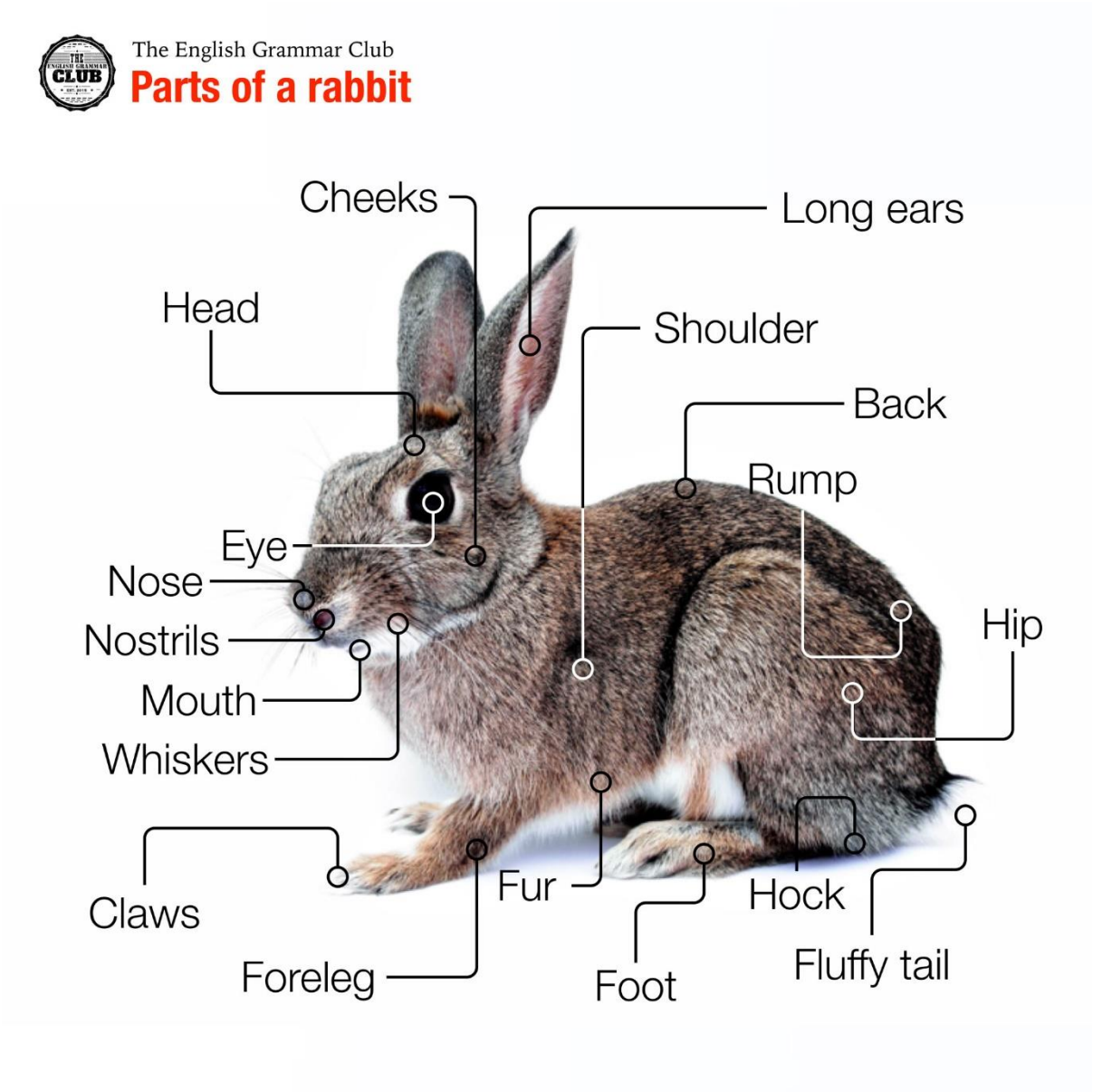
St Marks CofE Primary School Farm

A Guide to Caring for Rabbits

Introduction to Rabbits

Rabbits are highly intelligent, inquisitive animals and pet rabbits can be taught to respond to commands using positive reward-based training. Rabbits come in a variety of breeds, shapes and sizes, and each bunny has their own unique personality. They typically live for 8 to 12 years, but some may live for longer.

Rabbit Anatomy



Rabbit Husbandry Guidelines

The Animal Welfare Act 2006

By law, anyone who keeps animals is placed under a duty of care by the Animal Welfare Act 2006. This is a piece of legislation that sets out the requirements you must meet in order to keep your animals healthy and safe. The act sets out 5 animal welfare needs that you must adhere to when keeping your rabbits. This booklet will help guide you to meeting these needs.

The 5 animal welfare needs:

- need for a suitable environment.
- need for a suitable diet.
- need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns.
- need to be housed with, or apart, from other animals.
- need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury, and disease.

Now, let's look through the 5 animal welfare needs individually.

A Suitable environment

Rabbits are active animals, so they need to be able to hop, run, jump, dig, stand fully upright on their back legs, and stretch out fully when lying down. They need regular and frequent opportunities to exercise every day to stay fit and healthy, as well as an appropriate place to toilet.

Inside environment – The hutch

A hutch must be provided for shelter from poor weather as well as a safe place to rest. The floor of the hutch must be covered with a suitable dry substrate, such as wood shavings or megazorb. You should top this up or replace it when needed.

The hutch must be well ventilated, dry, and draught-free and they need to be protected from predators and extremes of weather and temperature. Living in draughty, damp, hot, poorly ventilated, or dirty environments can cause suffering and illness.

Finally, the hutch and everything inside must be regularly cleaned and disinfected to remove parasites and prevent disease. The rabbits' toilet area(s) should be spot-cleaned every day. The whole home should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected regularly – once a week. Cleaning is potentially stressful for rabbits so after cleaning, a small amount of the used but unsoiled bedding should be placed back into the toilet area of the hutch as this will smell familiar to the rabbits and help to reduce the stress caused by cleaning. Only non-toxic cleaning products should be used (such as Safe4), and the housing should be dry before the rabbits are let back in it.

Outside environment – The run

They need to be provided with enough space to be able to run, hop, jump, and stand up on their back legs. The run should provide opportunities for exploration and enrichment, such as rabbit safe toys, platforms to jump on or a dig box to allow for natural digging behaviours.

Shade must be provided as protection from the sun or bad weather. The plastic tarp must be over a minimum of 1/2 of the run at all times. Any food or water in the run must also be placed under the sheltered area to avoid it getting wet in the rain or too hot in the sun.

You must ensure that any weeds growing in the grass of the run are rabbit safe and non-toxic.

A Suitable Diet

Rabbits' teeth grow continuously throughout their life and need to be worn down and kept at the correct length and shape by eating grass, hay, high quality pellets and leafy green plants – if they don't eat the right sorts of food they can suffer from serious dental disease and gastrointestinal issues. They produce two types of droppings – hard dry pellets, and softer moist pellets which they eat directly from their bottom, and which are an essential part of their diet.

Hay

This is the **most important part of a rabbit's diet** and makes up around 80% of their daily food consumption. Rabbits must always have **unlimited** access to fresh, dust-free feeding hay, which must be replenished on a daily basis. Placing the hay into a rack above floor level helps to keep it clean.

Pellets

High quality commercial rabbit nuggets make up 10% of your rabbits daily dietary needs. For a healthy adult rabbit, allow 25g (an egg cup-full) of nuggets per kg of each rabbit's body weight per day, but take care to adjust the amount given according to individual rabbits' needs, based on their lifestyle, activity levels, age, and state of health. Muesli-style foods are associated with health problems in rabbits and should not be fed. Feeding muesli can increase the risk of rabbits developing serious teeth and stomach problems (including obesity), which can cause suffering.

Water

The rabbits must have access to a source of fresh water, which must be changed on a daily basis. In hot weather, the water may need to be changed multiple times a day. To help keep the water cool, place it in a shaded area. In cold weather, you must ensure that the water doesn't freeze over.

Fresh vegetables

Offer them a variety of safe, washed leafy greens or weeds every day ideally five or six different types. Safe plants include cabbage, kale, broccoli, parsley, and mint. **Don't feed them lawn mower clippings as these can upset their digestive system and make them ill**. A rabbit's diet doesn't naturally include cereals, root vegetables or fruit but you can give them apples or root vegetables like carrots, in very small amounts as an occasional treat. Avoid feeding any other treats as these may harm your rabbits. Below is a list of some safe and unsafe fruit and veg for rabbits, there are many more though (too many to list here!), so if it's not on the list please research before feeding it to the rabbits! However, always introduce new foods and make any necessary changes gradually to avoid upsetting their digestive systems.

Safe Fruit and Veg

- Apples (do not feed the seeds or pips)
- Cabbage (in moderation)
- Spinach
- Watercress
- Rocket
- Kale
- Spring greens
- Courgette
- Carrot
- Banana (as a treat)
- Bell peppers (do not feed the seeds)
- Broccoli (in moderation)

Unsafe Fruit and Veg

- Avocado
- Fruit seeds, pits, or stones
- Citrus fruits
- Onion
- Rhubarb
- Rice
- Aubergine
- Potato
- Mushrooms
- Iceberg Lettuce
- Canned fruit or vegetables
- Lawn mower clippings

Exhibition of normal behaviour patterns

Rabbits are highly social, playful, and inquisitive animals and need to interact and play with other rabbits. Many rabbits also enjoy interacting with people through gentle petting and positive reward-based training (such as clicker training).

In order to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of the rabbits, and allow them to exhibit species specific behaviours, you must provide them with enrichment. There are lots of different enrichment ideas you can give your rabbits, and a great place to look is on Pinterest!

A few examples include:

- Platforms to jump on
- Carboard boxes stuffed with hay
- Dig boxed filled with untreated top soil
- Tunnels
- Shredded newspaper
- Rabbit safe chew toys

Enrichment is a great and fun way to bond with the rabbits as you watch them explore, play, and have fun! Creating enrichment would also be a fun lesson for the children!

The need to be housed with, or apart, from other animals

Rabbits are social animals and must always be around other rabbits. You must never keep a solitary rabbit, unless direct a vet for medical purposes. Rabbits must always be in a group of at least a minimum of two individuals. Only ever house as many rabbits as you have space for to avoid overcrowding and aggression due to lack of space.

Protection from pain, injury, suffering and disease

Rabbits feel pain in the same way as other mammals, including people, but they are not very good at showing outward signs of pain and may be suffering a great deal before you notice anything is wrong. Healthy rabbits are 'bright-eyed', alert and interested. You should always contact a vet if you're concerned about the health and welfare of your rabbits. Here are some common problems to look out for.

A change in the way a rabbit normally behaves can be an early sign they are ill or in pain. If a rabbit is not eating or is more quiet than usual, they are highly likely to be ill, or in pain, in which case you should talk to your vet immediately.

Rabbits are vulnerable to many infectious diseases and other illnesses, especially dental disease. They can catch deadly infectious diseases from wild rabbits so you should prevent your rabbits from having contact with wild rabbits or areas where wild rabbits have been. Rabbits must receive yearly vaccinations against Rabbit (Viral) Haemorrhagic Disease (R(V)HD), RHD2 and Myxomatosis.

Feeding the rabbits the correct diet of mainly hay and/or grass will help prevent a lot of common diseases such as dental and gut disease. Check that the rabbits are eating every day and that they are passing plenty of dry droppings. If the rabbit’s eating or drinking habits change or the number of droppings gets less or stops, talk to your vet straight away as they could be seriously ill.

Daily Health Checks

Twice a day, usually in the morning when you first let the rabbits out, and last thing before putting them to bed, you should visually health check them to ensure they are not showing any signs of illness or disease. This will allow you to manage and deal with any health issue before the problem becomes serious. You should physically health check you rabbits at a minimum of once a week.

What to look out for during the daily health checks:

Eyes
Your rabbit's eyes should be bright and clear. There shouldn't be any discharge or dullness. If you notice any discharge, it could be that your rabbit has scratched its eye, or, if it is cloudy then the problem could be related to its teeth. Either way, if you notice that your rabbit has a problem with its eye, a trip to the vet is recommended.

Ears
The ears should be free of scabs and sores, brown material, or waxy buildups. They should generally be clean, and free of wounds.

Nose
If you spend a few moments watching your rabbit you should see its nose twitching regularly. As with the eyes, the nose shouldn't be runny. If it is, it could be a sign something isn't right.

Teeth
Should not be overgrown, chipped or broken. The top and bottom two should both be the same length as the one directly next to it.

Body
Is the skin free of wounds, lumps, and swellings? Does your rabbit squirm when you touch a particular area of their torso or back?

Fur
Part the fur with your fingers and check for white flakes, brown material, sores, wounds, and insects.

Feet
There shouldn’t be any lumps between your rabbit’s digits, and the feet should be free of cuts and swellings. The fur on the bottoms of the feet should be free from matting. Their claws should also be a suitable length and not curling.

Rear End
Your vet is the best person to speak to if your rabbit's rear is frequently soiled. It is especially important to check twice daily for any soiling in the summer. At this time of year areas of dirtiness will quickly attract flies to lay their eggs, which hatch into maggots within a matter of hours. This causes a condition known as flystrike, and it can very quickly prove fatal to your rabbits.

Health checklist

- **Make sure your rabbits are vaccinated regularly – take them for a routine health check with your vet at least once a year.** Vaccinations protect them against myxomatosis and Rabbit (Viral) Haemorrhagic Disease (R(V)HD) There is also a vaccine available to protect against R(V)HD2, which is a new strain of the disease. Your vet will advise how often your rabbits should be vaccinated.
- **Rabbits that are stressed are much more likely to become ill** so try to minimise unnecessary stress, provide constant access to safe hiding places and watch to see if their behaviour changes or they show regular signs of stress or fear, in which case, seek advice from your vet or a qualified animal behaviourist.
- **Check your rabbits for signs of illness or injury every day.** Make sure this is done by someone else if you are away.
- **In warm weather check the fur and skin around your rabbits' rear end and tail area twice a day,** as urine staining or droppings that are stuck will attract flies, which can lay eggs and cause 'flystrike', which is often fatal.
- **Front teeth and nails should be checked at least once a week** as these can grow quickly but only a vet should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth.
- **Give your rabbits treatment for external and internal parasites** (e.g. fleas and worms) as necessary, as advised by your vet.
- **Only use medicines that have been specifically recommended for your individual rabbit by a vet** – some medicines used for other animals can be very dangerous to rabbits.
- **Groom your rabbits' coats regularly to keep them in good condition.** If you are unsure how to groom your rabbits properly, ask your vet for advice.

Consult your vet immediately if you suspect your rabbit is in pain, ill or injured.

Cleaning

The rabbit hutch and run need to be cleaned regularly to prevent disease. It is important to keep your rabbit hutch clean as a build-up of droppings will cause a build-up of faeces and urine which will attract flies. This could lead to flystrike which can be fatal in rabbits.

The rabbit hutch should be spot cleaned on a daily basis, removing any visible faeces, and replacing substrate as necessary. The hutch will need a full clean every week. To do this, remove all the substrate and disinfect the hutch with the Safe4 disinfectant spray. Then place fresh substrate into the hutch. Cleaning is potentially stressful for rabbits so after cleaning, a small amount of the old but unsoiled bedding should be placed back into the toilet area of the hutch as this will smell familiar to the rabbits and help to reduce the stress caused by cleaning.

You will also need to check the smaller hutch run, as well as the larger run, for any faeces and remove these on a daily basis. This is important, not only to keep the hutch and run clean, but also to prevent people from treading in rabbit poop and walking into back into the school.

Any waste from the rabbits must be put into a black bin bag. After use, the bin bag must be tied off and placed into the black wheely bin on the farm.

Food and water feeders must also be cleaned regularly to prevent the build-up of bacteria.

Common Rabbit Illnesses

Flystrike
Flystrike occurs in the summer and is potentially lethal. If the rabbits rear-end and house isn't kept clean, the rabbit's fur can become soiled with droppings. The droppings make an ideal place for flies to lay their eggs. Within 24 hours the eggs will have turned into larvae and started to burrow into the rabbit. This is extremely painful and unpleasant for the rabbit, and sadly it will have to be put to sleep by a vet. You can reduce the chance of flystrike by keeping the hutch clean and making sure that your rabbit's diet isn't too rich.

During the summer months it's advisable to check your rabbit's behind twice a day for buildups.

Heatstroke
If your rabbit is lying down and hyperventilating, and it's very warm, then it may be suffering from heatstroke. Mild cases can be treated by wiping your pet with a cool (but not freezing cold) towel, and by moving it out of direct sunlight. Severe cases my need a vet.

Overgrown Teeth
One of the key symptoms of overgrown teeth is that your rabbit will stop eating. They may also dribble and have sores around their mouth and on their body where the teeth have cut them. They will need to be taken to a vet to have their teeth worn down.

Sticky Bottom Syndrome

Sticky Bottom Syndrome occurs when the rabbit is producing too many caecotrophs (a particular type of dropping that rabbits re-digest). Caecotrophs are dark, look moist and are sticky so they can easily get stuck on the hairs around a rabbit's bottom, leaving it permanently dirty. The most likely cause is that the diet is too rich. The solution is to cut down on pellets or rabbit mix and increase the amount of hay (fibre) in the diet.

This condition could also occur if your rabbit has become overweight and it is unable to reach round to clean its fur. If you suspect this, you should start to exercise your rabbit and adjust its diet. It's probably best to speak to a vet about this.

As soon as there is any sign of a sticky bottom, try to solve the problem as it can start to attract flies. This can not only make your rabbit's life unpleasant but can ultimately prove fatal if flystrike occurs.

Worms

Worms can set up home in your rabbit - you may notice them in your rabbit’s droppings, or around it’s anus. A rabbit-friendly wormer will rid your pet of them.

Bloat

If your rabbit’s stomach is firm, and your pet is not moving around as normal then they could have the extremely dangerous condition known as bloat. This condition is caused by a problem in the gut that causes your rabbit’s innards to fill up with gas. This needs to be treated immediately, so you’ll need urgent veterinary attention.

Bladder Stones

If there is blood in your pet’s wee, they squeak as they urinate, or if they aren’t urinating at all then you will need to get your pet to the vet as quickly as possible, as they could have bladder stones (or, in female rabbits, womb cancer also causes the first symptom). Ensure you are not feeding a diet high in calcium.

Daily Husbandry Guidelines

The rabbits require two visits per day. One AM and one PM visit. Always ensure that you shut the door of the run behind you after entering/ leaving!

You must wash your hands and disinfect your shoes (using Safe4) before and after working with the rabbits.

Daily AM Jobs: 8am – 8:30am

- The Rabbit run must be checked daily to ensure that there are no areas where the rabbits could injure themselves or any areas that they could escape from. Check there are no signs of entry from vermin.
- The run must also be checked for damage which may cause harm to staff or children, such as loose strands of wire.
- Any signs of damage must be reported to senior staff immediately. The rabbits must not be let out the hutch if you deem the run to be unsafe or unsuitable for containment.
- Once the run has been checked, the rabbits can be let out of the hutch and into the run.
- This is a great chance to visually health check the rabbits. Look out for any signs of injury, illness, or disease. Any signs of illness must be reported to senior staff immediately.
- Next, please ensure the rabbits are fed their nuggets in the AM visit. Roughly 2 egg cups of nuggets per rabbit, per day is enough. Also ensure they have lots of fresh, clean hay.
- The rabbits will now need fresh water. The water bowl should be kept inside the hutch.
- Wear gloves and spot-clean the rabbit hutch and run. Remove any soiled bedding and poo from the tray of the rabbit house and replace with a light layer of bedding, as this is changed daily. Also spot clean the run picking up any faeces on the grass. Dirty bedding and faeces must go into a black bag, which should then be tied off and placed into the black wheely bin.

Daily PM Jobs: 6pm – 6:30pm

- Visually health check the rabbits looking out for any signs of injury, illness, or disease. Any signs of illness must be reported to senior staff immediately.
- Now, round up the rabbits and lock them inside the small run beneath the hutch. Please leave the sliding door (at the top of the ramp) open, as the rabbits shouldn't be shut into the house section all night.
- They also need fresh veg daily. A handful of veg each is plenty; this can be given in the PM visit to give them something to eat overnight. Also ensure they have lots of fresh, clean hay.
- Spot clean the run picking up any faeces on the grass. Put any poo into a small white plastic bag, which should then be tied off and placed into the black wheely bin.

Rabbit Care Calendar

The daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly jobs for caring for rabbit.

Daily	**Weekly - Fortnightly**	**Monthly**	**Yearly**
Check the run for signs of damage	Full clean and disinfect hutch	Nail trimming (only if needed)	Vaccinations
Visual health checks	Enrichment 3 – 4 times per week		
Food, fresh water and fresh veg			
Spot clean hutch and run			
Close the main metal gate (hutch doors stays open so they are free to run around)			

Rabbit Shopping List

Below is a guide to the products you will need on a regular basis to care for the rabbits.

- Rabbit safe woodshavings
- Safe4 disinfectant
- Black bin bags
- Disposable gloves
- High quality pellets
- Feeding Hay
- Fresh vegetables

St Mark's CofE Primary School Farm

Animal Risk Assessment: Domestic Rabbit

Risk Assessment		Species: Domestic Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus domesticus*)					
St Mark's CofE Primary School		Assessment by: Tom Parker				Date: 7th June 2023	
Review Date: June 2024		Approved by: Charles Applegate				Date: 20th June 2023	
Hazard/Risk	**Who is at risk?**	**Likelihood**	**Severity**	**Risk Rating**	**Mitigations**	**Additional Control Measures**	**Completed**
Zoonotic diseases	Staff, Students, Parents, Visitors	1	6	6	- Do not to touch your face or put anything in your mouth whilst working with the rabbits. - Wash hands immediately after working with the rabbits. - Eating and drinking is not permitted on the farm. - Hand-washing signage is in place to remind everyone to wash their hands. - Hand gel may be used for immediate visible contamination, but additional handwashing remains compulsory. - Fresh cuts and grazes are covered before working with the rabbits. - Use the disinfectant Safe4 spray on your footwear when entering or leaving the rabbit run. - Anyone with a compromised immune system are not permitted to work with the rabbits. - The rabbit hutch, run and equipment is disinfected regularly. - Students are not permitted to play in areas where rabbit waste is disposed of. - All rabbits must receive their yearly vaccinations against myxomatosis, RVHD and RVHD2.		

Injury from the rabbits - Bites - Scratches	Staff, Students, Parents, Visitors	2	1	2	- Anyone, including students, handling the rabbits are trained by competent staff in the correct handling and restraint procedure. - Do not hold the rabbits near your face when handling. - Do not handle the rabbits unless absolutely necessary. - Do not poke fingers through the mesh of the run. - Keep noise level to a minimum when handling the rabbits. - Claws are trimmed if necessary. - Medical treatments, husbandry procedures (such as nail trimming) as well as prophylactic healthcare (such as faecal screening) is to be carried out by trained staff only. - Any rabbits that are consistently aggressive towards the children will be re-homed. - Any injuries from the rabbits are washed and immediately attended to by a first aid trained member of staff.		
Minor Injuries from the rabbit enclosure and equipment - Scratches - Cuts - Splinters - Bruises - Pinched fingers in bolts and padlocks - Trips and falls	Staff, Students, Parents, Visitors	2	2	4	- The rabbit hutch and run are checked on a regular schedule for maintenance issues. - Wear gloves if handling any broken wire or mesh. - Lightweight food bowls, drinkers and appropriately sized tools are used. - Students are briefed on safe tool use. - Tools are always stored correctly and safely after use. - Students are not permitted to ride in wheelbarrows. - Report/ treat any broken or stiff padlocks or bolts immediately. - Keep walkways and working areas clear from unnecessary debris, clutter, and equipment. - Suitable footwear must be worn on the farm. - Running is not permitted at any time on the farm.		

Major Injuries from the rabbit enclosure and equipment - Head or eye injury - Back injury	Staff, Students, Parents, Visitors	1	6	6	- The rabbit hutch and run are checked on a regular schedule for maintenance issues. - Lightweight food bowls, drinkers and appropriately sized tools are used. - Anyone working with the rabbits is briefed on safe tool use. - You are not permitted to ride in wheelbarrows. - You are only permitted to carry heavy items, such as bedding, if you have received the correct training. - Students are prohibited from carrying heavy items. - Items too heavy to carry must be transported by other means, such as in a wheelbarrow. - Keep walkways and working areas clear from unnecessary debris, clutter, and equipment. - Suitable footwear must be worn on the farm. - Running is not permitted at any time on the farm.		
Allergic reactions and respiratory problems. Inhalation of: - Dust, fur, or bedding materials. - Food such as hay	Staff, Students, Parents, Visitors	1	4	4	- Anyone with known allergies or respiratory issues are not permitted to carry out potentially risky tasks such as adding or removing bedding to the rabbit hutch or feeding hay. - Students are reminded in their hygiene and safety briefing to let a member of staff know if they feel unwell at any point during or after working with the rabbits. - A low dust bedding will be used for the rabbit hutch. - A low dust hay will be used to feed the rabbits.		

Illness or injury from contact with rabbit health care products - Allergic reactions - Skin irritation - Poisoning	Staff, Students, Parents, Visitors	1	5	5	- All rabbit cleaning and health care products are stored safely in accordance with COSHH regulations. - Any products not covered by COSHH must be stored and used in accordance with the manufacture's guidelines and/or product data sheet. - Students are only permitted to use low-risk products. - Gloves must be worn, when necessary, as per manufacturers guidelines for any products used. - Fresh cuts and grazes are covered before working with health care products. - Any rabbit medications must be mixed and administered and stored with strict supervision by staff. - You wash your hands immediately upon completion of cleaning/ health care tasks.		

Risk Rating = Likelihood x severity	
Likelihood: 1 = highly improbable occurrence 2 = occasional occurrence 4 = fairly frequent occurrence 6 = frequent and regular occurrence	Severity: 1 = negligible injuries 2 = minor injuries 6 = major injuries 10 = multiple major injuries

Risk Rating = Likelihood x Severity
Greater than 17 (requires immediate action or activity must stop)
12 – 16 (High risk)
8 – 11 (Moderate risk)
4 – 7 (Low risk)
1 – 3 (Very low risk)