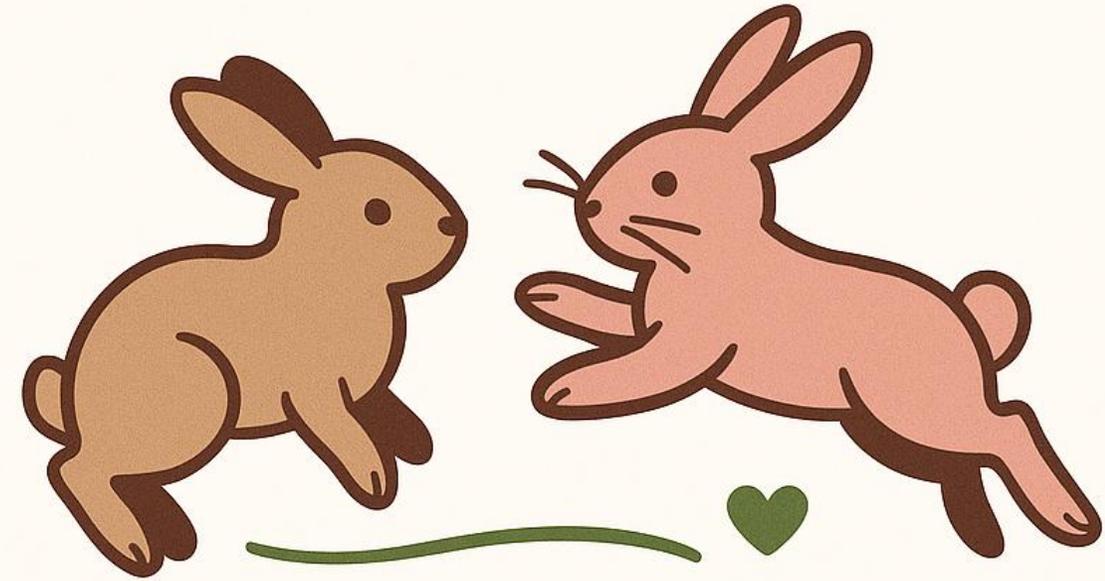

Rabbits in Law and Policy

From the Meat Trade to Military Training —
How rabbits “disappear” in law
and how we build a global abolitionist response



HOP TO SAVE RABBITS

WHO WE ARE – AND WHY THIS CAMPAIGN GREW

- Founded in 2024
- UK-Germany based, volunteer-led rabbit and hare advocacy organisation
- Work with rescues, campaigners and other charities
- Campaign grew because rabbits kept falling through legal and policy gaps.
- We call this the **category gap**:
the same rabbit loses protection when the label changes

FROM ONE CAMPAIGN TO CROSS-BORDER ACTION

- **South Africa (2025):** submission against draft rabbit meat regulations
- **Ireland (2026):** strategy submission on rabbit and hare protection
- **UK (2025):** Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (EFRA)
evidence on trade and production gaps
- **Australia (2025):** challenge on humane rabbit control in Tasmania
- **HTSR position:** Rabbit welfare gaps appear across borders,
but effective advocacy must respect local law, local voices, and local context.

HOW WE ADVOCATE ACROSS BORDERS

- Support local campaigners — do not speak over them
- Adapt arguments to local law, culture and context
- Bring evidence, solidarity and practical help
- Challenge cruelty without cultural condescension

HTSR position: Effective cross-border advocacy

needs moral clarity, cultural humility and respect for local voices.

FRONTLINE RESCUES: WHY THEIR EVIDENCE MATTERS

- Rescues see what happens when rabbits fall through legal gaps
- [Southern Cape Bunny Haven](#) and Special Needs Older Rabbits Sanctuary ([SNORS](#)) care for rabbits discarded by exploitation and neglect
- Rescues see what happens when rabbits fall through legal gaps



Photo: Courtesy of Southern Cape

UK RABBIT RESCUES ARE UNDER SERIOUS STRAIN

- Major charities report rising rabbit admissions and abandonment pressure
- Rescue centres are under pressure, and some rabbits wait a long time for homes
- Facilities and capacity are under strain
- The exact national scale is unclear — but the strain is real



HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT RABBITS?

- How smart are they?
- How do they show feelings?
- What do they need to live well?
- **Quiz:** Typical rabbit lifespan?
- 4–8 years
- 8–12 years
- 12+ years
- For lawyers: it depends



Credit: "Cute bunny rabbit" by Kristoffer Trolle, CC BY 2.0

RABBITS: SHY, RETIRING – AND MISUNDERSTOOD

- Prey animals hide pain
- Quiet does not mean easy is good
- Fear and illness often go unseen
- Hidden suffering leads to neglect
- Misread rabbits are under-protected



CHLOE AND SANDY CHALLENGE THE STEREOTYPE

- Rabbit guardians know they are not “easy starter pets”
- Chloe shows choice, cues and responsiveness
- Sandy showed the importance of company, routine and bond
- Rabbits are intelligent, social companions
- The law has not caught up with who they are



THE "GAP SPECIES" CHALLENGE

- Same rabbit. Different labels. Different rules, different protection.
- Rabbits fall between legal categories instead of being protected consistently across them.



Credit: Black Tan Rabbit Illustration

by Namyongmi, Wikimedia

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WHEN THE LABEL CHANGES, PROTECTION CHANGES

- As a pet, a rabbit is seen as a companion
- In the meat trade, a rabbit is treated as production
- In military training, a rabbit is treated as a tool
- In pest control, a rabbit can disappear into a different legal frame
- The animal is the same — but the protection changes

SOUTH AFRICA: WHEN RABBITS BECOME “MEAT”

South Africa, 2025: [draft rabbit meat regulations](#)

- Draft rabbit meat regulations treated rabbits as food animals
- Meat-production rules can narrow how rabbits are protected
- A companion animal should not lose protection because it is reclassified for use
- This is what happens when the label changes first and welfare comes second

HTSR position: A rabbit should not lose protection because it is reclassified for use.

MILITARY TRAINING: WHEN RABBITS BECOME “TOOLS”

- Rabbits killed in UK survival training
- Treated as training materials, not companion animals
- Use replaces companion-led protection
- UK example of a wider global pattern

HTSR position: No rabbit should be treated as a tool for training.

RABBITS ARE STILL BEING LET DOWN

- Many pet rabbits still live alone
- Some are still housed with other species
- Rabbits are too often treated as low-needs pets
- In reality, they are social, intelligent animals with complex needs
- Better understanding must lead to better protection

SCOTLAND: RABBITS ARE STILL A BLIND SPOT

- [Animal Welfare \(Licensing of Activities Involving Animals\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2021 \(SSI 2021/84\)](#)
- In Scotland, a rabbit breeding licence is only needed at a higher threshold than for dogs and cats
- Rabbit breeding licence needed only at **6+ litters** (compare: dogs and cats: **3+ litters**)
 - Our ask: **6** → **3**
- Yet the rules still treat them as a lower-priority case
- That is another sign that rabbits are not taken seriously enough in law

HTSR position: If rabbits breed quickly and are sold commercially, the threshold should not be higher than for dogs and cats.

SCOTLAND: WHAT COUNCILS REPORTED

- **Freedom of Information responses: 31 of 32** councils replied
- **28** reported no rabbit-breeding licences
- Only **11 licences** recorded nationwide
- **0** welfare or enforcement actions reported
- Rabbits are barely visible in the system
- Rabbit-specific enforcement data is limited
- Low visibility makes targeted protection harder

HTSR position: If the system cannot see enough, it cannot protect well enough.

Source: [HTSR Scotland licensing analysis](#)

RABBIT ABANDONMENT: PREVENTION FIRST

- Abandoned rabbits rarely survive outdoors
- Prevention is kinder than rescue
- Advised changes:
 - Breeder licensing
 - Mandatory microchipping
 - Meaningful penalties
 - Education, rescue support, better data

HTSR position: Prevention must come before abandonment becomes a rescue crisis.

Source: [HTSR Rabbit abandonment reports](#)

CATAPULT ATTACKS: CRUELTY AS ENTERTAINMENT

- Rabbits and hares injured and killed with [catapults](#)
- Attacks filmed and shared online - violence becomes normalised
- Rising pattern documented by [Target Crime Not Wildlife](#)
- Cruelty can spread through copycat behaviour
- Policy responses should include tighter controls on sales, ammunition and online promotion

HTSR position: Cruelty should not be made easier to commit or easier to spread.

Source: [HTSR Catapult cruelty](#)

WHY RABBITS TEST THE ANIMAL WELFARE STRATEGY

- Rabbits appear in many legal categories: companion animal, farmed animal, wildlife/pest control, research animal, training tool
- That makes them a test case for whether protection is truly
- If protection changes every time the label changes, the system is failing the animal

HTSR position: Rabbits are a test case for whether animal protection is truly consistent.

Source: HTSR briefing to APGAW on the Animal Welfare Strategy (confidential; not for public circulation)

THE FIVE ASKS (2026–2027)

In our Animal Welfare Strategy briefing,

we asked the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to deliver:

1. A clear legal welfare code for rabbits
2. Stronger breeder licensing and online sales rules
3. Better protection for wild rabbits and humane control standards
4. Reform on rabbit farming and imports
5. Yearly public reporting on rabbit and hare welfare

HTSR position: These are practical, deliverable reforms to close the rabbit category gap.

Source: HTSR briefing to APGAW on the Animal Welfare Strategy (confidential; not for public circulation)

HOW CHANGE STARTS: RABBIT

- **R — Recognise the gap:** name rabbits and hares
- **A — Assemble evidence:** rescues, FOI, consultations
- **B — Build the case:** labels change protection
- **B — Bring one clear ask:** code, licensing, reporting
- **I — Involve allies:** rescues, vets, local voices
- **T — Track delivery:** meetings, deadlines, follow-up

HTSR position: Change grows when evidence, allies, and clear asks work together.

WHAT YOU CAN DO (TODAY)

NGOs / charities:

- In consultations and evidence, name rabbits and hares explicitly
- Back enforceable standards: welfare code, licensing, traceability, and safeguards.

Supporters / public:

- Email your MP: ask for fairer legislation for rabbits and hares
- Sign + share the [“Ban Rabbit Meat” petition](#)
- Follow [HTSR](#) and stay involved

HTSR position: Coalition-building turns concern into pressure, and pressure into change.

THANK
YOU

Sandy and Chloe

Jean Burton

Dr Eberhard & Dr Emma Kerr

Southern Cape Bunny Haven

SNORS