as the Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund.

### Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund – “Don’t Bug Bunnies” campaign

This reflects a broader shift towards:

- Evidence-based care
- Welfare-led practices
- Recognising rabbits as complex, sentient animals with specific needs



## Our Position

At Nibbles, we do not place rabbits in environments where they are unable to:

- Access appropriate space at all times
- Control their interactions
- Live in low-stress, predictable conditions

Our focus is on ensuring rabbits can thrive, not simply exist, in environments that meet both their physical and behavioural needs. You can read more about the wider issues with animals in these settings and our call for change on our public page:

- **Petting Zoos and Farm Parks: When Interaction Becomes Stress**



If further information or discussion would be helpful, we are always happy to support conversations around improving rabbit welfare. More information about welfare-based rabbit care can be found on [our website](#), and you are very welcome to contact us directly at [team@nibbles.org.uk](mailto:team@nibbles.org.uk). Thank you for taking what we have shared into consideration—We hope this information supports ongoing efforts to improve welfare standards for rabbits.

## About Nibbles Rodent & Rabbit Rescue

*Nibbles Rodent & Rabbit Rescue is a registered charity (No. 1168657), established in 2015 and based in West Wales. We specialise in the rescue, rehabilitation, and rehoming of rabbits and rodents, alongside advocating for improved welfare standards through education and evidence-based guidance.*

*Our approach is grounded in both practical experience and current behavioural science. Our founder holds a BSc in Animal Behaviour, and through our work we have cared for hundreds of rabbits and rodents, giving us direct insight into the impact that environment, handling, and husbandry have on their wellbeing.*

*We are committed to promoting standards of care that allow these animals to truly thrive as companions.*