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Conference or Workshop Item

Title: Rabbit relinquishment to two UK rescue centres and beyond

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Introduction:

Three studies in Canada, the USA and Sweden (Ledger, 2010; Cook and McCobb, 2012; Ulfsdotter, 2013 respectively) all conclude that owner related factors, including inability or lack of interest in caring for a pet rabbit, were the most common reasons given for the relinquishment or rehoming of rabbits, with smaller numbers relinquished for behavioural reasons. An estimated 800,000 domestic rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus domesticus*) are currently kept as companion animals in the UK (PFMA, 2016) and one rabbit welfare organisation estimated that 67,000 rabbits are relinquished to rescue centres in Britain each year (RAWF, 2012). There has been no published data to date to explore the reasons for relinquishing pet rabbits in the UK or exploring other routes that may be used to relinquish this popular pet.

Aims of the study:

- Identify routes used to relinquish pets, including rabbits, in the UK.
- Explore reasons for relinquishment of pet rabbits in the UK.
- Identify 'at risk' characteristics for pet rabbits relinquished in the UK.

Methods

Survey 1 Public online survey (POS)

- The survey was distributed via www.SurveyMonkey.co.uk from 14th April to 18th May 2014 and targeted pet owners using social media and a news site.
- Participants were asked to identify pets species they had experience of keeping, and if they had experience of giving up each type of pet. They then selected the sources used for relinquishment from 'rescue centre', 'friends / family / colleague', 'pet shop', 'advert (online or print)', or 'other' with the option to describe.

Survey 2 - Rabbit Owner Survey (ROS)

- Ninety participants from this first survey, that had given up a rabbit, volunteered to take part in this survey which was emailed to participants and collected data via Google Forms (© 2015 Google Inc.), with responses representing 18 owners of 25 relinquished rabbits.
- Participants were asked to provide the characteristics of the rabbit/s relinquished (age, gender, neutered status, colour) and the reasons for relinquishment.

Survey 3 - Rescue centre survey (RCS)

- Rescue centres were randomly selected to represent sites across the UK, however the response rate was low (4.4%) Two sites, one in Northern Ireland and one in North Yorkshire contributed data. Data was collected using Google Forms (© 2015 Google Inc.).
- Data collected included, the characteristics of rabbits relinquished (as ROS and also health status on arrival) and the reasons for relinquishment during 2013, as this data is readily available at such sites.

Results

Where are rabbits relinquished to?

- Of 1,149 rabbit owners completing the POS, 11.6% had experience of rabbit relinquishment.
- Almost three times as many rabbit owners had experience relinquishing to '**friends, family members or colleagues**', (60%) than to rescue centres (22%). Other routes used were pet shops (14%), through 'online or print adverts' (13%) and other (4%) (Figure 1). This was similar for other pet species reported also (Figure 1).

Why are rabbits being relinquished in the UK?

- Reasons for relinquishment were significantly different between the two survey methods (ROS and RCS) ($p < 0.001$, Fisher's exact) (Figure 2).
- Of the 122 rabbits relinquished during 2013 to the two rescue centres that took part in RCS, the majority were relinquished as a result of the owner having **too many rabbits or an unplanned litter** (30%) and **housing problems** were also commonly reported (24%).
- Housing problems were also reported in the ROS (28%), however **behaviour issues** (including unsuccessful bonding) were most commonly reported (44%).

Are there 'at risk of relinquishment' characteristics in rabbits?

- Relatively equal numbers of males to females were relinquished (RCS 52% male, 48% female; ROS 52% male, 40% female, 8% could not recall).
- The RCS highlighted a significant difference in the **neutered status** of rabbits, following a one-sample Binomial test, with less rabbits being neutered on arrival ($p < 0.001$, 72% not-neutered), however the a large number of rabbits relinquished to the rescue centres were under 6 months (36%, 56% were adults, > 6 months but < 5 years). The opposite was seen for the ROS (64% neutered; 28% not-neutered) and more rabbits were adults (84%).
- White (22% RCS; 24% ROS) and black (24% RCS; 20% ROS) rabbits were the most common colours of rabbits relinquished.
- The majority of rabbits reported in the RCS were healthy, however 39% had health issues at the time of relinquishment. (Figure 3).

Discussion and Conclusions

- ⇒ Attempts to quantify the number of rabbits relinquished to rescue centres by sampling rescue centres alone may be conservative as other routes are seen to be more commonly used.
- ⇒ Interventions to support rabbit owners who may be considering relinquishment should be available outside of rescue centres so that people utilising other routes can utilise these.
- ⇒ Reasons for relinquishment in the RCS were similar to findings in other countries, however behavioural issues, predominantly social grouping issues, were more common for the participants of the ROS.
- ⇒ Reasons given for relinquishment to the ROS and the RCS were significantly different, which may represent the sampling method bias or factors surrounding rescue centre intake rules, i.e. younger rabbits may be given priority.
- ⇒ Behaviour issues relating to rabbit social groupings appear to be a factor affecting relinquishment for some rabbit owners and so interventions to support better matching of rabbits, and to facilitate more successful bonding may be beneficial.

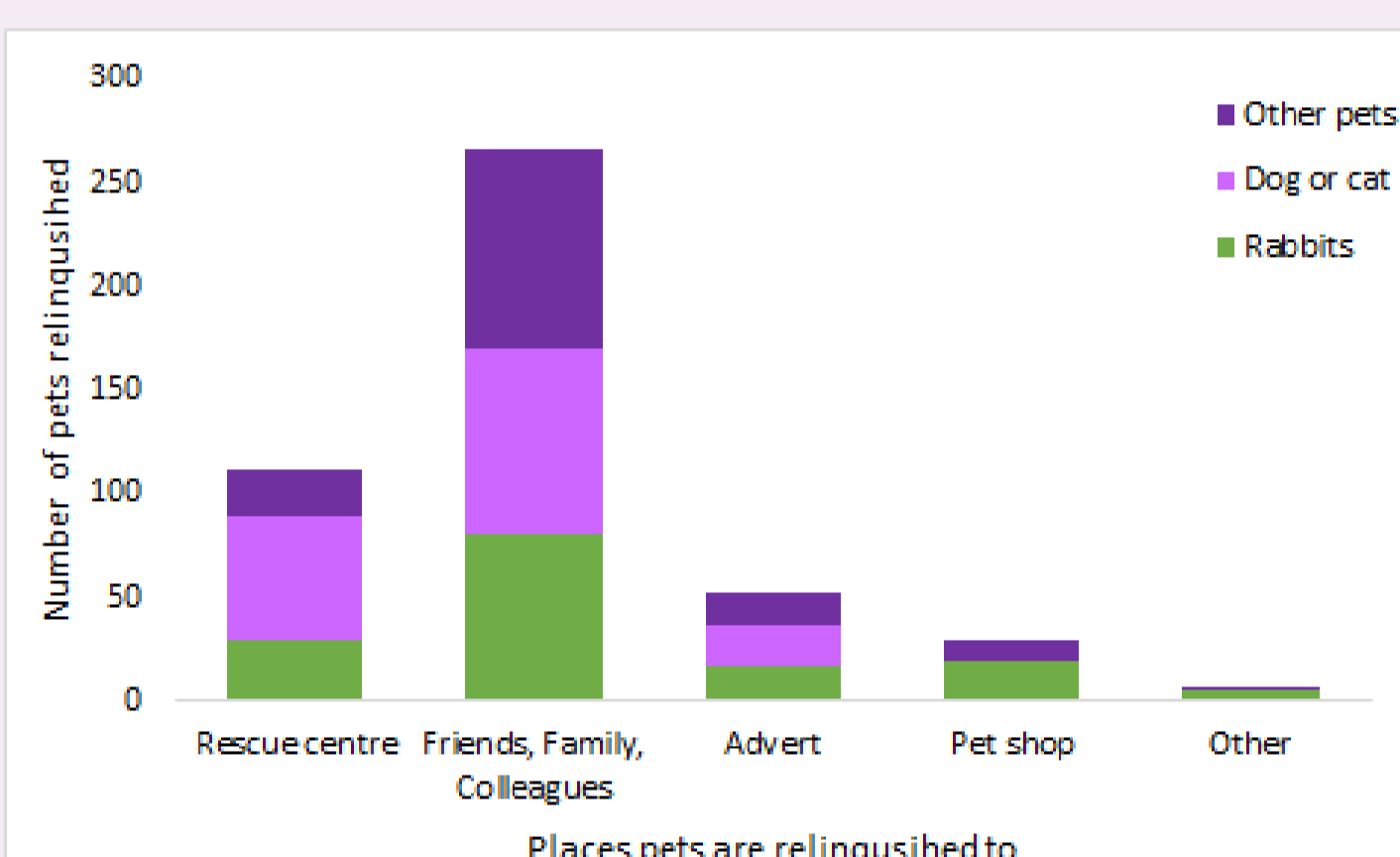


Figure 1 - Responses to POS showing routes used to relinquish pets (n=1,277 includes, 133 rabbit owners, 161 dog and cat owners, 139 'other' pet owners).

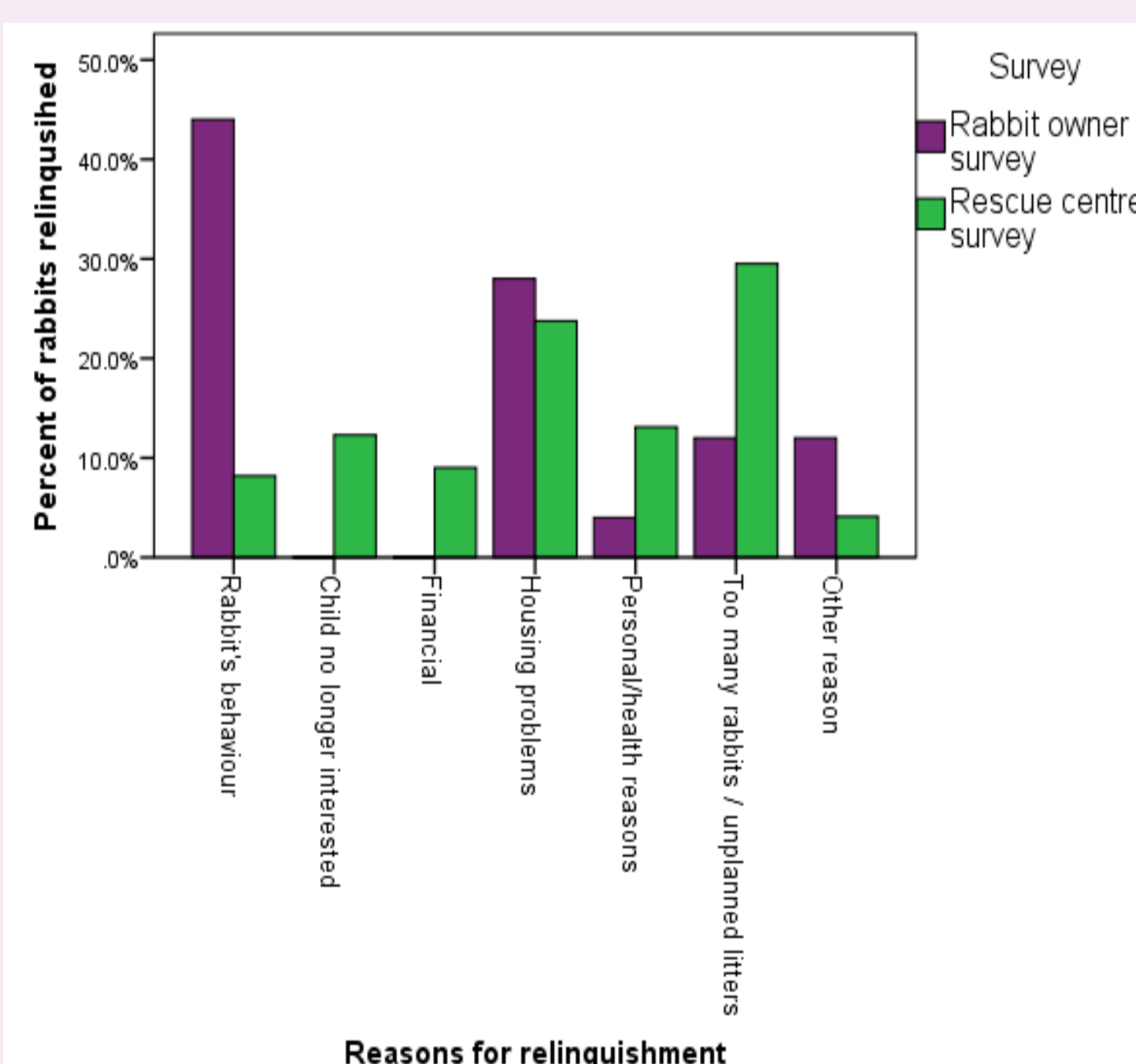


Figure 2 - Reasons for relinquishment of rabbits as reported through two different survey methods, online rabbit owner survey (ROS) (represents 25 rabbits) and those relinquished to two UK rescue centres (RCS) (n=122 rabbits during 2013). Significantly different reasons were reported via each survey method, ($p < 0.001$, Fisher's exact).

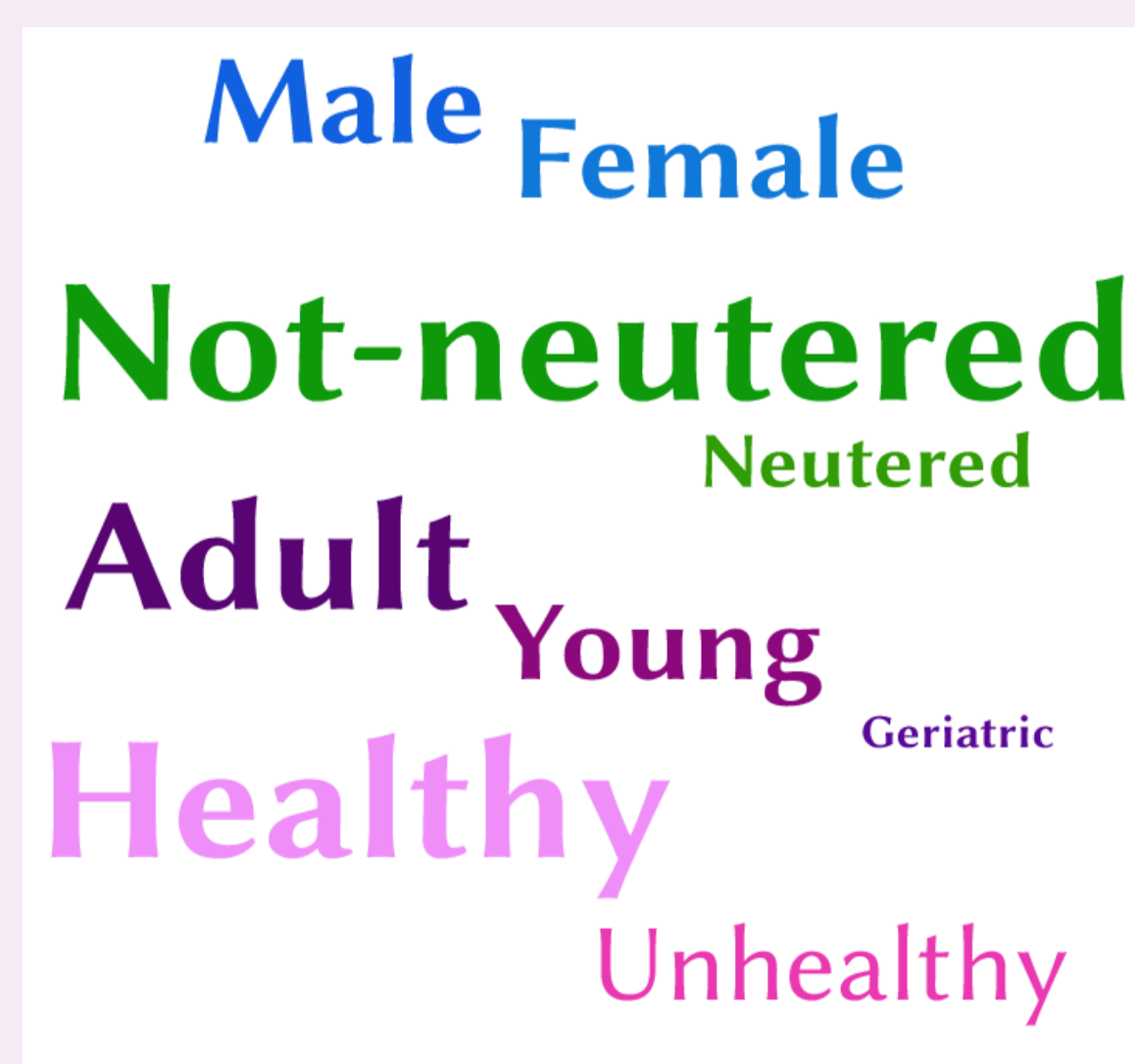


Figure 3 - Characteristics of 122 rabbits relinquished to two UK rescue centres (52% male, 48% female; 72% not-neutered, 28% neutered; 56% adult, 36% young, 8% geriatric; 61% healthy, 39% with health issues).

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