



Features Editor **Lorna King** speaks to Fire Knowledge Director **Dave Etheridge OBE** about a 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: Unique alliance provides safe space to grow



**New
Launch
Exclusive**

'It is vital that fire and rescue services create an environment where they get the best out of their people. Staff should feel confident that they will be supported to reach their full potential, with accessible development opportunities and structured learning available. As recommended by HMICFRS, the role of fire and rescue services needs clarification with greater local flexibility for firefighters and staff to add value.'

Home Office White Paper on Reforming Our Fire and Rescue Service, May 2022.

As we navigate our way out of the pandemic and into a more cautiously confident way of living, attentions have returned in full force to the scrutiny of how well the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) is doing its job. I am, of course, referring to both the Home Office White Paper on *Reforming Our Fire and Rescue Service* published in May and the second tranche of round two HMIFRS inspections more recently published in July.

Amongst all the findings in both reports, there is a clear winner when looking for the area in need of the most improvement: how well the FRS looks after its people, and in the recent interview I had with Fire Knowledge Director Dave Etheridge OBE for this article about a new cost recovery partnership designed to widely assist and support services to improve in this area, he made the following comment: "Even services that are rated 'good' in how they look after their people – it's still their weakest area and one where we are here to assist."

Practice to Progress Origins

Practice to Progress (P2P) is an organisation founded in 2019 by former Police Chief Constable for Cambridgeshire, Alan Baldwin, designed to support individuals and forces with recruitment and promotion within the police. Alan's services provide a safe space to practice for promotion. He works with over a third of UK police forces across every rank, covering a range of skills including presentation, interview practice and media training, and there is also support offered to students thinking of joining the police force. Being well acquainted with Dave since both their positions as chiefs in police and fire, Alan contacted Dave in 2020 to recommend starting a similar service within the Fire and Rescue Service.

P2P Fire Alliance

Dave says: "I thought, do you know what? There's something here for fire and rescue services, but I wanted to do it differently. I wanted to create a unique partnership which has never been established in the Fire and Rescue Service before." Fully aware of the room for

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improvement around equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), culture and values and succession planning, Dave has designed a new P2P Fire that will be a partnership between *FIRE* magazine publisher Fire Knowledge (FK), P2P, the Asian Fire Service Association (AFSA), Women in the Fire Service (WFS), and discussions are currently being held, but at the time of writing are yet to be finalised, with The Firefighters Charity (FFC).

The alliance will work together to design and deliver training to prepare candidates for initial selection and promotion assessment to every level within the fire and rescue sector. The series of services will be delivered through the efficient P2P engine room, but the content will be created and managed by FK, AFSA and WFS.

Fire Knowledge will manage all the media, marketing and social media and continue to promote and build the brand and the service through assessor and content management. The AFSA and WFS will provide a bank of assessors 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. They will also allow access to their networks and act as ambassadors for P2P Fire going forward. Such a relationship will ensure the correct approach is followed in terms of EDI, and this will send a strong message to the sector about the commitment of P2P Fire to making a difference.

Safe Space to Progress

A significant bank of questions and content has already been created around human resources, leadership, management, operations, technical fire safety, fire control, operational processes and procedures – all of the areas that are likely to be covered in real assessments. In addition, this content has been cross mapped to the NFCC Code of Ethics and the NFCC Leadership Framework documents. Dave says: “This has all been designed to provide services with a very strong evidence-based narrative for HMI – real action they are taking as an organisation to help deliver their succession plan, to help bring people on, to help develop people at the right time in their career, and to do that in such a way that is safe for them to operate... If [services] have their own code of ethics or their own particular values, or they’ve got their own leadership framework, again, we can cross map everything over to their internal documents.

“[P2P Fire] is all about providing a very safe space for people to work with experienced professionals in a highly confidential arena to practice and to challenge themselves around their knowledge, around how they present, around how they manage the media, etc. That’s why this is so good; it provides that safe space and it removes the risk of any unconscious bias from the organisation.”

Widening the Gate

For clarity, Dave offered the following example of a service that P2P Fire is currently in discussions with: “The service has asked us to work with 100 of their underrepresented employees at firefighter level – so, predominantly females, ethnic minorities and people with neurodiverse conditions. We will then create a bespoke package based around what it is they would like us to work around with these individuals. That could be around leadership, management, empowering people, organisational and operational procedures and ensuring people feel safe and valued; if that’s what they want the emphasis to be on, we’ve got the resources to create a package around that. Fast forward 12 months, and they have not only improved their cultural change programme, they are now able to report to HMI that as part of their positive action campaign, and as part of the delivery of their succession plan and people strategy, they have an arrangement in place with a professional partnership that is supporting them with all of this.

“It’s not about lowering the bar, it’s about widening the gate – ensuring that people who are moving up into those future promotion positions have been encouraged to read and understand, they’ve had professional discussion, they’ve had professional feedback around their own development and preparation for promotion going forward.”

P2P Fire will also be able to work at recruitment level via an online forum called the Student Room, the UK’s largest online student community. Around 10,000 students per month interact on this forum which has a specific section for careers in the emergency services. Fire Knowledge will be able to access and support students who are interested in a career in the FRS, boosting applications and ensuring students are fully aware of the entry requirements for each role.

One service that Dave has recently been in discussions with reported that out of their last recruitment drive of 100 applicants, only 20 were from underrepresented

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Dalvinder Rai, Chair of the Asian Fire Service Association, says association assessors will offer a range of approaches to provide insight and support to policymakers and practitioners

“This partnership will help bring together multidisciplinary teams of people with diverse perspectives, skills, and expertise”

“We can do single or group sessions and every session has a comprehensive and thorough debrief. Sessions are recorded to download, review and reflect with detailed feedback.

“We are also all about inclusion so P2P is available to all staff groups, professional support staff as well as on-call and whole time. It is an offering for all roles and managerial levels so P2P Fire is designed to be your personal and/or organisational partner for lifelong FRS career pathway journeys.”

Dave will be personally overseeing everything to ensure that fire and rescue services receive exactly the service that will suit their needs as an organisation or as bespoke individual packages, such is his commitment to the sector. He is still as passionate about the FRS now as he was when he first started. He says: “One day, in many years to come, I will retire and P2P Fire will be something that I hope will continue to grow and services will believe in it – they will trust it.”

Trusted Partner of Choice

The cost of P2P Fire services will be calculated only to cover partnership costs and ensure that AFSA, WFS and the FFC earn a small income to enable them to continue the good work they are doing for the FRS; Dave does not want this initiative to be seen as a business selling services, he wants it to become a unique partnership that enables the FRS to continually improve through workforce cultural change going forward. The vision is ultimately for P2P Fire to become the trusted partner of choice for the UK FRS concerning recruitment, selection, workforce development and succession planning support which is affordable and in line with public service principles and costs.

Dalvinder Rai, Chair of the AFSA, said in support of P2P Fire: “AFSA is looking forward to working with Practice to Progress and providing support to fire and rescue services, using the expertise of members and a range of approaches to provide insight and support to policymakers and practitioners.

“We want to work collaboratively and dynamically to find solutions to the most challenging issues facing the Fire and Rescue Service.

“This partnership will help bring together multidisciplinary teams of people with diverse perspectives, skills and expertise. In doing so it will provide a flexible and trusted resource to the Fire and Rescue Service and others.”

P2P Fire will be launched at the Emergency Services Show at the Birmingham NEC, September 21-22. Visit the Fire Knowledge/FIRE magazine team on stand D82.

groups, and only four of those 20 made it through. The service asked Dave if they contacted the 16 who did not get through and asked if they wanted to work with P2P Fire over the next six months and then re-apply; is that something P2P Fire can facilitate? Dave replied: “Absolutely!”

As well as supporting recruitment and promotion, P2P Fire can offer individual support for the following circumstances:

- To those who have recently failed a promotion process but clearly have potential
- An offering and solution for all staff in the service so avoiding internal favouritism, exclusion or unconscious bias
- Help to support mental health and wellbeing
- Individuals feel ‘invested in’ and valued
- Increase levels of confidence amongst all staff groups
- A solution for individuals who are considering Direct Entry.

Coaching and Mentoring

P2P Fire will also have a team of experienced coaches and mentors who work with candidates to help identify personal and professional goals. This service is offered by qualified professionals who have considerable and recognised experience. The mentoring service can offer support in rank and role progression, managing challenging situations, solving complex issues, operational command and supervisory, middle and strategic management. The individual career coaching can help candidates improve on their personal development including increasing self-confidence, improving work performance, enhancing communication skills and improving working relationships.

Dave says: “It’s a really holistic approach to succession planning and people strategies; that’s the idea behind it. P2P Fire delivery is family friendly and designed to fit around life and work. All practice to progress sessions can be delivered fully online via our secure platform and our assessors are available evenings and weekends to ensure maximum flexibility.