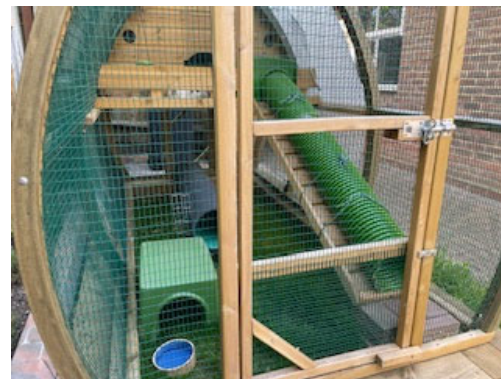




Caring for a blind and/or deaf pet rabbit

Meet one of our FAB Clinicians member's pet rescue rabbit's!

Fig (primarily white in colour) is a spayed female who happily lives in secure outdoor housing, as shown below, with her pale harlequin-coloured older castrated male companion, Sebastian. Fig is assumed to be completely blind and deaf and born this way, but is otherwise healthy. In contrast, Sebastian has normal sight and hearing for a rabbit.



Blind pet rabbits are thought to cope well considering that wild rabbits spend much of their time in dark underground warrens, but pet rabbits face challenges that wild rabbits do not and they do not have access to complex warrens. Our Fab Clinician's member gives the following tips to caregivers of deaf and/or blind rabbits, to help their rabbits live happy lives with minimal risk of being startled or feeling more vulnerable than a sighted and/or hearing rabbit.

1. If you suspect that your rabbit is blind and/or deaf, have them checked by a Veterinary Surgeon incase this is related to an eye, ear or other disorder and incase it is resulting in pain.
2. As with any pet rabbit, ensure that your rabbit's housing is predator-proof, as a blind and/or deaf rabbit may be less able to detect or locate danger and access effective sanctuary. Fig's housing is



covered in strong mesh which is also buried under the soil and grass. The combined indoor and outdoor housing has numerous sanctuary areas and shelters. Fig and Sebastian can access indoor and outdoor areas as they wish; day and night.

3. Provide your rabbit with tunnels, tubes or cardboard boxes (if they don't eat excessive amounts of cardboard) with **two** entrance and exit areas, as rabbits like to seek sanctuary which does not risk them becoming blocked in. The plastic Zippi® rabbit shelter by Omlet (<https://www.omlet.co.uk/>) is also good for this, plus it provides a sturdy platform for rabbits to stand on.

4. Keep your rabbit's basic resources (sanctuary areas, shelter, litter-trays, hay for eating and water) in the same areas, so that they are easily located and your rabbit can mentally map its environment. Adding additional enrichment such as different types of suitable foods scattered around their housing for foraging is fine, as they can use their other senses to access this.

5. Ensure that your rabbit has a bonded rabbit companion of the opposite gender; ideally **both** neutered. The Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund (RWAF) website (<https://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/>) gives rabbit bonding advice, or rescue centres such as Wood Green (<https://woodgreen.org.uk/>) and some independent rabbit rescues offer a rabbit-bonding service. If pursuing this through an independent rescue, ensure that the introduction and bonding method is that recommended by RWAF rather than a 'stress-bonding' method.

6. Rabbits have an excellent sense of smell and often position themselves down-wind of scent so that they can make predictions. Their housing should give them the space to exploit this; including from elevated platforms of a safe height. Rabbits should have the general housing height to stand on their hind-legs and fully extend their body vertically, so that they can 'periscope' to gather scent information. A blind and deaf rabbit should also be able to make environmental predictions if exposed to vibrations. This is a sense well-developed in rabbits as their behaviour is the same as that of wild rabbits, who are vigilant of vibration both below and above ground.

7. When opening up or entering your rabbits housing to i.e. give them fresh food, clean them out or interact with them, try to alert them to your approach in advance. This is to avoid them becoming startled and potentially associating this fear with you, and so that they can predict their housing to be a safe space (if they are startled by you even once, they will never know when this may repeat). Take a moment to stand up-wind of the breeze direction until you notice your rabbit recognise and hopefully react positively to your scent, or create nearby gentle vibrations; again until your rabbit notices this. Fig's caregiver has a small lean-to shed near the rabbit housing which contains straw, hay and dried herbs etc. She opens and closes the metal latch to this until Fig is aware of the vibration. In this scenario the latch vibration enables Fig to predict that her housing will be opened and something tasty will be offered. In turn, Fig's emotional response to her caregiver is a good one.

8. If your rabbit is not blind **and** deaf, you can gently alert them to your approach based on whichever of their senses is functional.

9. You can also talk to your blind and/or deaf rabbit's companion when approaching (assuming that the companion rabbit is sighted and hearing), as an associated change in their demeanour may allow your blind and/or deaf rabbit to predict your approach.



10. Avoid reaching out and touching your blind and/or deaf rabbit due to the risk of this startling them. Instead, you can let your rabbit approach you or your hand and initiate a physical interaction if they want to. A gentle cheek or nose rub may then be enjoyed more than being stroked on their head or body, as cheek and nose areas are associated with social grooming in rabbits.