

Looking forward, securing our future



Tim Weston talks to those involved in Trusted Game about their initial experience of this assurance scheme.

2022 really wasn't the year many needed after the Covid years; it should have been the point of recovery. It perhaps also wasn't then the year to launch the Trusted Game health and welfare scheme for the sector, or so you might have thought...

Trusted Game is the brainchild of Vets Rita Alves, Dan King and Mark Elliott, all of whom are vets specialising in gamebirds. It was launched officially in January 2022, with pretty much every Veterinary Practice providing a significant level of service to our sector enthusiastically signing up to deliver its comprehensive and testing audit of clients' businesses and shoots, as well as structured advice and training.

Trusted Game is different to previous projects, as it has been built from the ground up specifically for the gamebird sector. Rita, Mark and Dan evolved the processes of audit by first looking at their best-performing clients to analyse their systems. They questioned everything the sector takes for granted and went through early drafts of audits, and developed definitive versions that colleagues could work with. There are modules for all stages of the rearing and releasing process as well as all the main systems in which birds are kept. Modules are also specific to the key species, namely pheasant, redleg partridge and mallard.

Coincidentally, the British Veterinary Poultry Association's (BVPA's) Gamebird Working Group (of which all three of the Trusted Game vets are part) was agreeing to the curriculum for training modules that were also launched in 2021/2. These cover laying flocks, rearing and releasing from a veterinary perspective, alongside raising awareness of the relevant legislation.

Timing seemed perfect as everything was coming together nicely, but then 2022 happened and we all know the problems that has caused.

I first asked Mark Elliott, a regular contributor to *KtB* how he had got on with launching Trusted Game and the BVPA courses:

He explained: "The start of the year was so full of enthusiasm, and my first focus was to provide the BVPA courses, which I set up to run in small groups of up to 20,

"Trusted Game is more stringent, relevant and practical."

borrowing shoot lodges and premises over the wide area I cover in the South East to keep costs down. I have been focusing on education for many years now and I do get a lot of support for events. Even so when around 200 keepers, game farmers and students signed up to attend, I was

blown away. Frustratingly halfway through I got Covid and so in the end only, we only managed to train 140 this year. Then as we moved through the spring, the reality of the bird flu situation dampened things down and a lot of my time was taken up supporting concerned clients and keepers, advising them however I could based on the available information. Here in the South East, we were reliant on imported eggs and day-olds, and quite a few of my registered shoots mothballed for the season.

"Despite all this, uptake of Trusted Game actually took off quite well, with some 80 shoots and game farms, from my client base alone, signing up to the process. I didn't quite realise the time that it would take to get them all through the audits, so I ended up pretty busy considering. Autumn was supposed to be the time of reviewing the data gained and to feedback into the auditing process for phase 2 next year but again bird flu impacted on my time, →

Tidy, organised and consistent setups are easier to manage successfully.





Trusted Game caters for all shapes and sizes of game farming systems.

with many hours on the phone each day advising on biosecurity, current situations and supporting those most affected, as well as attending meetings. However, Trusted Game was designed to be an ongoing process, so a lot of work will now go into the early part of the year instead as we prepare for 2023. Perhaps the slower uptake has given us breathing space to learn and we will actually make Trusted Game even better as a result.

“Our community is pretty resilient, and despite (or perhaps because of) bird flu, we are seeing new projects evolving for 2023 on existing sites, and even start-ups; the Trusted Game audits are being circulated and taken up as a guide to many of these, which is helping them start on the right footing.

As vets working a niche area, Trusted Game has given us vets a new sense of community as well, with younger vets having had time in 2022 to visit and learn from the more specialist teams, and smaller practices supporting each other and discussing complex cases, with general sharing of information – all unexpected, but fantastic consequences of establishing Trusted Game.

“So even if the start in 2022 was a little shaky, and we are not quite where we hoped to be now with a lot of work yet to be done, there is a real sense of an optimistic and better future ahead.”

Dan King pretty much echoed that, noting: “We saw significant enthusiasm and uptake for Trusted Game, which was created following client demand in the first place. Game farmers and gamekeepers recognise that audit and working closely with their vet to drive improvement is an essential part of the sector in modern times – just as audit is in all industries. Some clients really engage with the scheme and use it to its full potential to help evaluate their business, set targets and improve. Others see it as a necessary step to help protect their business and the shooting sector.

“The Trusted Game audit isn’t Pass/Fail; but as long as the site follows the legislation

and demonstrates good outcomes (welfare/disease/antibiotic use), it can be a ‘Trusted Game approved site’ without following all of the standards. The Trusted Game process is more about identifying areas for improvement and evolving over time, and many sites are open to this form of audit.”

So, how has Trusted Game gone down with the clients?

Frank Boddy, leaseholder at Mountgarret Estate shoot was positive: “Having previously been with other audit schemes, we found that Trusted Game was actually more stringent, relevant and practical. The Trusted Game audit also provided detailed veterinary advice which helped to motivate staff and drive improvements. We followed this advice and had the best rearing season we have ever had.”

David Wiggins, head keeper at Englefield in Hampshire and NGO Vice Chair (Deer Branch and Hants/Berks/IoW) echoed those words: “The Trusted Game audit immediately came across as more rigorous than other audits I have gone through, and by linking it to advice it was more relevant and a great learning experience.”

Paul Smith of Wealden Game Farms was a test site for the rearing audits through 2020-2021 and commented: “Having been involved from the start I can testify to the effort and depth of investigation that has gone into developing Trusted Game. Even when thinking you are doing well, a process like this can produce surprises and you tighten things up even more, which can only be good.”

Steve Crouch, who chairs the National Game Dealers Association and who custom-hatches for clients, said: “We need commonly accepted and high standards in rearing and release to help game dealers market the birds. Trusted Game to me is an essential part of that, and vets are key as they are ideally placed; they know their clients, are trusted by their clients and their involvement gives confidence to the end consumer.”

Tim Robbins is a third generation game farmer who runs Holme Park Hatcheries.

Having reared for the last 70 years, he has seen many schemes come and go. His view was that Trusted Game is here to stay. He said: “It is a practical and achievable audit and one where you are dealing with a qualified and regulated, as well as skilled and experienced contact who knows you and your business. However stuck in our ways we might be, we can all keep learning and improving the way we rear and build on welfare and standards and – as importantly – be seen by our detractors to be being proactive, and doing our best to safeguard our futures at the same time.”

Trusted Game clearly seems to be the game sector’s answer to its critics. The foundation it establishes, mirroring other farming sectors who have faced similar challenges, appears already well supported. As such, the NGO, along with the Game Farmers’ Association, are right behind it. It is low cost, vet- and client-led, and ticks all the boxes for what we need now with a possible hostile government in the waiting for 2024.

The last word is from Rita Alves: “Although it was not the best year to launch the Trusted Game scheme, it was vital to put this in place for an industry that is under a lot of pressure. For those who had and have to invest in their businesses to adapt to the market demands and to secure birds for their shoots, Trusted Game provides a template and standards to ensure they are making the right choices.” ●

TRUSTED GAME

Check out the NGO’s YouTube channel for a video entitled *Does game shooting need accreditation?*, which features an interview with Mark and Rita (link: youtu.be/gpGted1Oquw)

Also visit www.trustedgame.co.uk for more information, and contact your vet to get involved. ●

