

In the first of a series of interviews with the coaches, mentors and ambassadors for Practice to Progress Fire, we speak to the assessors about what they will bring to the unique partnership that will provide a safe space to practice for promotion for every level within the fire and rescue sector

Practice to Progress Fire: Assessing the assessors



Chris Davies

Until April 2022, Chris served as Chief Fire Officer of Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service for the last eight of a 37-year Fire Service career. Chris has managed a number of high-profile major incidents, both from a fire and rescue perspective and a political perspective and has experienced a variety of roles within the fire sector including being seconded to the Fire Service College within the Command and Management Faculty, where he gained considerable experience in training and people development.

Awarded the Queen's Fire Service Medal in the 2017 New Year's Honours, Chris says being part of the Practice to Progress Fire initiative will enable him to continue to invest in coaching and mentoring people, creating a fantastic opportunity for anyone wanting to progress and practice for promotion in a safe environment.

Practice to Progress Fire (PtP Fire) – the unique partnership formed between the Asian Fire Service Association, Women in the Fire Service and *FIRE* publisher Fire Knowledge (see *FIRE* September) – is an alliance that works together to design and deliver training to prepare candidates for initial selection and promotion assessment to every level within the fire and rescue sector. AFSA and WFS are providing a bank of assessors (some of which are featured here) who will provide support to organisations and individuals who are seeking progression and each assessor will be of suitable rank and experience for sitting on selection/promotion boards.

The approach is designed to send a strong message to the sector about the commitment of P2P Fire to making a difference. In Fire Knowledge Director Dave Etheridge's words: "It is about widening the gate, not lowering the bar."

To get a feel for what the assessors will provide, *FIRE* spoke to a tranche of diverse and experienced Fire and Rescue Service personnel who will be coaching and mentoring the FRS stars of the future.

***FIRE*: What interested you in the P2P Fire concept in the first place?**

Alex Johnson: "I've spent years through my role in Women in the Fire Service supporting people to progress in the Fire Service. This concept gives me the opportunity to provide a more structured and focussed support."

Chris Davies: "I have always had an interest in coaching, mentoring and developing people. P2P now

gives a fantastic opportunity for anyone wanting to develop themselves to access experienced, knowledgeable and professional people who can help them realise their personal career goals. I always found assessment centres daunting, but now P2P enables individuals to be able to practice those assessment centre challenges in a safe environment and receive detailed supportive feedback, before the 'real thing'. What a great opportunity to build confidence."

Dave Pemberton: "After discussing the potential development of what was to become P2P Fire with Dave Etheridge, it quickly became apparent that it satisfied two key principles of mine: only do something that energises you, and only work with people you trust. I passionately believe that the most important element of a fire and rescue service is its people and that the most effective outcomes for the community are achieved by diverse teams united by shared values. I'm proud of the support I've provided to others during my Fire Service career and the P2P Fire concept provides an excellent opportunity for me to continue to support others in their career development journey."

"P2P Fire will now enable individuals who may have felt apprehensive about promotion to have support and coaching to build their confidence"

Chris Davies



Dave Pemberton

Dave has had a 29-year career within the Fire and Rescue Service, the last 13 at a strategic manager level, during which time he has developed a strong passion for enabling individuals and teams to be the best they can be. With a transformational and empathetic leadership style, Dave has a strong track record of building high performing teams through empowerment, trust and recognising that wider diversity leads to better outcomes.

Dave has a deep understanding of what fire and rescue services are looking for in candidates and is looking forward to continuing to support the fire sector's continuous improvement journey by helping talented people from a diverse range of backgrounds to deliver to their full potential.



Alex Johnson

Alex joined Derbyshire Fire and Rescue Service in 1992 and progressed through the ranks to reach Area Manager in 2015. In 2017, she was promoted to Assistant Chief Fire Officer in South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue, a year later becoming Deputy Chief and in January 2020 taking up the position of Chief Fire Officer.

Prior to her retirement in May 2022, Alex had been the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion lead for the National Fire Chiefs Council and was on the Executive Committee for Women in the Fire Service UK for many years. Alex is passionate about creating inclusive workplaces and people being empowered to come to work as their whole self.

FIRE: How important is mentoring and coaching to the development of FRS personnel?

Chris Davies: "The development of personnel through coaching and mentoring is vitally important if the FRS is to maintain and develop its highly recognised professional, skilled and confident workforce. It is widely acknowledged there are challenges around recruitment, retention and progression. P2P Fire will now enable individuals who may have felt apprehensive about promotion to have support and coaching to build their confidence, thus building and supporting staff development. I dare not think if, in the future, there are not enough skilled, competent and confident staff to fill the vacancies, what will happen to the Fire and Rescue Service."

Dave Pemberton: "I believe that mentoring and coaching are essential enablers to support people to be the very best they can be. Learning from the experience of others has always been a requisite for competence and confidence in the Fire Service and this can be most effectively achieved through bespoke mentoring and coaching."

Becci Bryant: "Coaching is a fundamental part of leadership and everyone should have access to it."

Jim Owen: "Coaching is all about becoming more self-aware and taking ownership of your own development and mentoring a natural extension, through which people can

benefit from advice and support from people who have been where they are. Without help from a third party it's more challenging to learn about yourself and how you can make more of a difference."

Alex Johnson: "I believe it's pivotal for leaders at all levels to have the opportunity to receive coaching and mentoring. To me, personally, it helped immensely."

FIRE: How do you envisage P2P Fire will make a difference?

Dave Pemberton: "My colleagues and I within the P2P Fire team have a deep understanding of the 'people' needs of fire and rescue services and I'm looking forward to continuing to support the fire sector's continuous improvement journey by helping talented people from a diverse range of backgrounds to deliver to their full potential."

Alex Johnson: "I hope that individuals who have doubted themselves in the past will grow in confidence as a result of their interaction with P2P and recognise the difference they bring to the UK FRS will make it a stronger organisation."

Chris Davies: "P2P Fire will now allow staff to practice those dreaded assessment centres in a safe environment. This will give people the opportunity to experience them, dispel some of their own personal myths and receive detailed feedback, allowing them to reflect, build their

"You have absolutely nothing to lose and everything to gain"

Alex Johnson

“If you want to get first class support in learning about yourself and the fire sector, just go for it!”

Jim Owen

own confidence and give them the assurance they have the ability to progress.”

Jim Owen: “P2P Fire is in a position improve the diversity of the fire sector by supporting those who might find cultural challenges along the way to becoming employed in the sector. And then we can support people as they move forward, providing advice and guidance at key moments in people’s careers.”

FIRE: Why is P2P Fire important to FRS culture and improvement in performance around equality, diversity and inclusion?

Alex Johnson: “The FRS has a very strong culture. Often, unintentionally, it creates an environment where people adapt their behaviours and values to ‘fit in’ with the people they work with. As such the qualities and diverse make-up of the person originally recruited is lost. I believe P2P will empower people to be the best version of themselves and recognise that a diverse workforce is one which can best serve its community.”

Becci Bryant: “Diversity in all its facets is crucial in teams including leadership and management teams. P2P Fire provides bespoke development that will support cultural change through the inclusion of difference as a way forward for teams.”

Jim Owen: “We can help people by connecting them with P2P assessors and coaches who have been where they are and understand the challenges that they face in becoming employed and then progressing in the Fire and Rescue Service.”

Chris Davies: “Allowing individuals to practice scenarios in a safe environment will enable a focus on not only the performance of the organisation but also the improved performance for individuals, thus delivering improved workforce strategies and succession planning goals. P2P will also allow a more targeted approach to equality, diversity and inclusion, building confidence and providing, to those who may need it, that extra support and encouragement. A more diverse workforce can only improve the Fire and Rescue Service, both professionally and culturally.”

FIRE: How much of a difference did mentoring/coaching/support make to you/is making to your career progression?

Becci Bryant: “Coaching was crucial in supporting my progress through assessment processes. It allowed me to shape my thoughts in a way that meant I would call on them when the assessment process was running.”

Jim Owen: “The best managers I worked for were always great workplace coaches and mentors. While you can learn from poor management how not to do your job,



Becci Bryant

Becci retired from Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service in October 2021 having served almost three decades across three different fire services. She worked as an operational firefighter, instructor and manager in learning and development before ultimately becoming Chief Fire Officer with Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service in April 2016. From 2014, Becci was the NFCC Programme Director for the Fire Service’s Executive Leadership Programme.

Since retirement Becci has become an Associate Professor with Warwick Business School delivering bespoke executive education and continues to be involved in strategic leadership development within the FRS through the NFCC by continuing to lead and deliver the ELP gateway. Becci is passionate about leadership and the need for difference in leadership positions and says that P2P will help enhance the levels of diversity across leadership levels in the Fire Service.

it’s always better to have access to those who know how to lead effectively and develop people every day. I can say that I owe a huge debt to my coach in developing my skills as a leader and a team player.”

Chris Davies: “I was fortunate to have unofficial mentors throughout my career, which helped me enormously. They offered career advice and general support when things went well and more often than not, when things didn’t go well. Learning experiences, I think they’re called! I truly believe the more formalised structured approach that P2P Fire offers will hugely benefit individuals, it is long overdue.”

Dave Pemberton: “Unfortunately, mentoring and coaching was not an embedded concept until later in my career, but it certainly made a difference once it became available. The ability to discuss my career development in a safe and trusted space with people who had ‘been there and done it’, was a game changer. Some of the support

“P2P Fire provides bespoke development that will support cultural change through the inclusion of difference as a way forward for teams”

Becci Bryant



Jim Owen

After 30 years combined service with Lancashire and Greater Manchester fire and rescue services, including 12 years in senior and principal officer roles, Jim retired from the Fire Service as Deputy Chief Fire Officer. Jim has been an experienced operational commander at every rank to principal officer, as well as an experienced fire safety officer, fire investigator and expert witness.

Since leaving the service, Jim has been providing business improvement services and considers it a privilege to support and develop people, whether through training, mentorship or coaching.

“We will provide you with a unique and highly effective level of support that will significantly increase your chances of achieving your career development goals”

Dave Pemberton

I received went beyond performance in role; providing great benefit to my health and wellbeing too. I continue to receive an amazing level of professional support from colleagues within the P2P Fire team.”

Alex Johnson: “Absolutely immense! My first formal coaching was at Group Manager level. It helped me to understand my own self-doubt, recognise my strengths and gave me focus. It reenergised me to apply for the next promotion board. I was better prepared and more confident in my own abilities.”

FIRE: What do you bring to the role of P2P Fire assessor?

Dave Pemberton: “During my Fire Service leadership career, I developed a strong passion for enabling individuals and teams to be the best they can be. The part of my career I found most energising was supporting and coaching individuals to pursue their career development goals and preparing them for the processes they have needed to undertake to achieve them. I’ve been ideally

placed to be incredibly successful in my approach, with many years of experience on the other side of the table, as both the lead, and member of selection and promotion appointment processes up to middle manager level.”

Jim Owen: “I’ve bags of experience in the sector at every level through to and including principal officer, alongside years of experience first as a workplace coach and then as a professional coach after leaving the service. There are few situations I haven’t faced and learnt from and it’s a pleasure to help develop people and put back into the sector after all the development opportunities I received.”

Alex Johnson: “I have 30 years operational service in two fire services and have worked across just about every discipline. I’m a qualified business fire safety officer, I was a BA instructor, I’ve been a Firefighter, I’ve been a Chief and everything in between. I’ve lacked self-belief and I’ve taken advantage of mentoring and coaching to overcome this. I bring honesty in my approach and a genuine desire to help people be the best they can be.”

Chris Davies: “I have over 37 years of Fire Service experience with eight years as a Chief Fire Officer. I have been in the shoes of those individuals wanting to progress. I can offer the lessons I learned whilst also offering real world experience of the leadership and political situations I have found myself in. Whilst I achieved Chief Fire Officer, my career was not all easy. I had many knock backs (especially assessment centres) but learned each time. Leadership is about resilience and any one of us involved with P2P will be able to give our experience and offer our support.”

Becci Bryant: “I’ve experience of leadership at all levels in the Fire and Rescue Service and great experience in leadership development within and external to the sector combined with a passion for supporting people achieve their goals and for enhancing leadership diversity.”

FIRE: What would you say to an FRS employee considering the development opportunity provided by P2P Fire?

Alex Johnson: “You have absolutely nothing to lose and everything to gain. To talk to someone who has been in a similar position as you, who can help you navigate the sometimes rocky road of progression. To help you grow in confidence and self-belief. Just go for it!”

Chris Davies: “P2P is a great opportunity to practice in a safe environment. It will allow anyone to look at themselves, identify their strengths and also any areas which may require more focus, but ultimately it will improve them. I can’t stress it enough, but this is all done in a fail-safe environment, so the focus really is improving the individual. It’s all about building confidence and knowledge. Go on, go for it!”

Becci Bryant: “Speak to the team and talk about the support available which can be tailored to their needs.”

Dave Pemberton: “Do it! As long as you have the right values and commitment we will provide you with a unique and highly effective level of support that will significantly increase your chances of achieving your career development goals.”

Jim Owen: “If you want to get first class support in learning about yourself and the fire sector, just go for it!”