

# CAMPAIGN UPDATE

Welcome to another Campaign Update, keeping you informed of our constant fight to make things better for bunnies.

## Capone Campaign - Annual report 2022

This report relates to activities of the RWF in relation to animal welfare matters during 2022. This pertains to operations carried out under the remit of the ongoing Capone Campaign and covers activities in the UK. Where information has come to light indicating issues outside that jurisdiction, intelligence has been passed to those areas.

### Introduction

This was another record year for the RWF in relation to the identification, processing and reporting of suspected animal welfare offenders.

We smashed the previous record for cases raised in 2021, and sadly the first month of 2023 has already seen an exponential increase in cases raised in Jan 2022, meaning that this trend looks set to continue unabated.

2022 has been a disappointing year for Animal Welfare developments in general, with hoped-for tightening of regulations and increased protections seemingly on the backburner in Parliament and a possible relaxation in standards, coming as the Government seeks to dilute previously-held European legislation that could well impact upon UK animal welfare and allied standards.

As with the trend through Covid, we have seen an evident increase in new breeders across all sites, and this is unlikely to reduce in the coming year since - traditionally, times of austerity and recession will always cause people to seek innovative and less than legitimate ways to earn money, and pet breeding seems to be an ongoing favourite for low-risk/higher gain in relation to enforcement likelihood versus untaxed earnings potential.

- **The year in case numbers:**

**2022** - Cases progressed and considered - 660 **(37.5% increase over 2021)**

- **Contrasted with:**

**2021** - Cases progressed and considered - 480 **(34.5% increase over 2020)**

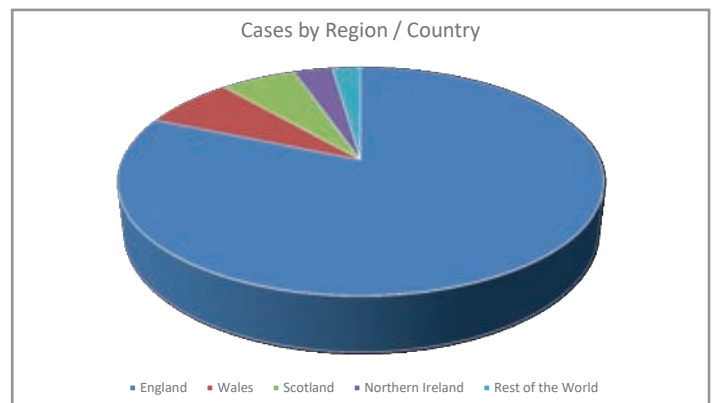
**2020** - Cases progressed and considered - **357**

This shows that between 2020 and 2022 there has been an 84.9% increase in cases coming to our attention.

**18** Summer 2023 | **Rabbiting On**

### Cases by region/country

Country	Case Count
England	537
Wales	48
Scotland	40
Northern Ireland	20
Rest of the World	15



### Case disposals

Agency / Investigation Body	Number of referrals
Police	30
Local Authority (Benefits or Planning)	4
Local Authority Licensing checks and liaison	6
Action Fraud	2
HMRC	17
DWP	5
Planning Inspectorate	2
RSPCA / SPCA	6
Crimestoppers	61
LA TS / EH	43
Other agencies	11
<b>Total referrals</b>	<b>187</b>

Approximately 28% of the cases raised in 2022 could be sufficiently identified and traced to provide viable intelligence to the agencies detailed above; of the remaining 72% of those cases around 250 are still open and in development, the remaining 223 cases had to be closed due to a lack of identifying data or usable intelligence.

## Case type

Subject / Legislation	Number of cases
Agriculture Act	1
Animal Health	1
Animal Welfare	508
Tax Fraud(s)	2
Other frauds	7
Customs - Tobacco Fraud	45
CITES - Endangered Species	13
Illegal Hunting and Poaching	19
Consumer Protection legislation	2
Public Order	2
Drugs offences	7
Fisheries legislation	2
Food Safety and Standards	2
Immigration offences	11
Money Laundering	3
Offensive Weapons	1
Planning legislation	2
Road traffic matters	1
Theft	2
Counterfeiting	26
Veterinary Medicines legislation	3

## Trends

### • New breeders/traders

There has been a trend in "new breeders" appearing again this year, with 86 new traders or breeders recorded across a number of platforms; in this instance, new relates to breeders who have started within the year; this is very close to the 2021 figure of 91 new breeders.

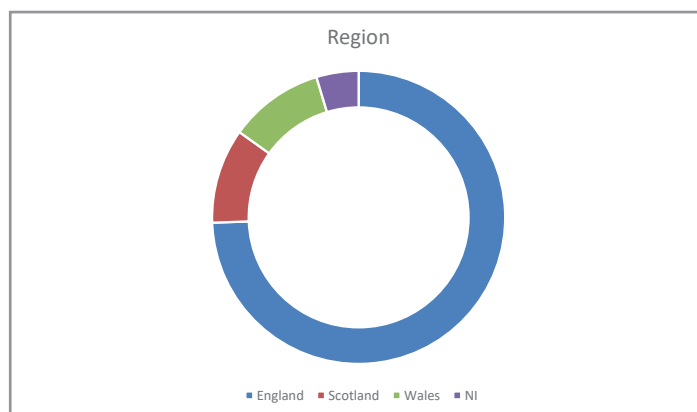
Some of this may still be part of the Covid-effect noticed in 2020 and 2021, whereby lockdown and economic issues seems to have pushed people to "black market" methods of income, but the majority appeared after lockdown "ended" in most jurisdictions in early 2022, so we are now looking potentially at the start of a new phenomenon of recession/austerity money-making schemes.

If this is the case, it is very worrying since this could result in large numbers of amateur breeders flooding the market with rabbits that have not been health-checked, vaccinated or the prospective buyers vetted and advised regarding rabbit-care.

A caveat here is that these figures relate to a finite number of platforms - if this trend is being replicated across multiple sites, the numbers could be far higher.

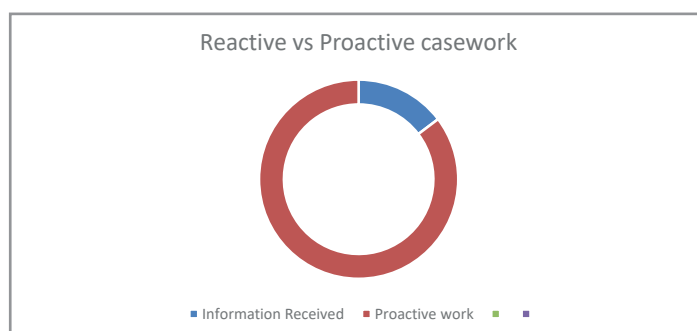
## Breakdown of new traders across the UK

- England - 64
- Scotland - 9
- Wales - 9
- Northern Ireland - 4



## Self-generated vs proactive

- Reactive (Information received and complaints) - 97
- Proactive Casework (self-generated) - 563



## Case studies

### • Persistent offender identified:

In 2017 when I started in this role, I identified a persistent trader in the South-East, who, despite her persistence, could not be traced to an address. I have been regularly monitoring this trader's behaviour, through various sites and trading names, but have always struggled to find them, or obtain a full name, despite some clues as to likely locations.

I was finally able to track them down this year, via their daughter who started to trade on a well-known platform earlier in 2022; unlike the parent(s), the daughter had a significant profile on social media, which included a post about her new car, pictured on a driveway of an address I had previously traced regarding the "phantom" trader. This allowed me to link the two, confirm their identities and using various open sources eventually track the "senior" trader to an address which has enabled me to make the necessary referrals to have them dealt with by the local authority and/or HMRC.

Between them, they are exceedingly prolific, so it is hoped that any action that can bring them into line will assist greatly with local pet breeding controls.

### • Changing names:

I have been tracking a husband-and-wife team across various sites during 2022. Each time they use a different site, they use slightly different trading names, but the same phone number keeps cropping up. I have managed to tie them down to an address, which, when checked, comes back to a housing association, even though their full names remain elusive; but having the HA details means that a referral can be made to that organisation as well as the council and DWP, in the hope that a joint visit can be made to assess both the rabbits and the suitability of the address for this activity.

Both are highly prolific and clearly making more than just "hobby" money, meaning that even if we cannot get an animal welfare organisation to deal with the case, it is likely that HMRC and the DWP will pick it up from our referral.

• **A trader of a thousand faces:**

Well, names anyway; there is a trader who I have been following since 2018, across multiple trading platforms, who has used more names and identities than the phone book, although she must like her phone number because that never changes.

This year, after being removed from various trading platforms as we reported her for using different identifies and shady practices she disappeared, only to resurface with her own web page linked in to a Facebook page.

Work is now underway to trace her, and hopefully close her down or push her into licensed trading once and for all.

**Into 2023**

We are already part-way through January, and the month has

already been record breaking for the number of cases I have identified, so much so that I have stopped searching trading platforms for a couple of weeks to catch-up.

In February through to June I shall be running a special operation concurrently to my day-to-day monitoring, called Operation Caledonia; this operation will concentrate on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with a view to identifying persistent traders in those administrations who can be referred to the local SPCA/RSPCA or animal welfare organisations.

We believe, from current relationships with bodies in those areas, that we may receive a more positive response to our referrals, which will hopefully enable our intelligence to go to good use and see more breeders coming into the licensing fold, or leaving the trade if they refuse to comply with legal and regulatory requirements.

**Mark Dron, Animal Welfare Operations, RWAf - January 2023**

# No one is working harder to improve things for rabbits than us

## New website

Our super-duper new website is live! Have a look at **rabbitwelfare.co.uk** and please spread the word. We want anyone and everyone with an interest in rabbits to see it!



## Petition to change legislation for rabbit breeders

You may have already seen our petition demanding changes in legislation on rabbit breeding. We want rabbit breeders to be licensed in the same way that applies to dog breeders. Under the Animal Welfare Regulations 2018, dog breeders (defined by the legislation as anyone who breeds three or more litters in a year, or breed dogs and is advertised as a business selling dogs) has to be licensed. This means they are subject to inspections by the local authorities and have to meet certain standards of welfare for the animals in their care.

There is no such legislation relating to rabbit breeding in England. Whilst pet shops must be licensed, which ensures certain standards must be met for the animals they sell, almost anyone can start breeding and selling rabbits without any need for a licence. There is currently a boom in people breeding and selling rabbits online, and it is causing huge problems for rabbit welfare.

No licence means no local authority involvement, no need to meet any welfare standards, no care guides for customers and no home checks. This means that people take on rabbits without being aware of their complex needs, which can

mean miserable and unhealthy lives for the rabbits, or them being dumped into already over-run rescue centres. This problem is made worse when the animals have been mis-sexed, because the new owners can very quickly be faced with one or more accidental litters.

Incredibly there is no requirement for rabbits to be correctly sexed when sold. This of course leads to yet more unwanted litters.

So our petition which calls for two changes to the current legislation:

- I. The breeding of rabbits to be made a licensable activity (as the breeding of dogs currently is).
- II. Amendments to the legislation governing the sales of animals so as to require purchases to be told the sex of the animal they are buying, and for the sex of the animals being sold to be correct.

These are explained in further detail on the petition homepage, so please go to our website and take a look.

At the time of writing the petition has over 50,000 signatures! This is an amazing

result and we are already half way to our goal in only a few months. But we're not there yet - please sign the petition if you haven't already, and share with everyone you know!

Go to **change.org**, click the magnifying glass to search "rabbit breeding"; our petition is the first one that comes up. Please keep signing and sharing!



# Breeding amnesty

There is a crisis going on right now. So many rabbits are being abandoned that rescue shelters simply cannot cope. With our breeding amnesty we are calling for:

- Breeders to stop breeding
- Pet shops and online classified sites to stop the sale of rabbits
- Potential rabbit owners to do their research properly and make sure they can commit to the care needs of two rabbits over a 12 year period
- Everyone to adopt from a rescue centre, not a breeder or pet shop.

We are witnessing an unprecedented rise in abandoned and mistreated rabbits, with an alarming increase in the number of rabbits for sale online, and rescue centres at bursting point. The number of online breeders has increased dramatically, with our Welfare Officer, Mark, reporting a 77% increase in the number of breeders in 2022, compared to 2021. He has reported over 300 underground breeders to their respective local authority, another huge increase on the previous year. Mark has reported hundreds of breeders, but to our knowledge, none have been licenced by the local authorities, despite Mark submitting evidence of what is known as the 'business test' which shows that the breeder is a trading business and should be licenced. This is why we are so keen to get as many people as possible to sign our petition to change the legislation and force these underground breeders to either be licenced or stop being in business.

Since the pandemic, there has been a surge in new rabbit owners, who we know are very likely to be surprised at how complicated rabbits can be to care for, how much space they need, and how much time and money they take up. This lack of knowledge has resulted in a spike in accidental litters, which, along with an



increase in unlicensed breeders means that demand on rescue centres is at an all-time high.

We have had two immediate responses to the Breeding Amnesty campaign:

- The online classified site Preloved is supporting the amnesty by stopping rabbit breeders selling on its site for a three week period over Easter. The website has informed users that with immediate effect, the sale of rabbits is prohibited
- Gumtree has also committed to stop all adverts over this period for two weeks.

Make no mistake about it, this is a huge achievement, and a great start to the campaign. Not only will users be directed to rescue centres over that period, but it also raises the issue of the rescue crisis with people who otherwise wouldn't have known about it. Preloved and Gumtree, who each have millions of users every week, are also featuring educational content on their sites about rabbits. We are very grateful to both Preloved and Gumtree for being the first classified sites to support our campaign.

As well as the support of two of the largest classified selling platforms, we are also supported by our colleagues at the RSPCA, Wood Green, and Raystede Centre for Animal Welfare.

The RSPCA is as worried as we are about the levels of abandonment and mistreatment, and the rise in online sales.

Dr Jane Tyson, RSPCA scientific officer in the Companion Animals Department (CAD) said, "The number of rabbits entering the RSPCA has surged since the pandemic, possibly because people could no longer care for their pets as life returned to normal, but also as a result of the cost of living crisis too.

"As more are coming into our care, our centres are at capacity and we are utilising private boarding which is costly to us as a charity. At the same time, we are seeing rehoming rates slowing, meaning rabbits are staying with us for longer than ever before.

"We are pleased to support the Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund Breeding Amnesty campaign and would urge anyone thinking of getting rabbits to do plenty of research first and consider adopting from one of our many centres across England and Wales rather than buying from a pet shop or online".

Raystede Centre for Animal Welfare supports the Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund's Breeding Amnesty and Adopt Don't Shop campaign and petition. Matthew Gough, Head of Animal Welfare at Raystede, says, "We were asked to take 605 rabbits over the past 12 months (February 2022 to January 2023). On 1 February 2023, we had 22 rabbits at Raystede waiting for homes - we are completely full, we cannot take any more. In January 2023, there were 45 people wanting to surrender their rabbits to Raystede; we rehomed just one rabbit. We currently have 22 rabbits belonging to 11 owners on our 'waiting list'- we have encouraged all the others to keep and care for their rabbits or find another solution, but the situation is untenable.

"The Rabbit Welfare & Fund's campaign to stop breeding and sales would address the problem, not immediately but in the next year or so, thus eventually stopping the flow of 'new' rabbits onto the market and driving people who want rabbits to go to rescue centres like Raystede and adopt".

This is a brilliant start to our campaign, and we will keep pushing this forward and hope to keep building momentum.

## Hitting the headlines

We have really hit the headlines with our latest campaign. We have been on ITV prime time news, on the radio, in print and social media. We have had 59 separate pieces of coverage so far, which gives us a potential audience of 1.7 billion people, and 3.4 million estimated views. Such big numbers! This is the most coverage we have ever had, and we will keep pushing this story out to keep raising awareness and pushing people towards rescues and not breeders.

## How can you help?

If you would like to help with the Breeding Amnesty campaign or the petition here are some ideas:

1. Sign the petition and share it on social media to help us reach our goal
2. Write to your local MP, share the petition with them, and ask them to support it, and raise the issue of lack of legislation themselves with the relevant minister, or even in the House of Commons. Please note in your letter that the current 'business test' is not working, which is why a change in legislation is needed
3. Donate via the website. We hate to ask, but campaigning and PR is expensive and any donations to these campaigns go directly to the campaign costs. Please don't donate via change.org as that donation goes to them, not us. Thank you.