Building trust through action: Race, reform and the DIRF system — An interview with Sev Bikim MBE

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The interview was conducted in January 2025

HB: Can you start by giving us an overview of your role and the work you do within the Prison Service?

SB: I am the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) and Families Lead for the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, and Norfolk (BCN) prison group. My role is to support the prisons within this group by aligning national D&I strategies with regional activity and tailoring them to meet the unique needs of each site. Every prison has its own dynamics, so my approach involves understanding these distinct challenges and opportunities.

I work to ensure that the D&I Managers and Families Leads at each site are equipped to enhance outcomes for staff, prisoners, and their families and loved ones. My role also involves building and strengthening relationships with internal and external stakeholders, acting as a bridge to foster collaboration and achieve meaningful results.

For me, Diversity and Inclusion is not a standalone initiative—it is a golden thread that runs through every aspect of prison operations. By integrating D&I principles into the core business objectives of all prison functions, we can drive improvements in the outcomes for people in prison, support our staff, and create stronger connections with our communities.

HB: What led you to become involved in initiatives around race and equality in prisons?

SB: I've been working in the equality, diversity, and inclusion space for over 10 years across different roles and grades within His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). My journey began at HMP Woodhill as an Equalities Officer, where I engaged in focus groups, oversaw the administration of Discrimination Incident Reporting Forms (DIRFs), handled complaints investigations, and conducted data analysis.

A pivotal moment early in my career was collaborating with the Zahid Mubarek Trust (ZMT), introduced to me by my functional head. Together, we worked to improve outcomes for ethnic minority prisoners at HMP Woodhill. This led to the development of a joint Staff and Prisoner anti-racism workshop designed to strengthen staff-prisoner relationships. It also created safe spaces for dialogue and introduced collective reverse mentoring between staff and prisoners, to explore race related issues within the prison environment.

At HMP Bedford, I adapted this initiative despite the challenges of COVID-19, ensuring its rollout in a meaningful way. The success of this work contributed to me being awarded the MBE—a recognition of collective effort, innovation, and dedication.[1]

Being from an ethnic minority background, I've experienced firsthand some of the struggles faced by both staff and prisoners. This personal connection has given me a unique perspective and drive to address disparities. My academic background in law and early exposure to the Criminal Justice System further deepened my understanding of the systemic disparities that often feed into the challenges seen in prisons. Recognising that these inequities are inherited at different stages, I've focused on addressing them locally and regionally, using strategic planning, collaboration, and commitment to drive positive change.

HB: Could you explain the Equality Advocates programme and its significance in the prison environment?

SB: The Equality Advocates programme is a prisoner-led initiative designed by ZMT to improve the treatment and outcomes for prisoners from ethnic minority backgrounds. It plays a vital role in addressing racial disparities within prisons by empowering peers to provide support and advocacy.

1. Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) is a British award recognised for outstanding achievement or service to the community, particularly for long-term, significant contributions.

Advocates are selected through a thorough process, ensuring they have the skills and commitment to fulfil their role. They are given a clear job description, ongoing support from the ZMT, and the BCN prisons' management team. Their development is a priority, with a bespoke personal and professional development course spanning seven sessions. This course not only enhances their skills but also aligns with their personal and professional goals.

The role of the advocates includes supporting ethnic minority prisoners, working with Equalities Leads to implement local equality strategies, and reporting progress, challenges, and opportunities to both the ZMT and prison management. Upon completing their 6-month assignment, advocates earn accredited qualifications in peer mentoring and advocacy, further equipping them to support others and contribute meaningfully.

What makes this programme unique is its ability to amplify prisoner voices, foster trust, and encourage participation in decision-making processes. The advocates' presence creates a ripple effect, improving relationships and building confidence among prisoners and staff.

HB: What challenges have you encountered in implementing this programme, and how have you addressed them?

SB: Interestingly, I've received strong support from prison Governors and Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) who were eager to trial the programme. To ensure success, I took time to clearly outline the structure, goals, and expected outcomes, and this transparency-built trust and buy-in from leadership.

One logistical challenge was managing the session sizes due to high interest and participation. Additionally, sifting through a large number of applications to select the right advocates was both exciting and demanding. While we wanted to offer opportunities to more participants, we remained focused on ensuring the quality of the cohort.

Ultimately, these challenges were manageable and reflected the enthusiasm and engagement the programme generated, which is a positive sign of its impact and relevance.

HB: How do you measure the impact of Equality Advocates on the culture of prisons?

SB: The selection process is critical—collectively we look for individuals who are ready to drive change, not just those who are compliant or easy going. This ensures advocates represent a diverse and motivated group.

The impact is evident in several ways. Advocates lead peer-driven initiatives like the CCC (Connect, Communicate, and Change) programme, which fosters collaboration between prisoners and staff to identify and solve issues on the wings. Their work has also increased trust and confidence in the DIRF system by providing a transparent and accessible platform for addressing concerns.

Advocates actively participate in forums and meetings, giving a voice to those who might otherwise go unheard. One of the most rewarding outcomes is the progression of advocates themselves—from moving to open conditions to preparing for release. At HMP Wayland, for example, I've seen advocates successfully transition to the open prison estate or be released, and the demand for more cohorts continues to grow. Each new request for a cohort reaffirms the positive cultural shift brought about by this programme.

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HB: Building trust between staff and prisoners is a recurring challenge. What strategies have you found most effective in fostering trust, particularly across racial lines?

SB: Trust is built on four key values: accountability, transparency, respect, and fairness. These principles guide all the work we do within the D&I space.

One of the most impactful strategies we use is leveraging lived experiences. Initiatives like Let's Talk My Story sessions and reverse mentoring allow us to explore challenges and build understanding. For instance, we've had Governing Governors participate in reverse mentoring with young adults from ethnic minority backgrounds. Their feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, as it's fostered deeper insights into the experiences and perceptions of ethnic minority prisoners.

Perception is one of the greatest challenges, especially when discussing sensitive topics. Creating safe spaces where staff and prisoners can talk openly, without fear of judgment or error, is essential. These platforms allow us to listen, learn, and grow together.

Ultimately, fostering trust is about building communities where staff and prisoners work collaboratively to improve outcomes. We're still on this journey, but every step we take brings us closer to creating an environment where trust is mutual and enduring.

HB: How do you handle situations where trust has been broken due to incidents of discrimination or bias?

SB: When trust is broken, the first step is to actively listen. It's important to hear not just what happened but how it made people feel. Empathy is key to understanding the depth of the situation and addressing it effectively.

We then look at what lessons can be learned. Often, we bring everyone involved together in a safe space to discuss the incident. This can be a casual setting with coffee and biscuits or a more structured environment, depending on what feels right for the group. The goal is to create an open and honest dialogue where all parties feel heard and supported.

Transparency is vital—we acknowledge mistakes and commit to learning from them. This often involves targeted training, workshops, or collaborative projects with prisoners, staff, and external stakeholders.

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By addressing incidents head-on and creating opportunities for reflection and growth, we can rebuild trust and strengthen the relationships that are critical to our shared goals.

HB: How important are positive staff-prisoner relationships in addressing racial inequalities, and what can staff do to improve these relationships?

SB: Positive staff-prisoner relationships are absolutely critical in addressing racial inequalities. From my experience, trust and mutual respect are the foundation for creating equitable environments. When staff and prisoners engage meaningfully, it creates opportunities to challenge biases, address misconceptions, and foster a shared sense of accountability.

One approach I've championed is embedding diversity and inclusion as a 'golden thread' through all areas of prison life, rather than treating them as standalone initiatives. This means building relationships through consistent, everyday actions rather than occasional interventions.

Staff can improve these relationships by actively listening to prisoners and acknowledging their lived experiences.

Another key step is for staff to act as allies. Allyship involves not just understanding but actively standing alongside individuals to challenge inequality and drive change. For instance, staff who participate in reverse mentoring with prisoners not only gain insight but also demonstrate their commitment to understanding and addressing racial inequalities.

Ultimately, addressing racial inequalities is a shared responsibility. By cultivating positive, respectful relationships, staff and prisoners can work together to break down barriers and build a fairer environment.

HB: What role does staff training and awareness play in shaping these relationships, especially around race and cultural understanding?

SB: Staff training and awareness are essential in shaping meaningful relationships and fostering cultural understanding. Without the knowledge and tools to address racial disparities, staff can unintentionally perpetuate biases or misunderstandings.

Training needs to go beyond 'box-ticking' exercises. It should include immersive and reflective elements, such as unconscious bias workshops, cultural competency sessions, and practical initiatives like scenario-based training. For example, in my work, I've incorporated an allyship workshop into sessions, enabling staff to better understand the nuances of race and culture while equipping them with strategies to challenge inappropriate behaviours.

Awareness starts with self-reflection. When staff understand their own biases and how these might influence their interactions, they can take steps to address them. Training must also highlight the importance of fairness and transparency, helping staff see how their actions contribute to the wider prison culture.

In practice, awareness leads to proactive actions, such as using DIRF systems effectively, challenging discriminatory 'banter,' or creating safe spaces for prisoners/staff to share their concerns.

Ultimately, training and awareness aren't just tools—they are investments in building trust and

fostering an inclusive environment. When staff are empowered with knowledge and understanding, they are better equipped to address inequalities and build the positive relationships that are essential for change.

HB: The Discrimination Incident Reporting Form (DIRF) is a key tool in addressing racial discrimination in prisons. Can you describe how these investigations are conducted and what outcomes they usually lead to?

SB: Absolutely, I agree that DIRFs are a crucial tool in tackling discrimination in prisons. At BCN, we've refined the process to ensure every complaint is handled with care, integrity, and fairness. Investigations aren't just about sitting at a computer—they require a thoughtful, hands-on approach to get to the heart of the issue.

So, here's how it works:

- ❏ When a DIRF is submitted, our D&I team triages it, using the King Formula. The King Formula is a structured approach that helps identify whether a difference in treatment due to a protected characteristic has caused detriment without a reasonable explanation—essentially determining if discrimination is the likely cause.
- ❏ Once triaged, the D&I managers allocate the DIRF to a trained case investigator, usually a trained middle manager on a rotational system. To maintain impartiality, any conflicts of interest are resolved by reassigning the case to another investigator. Timelines are set, usually 14 days, though it can extend to 28 days depending on complexity or availability of evidence.
- ❏ The investigation itself prioritises safety and transparency. Interviews are conducted in appropriate locations, ensuring both staff and prisoners feel safe. Every DIRF begins with an acknowledgment that outlines the steps of the process, setting clear expectations for everyone involved.
- ❏ The investigator gathers evidence, including prisoner accounts, staff statements, and even body-worn camera footage if available. Importantly, responses must be thorough and demonstrate that the individual's voice has been heard, and their concerns taken seriously. If discrimination isn't found, the DIRF isn't dismissed outright; instead, it's redirected to the general complaints process, with clear communication back to the complainant.
- ❏ Post-investigation, outcomes are tailored to the issue; whether it's a genuine apology, mediation, or training sessions. These outcomes are followed up to ensure they're implemented and that recurring incidents are reviewed collectively.

We've also introduced external and internal scrutiny measures, including prisoner-led DIRF scrutiny panels, which have been instrumental in building trust. Prisoners know their concerns are being taken seriously, and this transparency has strengthened the credibility of the DIRF system across the BCN sites.

> Positive staff-prisoner relationships are absolutely critical in addressing racial inequalities.

HB: In your experience, how effective is the DIRF process in bringing about meaningful change?

SB: In my view, the DIRF process has been incredibly effective in driving meaningful change. At BCN, we've worked hard to demonstrate that DIRFs are more than just forms, they're a pathway to accountability and improvement.

One of the most significant impacts has been the increase in trust and confidence. By colour coding DIRF boxes, sharing regular updates, and being open about our external scrutiny processes, we've shown both staff and prisoners that this isn't just a tick-box exercise.

Prisoners now feel empowered to use the system because they know their voices will be heard. The transparent investigation process and the opportunity to appeal decisions further reinforce this trust.

The process has also improved relationships between staff and prisoners. Investigators take the time to engage, connect, and communicate, which helps break down barriers and address misunderstandings. It's not just about resolving complaints; it's about fostering an environment where people feel safe to speak up and confident that their concerns will be acted upon.

Of course, meaningful change goes beyond individual cases. By reviewing outcomes collectively, we're able to spot patterns and implement systemic changes. Whether it's through training, workshops, or policy adjustments, the DIRF process continues to be a catalyst for creating fairer, more inclusive environments.

HB: I know you have recently received an award at the House of Lords for your involvement

in delivering the pilot in HMP Wayland from January to April 2024 to address the lack of confidence in the prison discrimination complaints system amongst ethnic minority prisoners, with a particular focus on young adult prisoners. Congratulations.

Could you share the key motivations behind the Wayland Pilot and give us an overview of what it involved?

SB: The motivation for the HMP Wayland pilot came from listening to the voices of prisoners who felt unheard and disillusioned with the discrimination complaints process. Particularly, young adult prisoners from ethnic minority backgrounds expressed a significant lack of trust in the system. The HM Inspectorate of Prisons thematic review highlighted these issues, and we knew we couldn't afford to let them linger.

The pilot was designed to re-establish trust and ensure that prisoners had confidence their concerns would be taken seriously. We focused on creating a prisoner-led scrutiny panel that allowed for transparency and accountability. The key idea was to involve those directly impacted; young black prisoners, in the process, providing them with ownership and a platform to contribute to meaningful change.

The pilot ran from January to April 2024, where we trained a cohort in critical thinking, fairness principles, and how to assess DIRFs objectively. The scrutiny panel reviewed a percentage of DIRFs, provided feedback on trends, and identified potential biases. We also embedded the ZMT to provide independent oversight, which was crucial for fostering trust.

HB: What impact has the pilot had on trust in the discrimination complaints system, particularly among young black prisoners and staff?

SB: The impact was profound. Young black prisoners who participated in the scrutiny panels shared that they finally felt part of the solution rather than just the problem. This shift in mindset was pivotal. Through their involvement, we saw an increased trust in the DIRF process—not just among the panel members but also among their peers, who began to see the process as more transparent and fairer.

For staff, it was eye-opening. They gained insights into how prisoners perceive discrimination and their complaints. This created opportunities for learning and growth, particularly in understanding bias and the importance of communication.

The number of complaints resolved without escalation grew, and we saw a notable drop in the perception of 'inaction' on DIRFs. For me, that's the most rewarding outcome—seeing trust slowly being rebuilt, brick by brick.

HB: What were the main challenges in implementing the HMP Wayland pilot, and how did leadership at HMP Wayland and within HMPPS contribute to its success?

SB: One of the main challenges was overcoming initial scepticism. Some prisoners and staff questioned whether the pilot would lead to real change or just be another 'tick-box' exercise. Building that trust took time, and it required consistent communication and small, visible wins.

> Ultimately, training and awareness aren't just tools—they are investments in building trust and fostering an inclusive environment.

Another challenge was logistical—ensuring panel members were given adequate time and space to review DIRFs while balancing their daily routines. But the leadership at HMP Wayland made it clear this pilot was a priority. The Governor fully backed the initiative, which made a huge difference in getting staff buy-in.

At regional and national levels, the support we received was invaluable. Leadership ensured we had the resources and external expertise to guide the process. They didn't just endorse the pilot—they championed it, which gave it the credibility it needed to succeed.

HB: How do you envision the HMP Wayland pilot influencing wider prison reforms, and what are the next steps for you and your team in promoting racial justice and equality within the prison system?

SB: The pilot has the potential to be transformative across the prison estate. It's more than just a procedural reform; it's a cultural shift. By placing trust and transparency at the heart of the process, we've demonstrated how meaningful prisoner engagement can lead to better outcomes for everyone.

The next steps are about scaling up. We're already sharing the lessons from HMP Wayland with other prisons in the BCN region and beyond. The pilot's good practices have also been shared with other regional D&I leads for them to consider adapting in their own regions and prisons.

For me and my team, the focus remains on embedding racial justice into everything we do. This means continuing to listen, challenging systemic biases, and working collaboratively with both staff and prisoners to ensure that diversity and inclusion isn't just a policy, it's a lived reality.

HB: What recommendations came out of the pilot for generating trust and confidence in the discrimination complaints system?

SB: Several key recommendations emerged:

- ❏ ***Prisoner-led panels:*** Empowering prisoners to scrutinise the system fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, which directly builds trust.
- ❏ ***External oversight:*** Involving independent stakeholders like the ZMT provides transparency and demonstrates that the system isn't just self-regulated.
- ❏ ***Clear communication:*** Explaining the DIRF process step by step, including timelines and outcomes, helps manage expectations and reduces frustrations.
- ❏ ***Training for investigators:*** Ensuring all staff involved in DIRF investigations are trained in bias, cultural awareness, and the King Formula enhances fairness and consistency.
- ❏ ***Feedback loops:*** Sharing outcomes, themes, and lessons learned from DIRFs openly with staff and prisoners encourages continuous improvement.

Ultimately, the pilot reinforced that trust is built through action, not promises. Every step we take must show that we're listening and responding in a meaningful way. That's how we create systems that everyone can believe in.

HB: What does true racial equality in prisons look like to you, and what steps are needed to get there?

SB: True racial equality in prisons is about creating a space where every individual staff or prisoner, feels respected, heard, and valued, regardless of their background. It's about addressing disparities, ensuring access to the same opportunities, and fostering an environment where cultural differences are acknowledged and embraced. We need a system where the experiences of ethnic minorities, particularly those of young black prisoners, are not just heard but actively addressed through meaningful, sustainable change. To get there, we need more than policies; we need a collective shift in mindset, one that puts inclusion and fairness at the heart of everything we do. We need staff to engage in continuous training, leaders to champion inclusive practices, and for everyone, from top to bottom, to consistently act with empathy and accountability. Our work must focus on breaking down barriers, whether it's through listening, offering genuine support, or ensuring equal treatment in every aspect of prison life.

HB: In your view, how can the Prison Service at large improve its approach to addressing race and equality issues?

SB: In my view, we have made some positive strides, such as new structures and leadership that encourages innovation, but there's still much work to do. It's crucial that we invest in training that goes beyond compliance, ensuring all staff understand the systemic nature of racial inequalities and how their actions, whether conscious or unconscious, contribute to these issues.

Equally important is creating open, safe spaces for both staff and prisoners to discuss race, bias, and discrimination without fear of retribution. Transparency plays a vital role here; prisoners and staff need to know that when they speak up their voices are truly heard and that there will be follow-through. We are on a journey, and we need to ensure diversity is woven into every layer of leadership and decision-making. With diverse perspectives, we can find better solutions, and I'm confident that with the leadership we have now, we will continue to try different methods, learn, and evolve together towards a fairer and more equitable environment for everyone.

HB: What message would you like to leave with our readers regarding the importance of this work in building a fairer and more equitable prison system?

SB: This work is not just about policies; it's about people. It's about the lives of prisoners and staff who walk through the gates of our institutions every day, facing a world that is often unforgiving. Racial equality in prisons isn't a luxury or an optional improvement—it's a fundamental human right. By addressing race and equality issues, we aren't just making the prison system better; we're contributing to a more just society as a whole. Change will not come overnight, but if we work together- staff, prisoners, and external stakeholders, we can build trust, improve outcomes, and create an environment where everyone has the chance to thrive. My message is simple: don't wait for change to happen, drive it. We all have a part to play in making the system more just, fairer, and equitable for everyone.