Independent review of the prison system in England and Wales: Call for Evidence

Evidence submission | August 2026

This submission has been produced by Action for Race Equality's policy and research team: Meka Beresford, Head of Policy, Qasim Alli and Bowale Fadare, policy and research officers. For inquiries relating to this submission, please contact Meka Beresford via meka@actionforraceequality.org.uk

About Action for Race Equality

Action for Race Equality (ARE) was founded in 1991, and over the last 30+ years we have worked to champion fairness, challenge race inequality and pioneer innovative solutions to empower young people across education, employment, and criminal justice.

ARE has worked in the criminal justice system (CJS) for over 15 years, acting as a critical friend to services including the Metropolitan Police, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, the Ministry of Justice, the Youth Justice Board, and the Greater London Authority's Violence Reduction Unit. We co-ordinate the National Independent Advisory Group, a panel of experts comprised of civil society, academic, and third sector representatives, who work to challenge policy and practice that disproportionately impacts Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people in the Criminal Justice System. We produce research and briefings on racial disproportionality in the CJS, and work with organisations led by and for Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people to strengthen their capacity and platform their voices in policy spheres.

Action for Race Equality recognises that the Criminal Justice System is institutionally racist. At every level, and in every department, institutional and systemic racism are creating harsher outcomes for Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people who come into contact with the justice system. At each stage of a racially minoritised person's journey through the system, they will likely face racial bias, culminating in prison and resettlement.

In 2014 The Young Review, which was supported by Action for Race Equality (then BTEG) and Clinks, highlighted the specific experiences and needs of Black and Muslim men aged 18-24 in the Criminal Justice System and set out a series of recommendations that aimed to ensure that action takes place to address unequal outcomes; from prison to resettlement. This paved the way for David Lammy's 2017 review, which critically examined the treatment of Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people by the CJS and set out 35 clear recommendations intended to address and rectify areas where racial disproportionality was occurring. Nearly a decade since the landmark review, these recommendations have failed to deliver change despite Government accepting and completing implementation. This is pertinent to the Prisons Review, because we have seen how recommendations fade into oblivion and no change is achieved. If the review hopes to be successful in ending the unending crisis that grips the prisons system, we would encourage an accountability mechanism to be implemented to follow up on the outcomes of the review for a time period following its completion.

Theme 1: Key outcomes, risks and opportunities

Q3: Thinking about the next five to 15 years, what are the biggest opportunities to address the risks facing the system and improve outcomes?

Firstly, implementing a cross-departmental anti-racism strategy which integrates lived experience and cultural competency with policy change, robust monitoring and enforcement, with effective scrutiny and oversight measures is required to create broad change. This strategy should Improve cross-system data collection and linkage so that cumulative disadvantage can be examined across social, educational, housing, health, social, and criminal justice factors, and across successive CJS decision points, to ensure that prison is truly seen as a last resort, capacity pressures are eased, and disproportionate harm is tackled.

Secondly, there is an opportunity to overhaul the training regime which prison staff go through to improve outcomes for Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people in prison settings. Despite a notable increase in literacy around racism and racial disparities, efforts to implement anti-racist practice through training have not yet been substantial enough to ensure that decision-making isn't impacted by systematic racism and discretionary bias. Existing training models should be updated to move away from conventional tick-box e-learning training to models that rely primarily on mandatory online completion. Rather, training which is rooted in experiential, discussion-based and applicable to professional practice.

Finally, access to diversionary and rehabilitative interventions should not be conditional on an individual pleading guilty, as this requirement may disproportionately exclude people who are more likely to plead not guilty due to mistrust, legal advice or other factors. Removing this gateway could widen access to early support, reduce the number of people entering prison, reduce the accumulation of disadvantage at later stages, and enable diversion to focus on rehabilitation and reducing reoffending rather than procedural outcomes.

Theme 2: The prison estate and its capacity

Q4: What are the main current and future risks relating to prison capacity in England and Wales?

Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people are grossly over-represented in prison. Over a quarter (27%) of the prison population, 21,574 people, are from a minority ethnic group. If our prison population reflected the ethnic make-up of England and Wales, we would have over 9,000 fewer people in prison, the equivalent of 12 average-sized prisons. The economic cost of ethnic minority over-representation in our prison system is estimated to be £234m a year (2021).

Prison overcrowding has a disparate impact on Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people because it exacerbates already unequal, unsafe, and derogatory treatment. Almost three-quarters of prisons (72%) were overcrowded in 2024–25. A quarter of the prison population are held in overcrowded accommodation. Overcrowding affects whether activities, staff and other resources are available to reduce risk of reoffending, as well as distance from families and other support networks. Prison Reform Trust research respondents felt there were too many people in prison drawing on limited resources. Sharing a cell, as well as poor conditions, such as inadequate mattresses and broken windows, were cited as contributing to stress and anxiety.

Sentence inflation, closing prisons, cutting staff and not replacing them quickly, or not replacing them with equally skilled staff, increasing the punitive aspects of the incentives and earned privileges (IEP) scheme, increasing the length of sentences and increasing recalls from shorter sentences all have a cumulative impact on the mental health, safety and treatment of those in prisons. Whatever the causes of overcrowding, their effects for all prisoners on operational capacity leads to increased violence, lack of resources for rehabilitation, and lack of access to education. There have been significant links between a facility's population size and poor mental health, and incidences of self-harm and death from suicide. In later sections of this response, we will detail how this exacerbates already unequal, unsafe, and derogatory treatment that Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage prisoners suffer under structural racism in prisons.

In recent decades, the UK has become an increasingly ethnically diverse country, reflecting new patterns of migration, settlement, and identity, and this is likely to continue to change. The demographic picture resists simple classification or forecasting, and we should be wary of contributing to a discourse around the future demographic makeup of the UK that feeds into far-right narratives of 'replacement'. However, there is some evidence that most minority ethnic groups have much younger age profiles than the overall population. A higher proportion of people in prison under 25 years old are Black or Mixed Heritage. If patterns of racially disproportionate policing, sentencing, and imprisonment continue, the prison capacity crisis will continue to worsen, and continue to disproportionately affect Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people. Outcomes cannot continue to be determined by racist over-policing and systemic disadvantage, and the onus must be firmly placed on the pervasive systemic racism throughout the criminal legal system which discriminates against these groups, and so we would encourage this review to recognise the broader decision-making which is impacting the prisons system.

One young person we spoke to explained how he was sent to prison for his first arrest, an experience which indicates the disproportionate harshness experienced by Black young men in the criminal justice system: *"Everybody had thought that this was just going to be a simple tag, and we can work with the young person, but they just gave up on us, just threw the book. They threw me all the way in Wales, six hours away. When you're from London it's essentially going to another country to serve a sentence."*

Q5: What are the biggest opportunities to address these risks in the next five to 15 years, and ensure there is space to best accommodate the current and future projected prison population?

The cumulative disadvantage that Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people experience through the criminal legal system is directly contributing to the prison capacity crisis. If this review hopes to address the capacity crisis in prisons, it is crucial to consider how other government policies are disproportionately targeting Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people and contributing to the strain on prisons. The Independent Sentencing Review highlighted longer sentences, driven by increasingly punitive legislation, have been a major contributor to the rising prison population over the last 20 years. Yet there is no straightforward link between longer sentences and reduced reoffending. In 2024, five of the most senior former judges in England and Wales publicly stated that "there is nothing that justifies this doubling of sentence lengths." Overcapacity prisons are a symptom of a system that is in desperate need of reform. This presents a chance at creating longer term cultural change which dismantles current systems of racial bias. We hope the review will consider robust implementable reforms now, alongside a vision for longer term change.

Community sentences are particularly effective for people with many previous offences, aged under 21 or over 50, and with mental health conditions. Yet, their use has declined by a third in the last decade. Pre-sentence reports (PSRs) provide an assessment of the context and causes of a person's behaviour, and an independent recommendation of the sentencing option(s) available to the court. In 2024, probation inspectors found that less than half of PSRs they reviewed (47%) were of sufficient quality, particularly for ethnic minority defendants. Courts are over 10 times more likely to impose a community sentence if a PSR is conducted by probation staff. The decline in the use of these assessments is strongly linked to the sharp fall in community sentences. Despite this evidence, the government introduced emergency legislation explicitly to counter the sentencing council guidelines that PSR's should normally be considered if offenders belong to cohorts including those from an ethnic minority, cultural minority, and/or faith minority community. This move reversed a promising, well-researched, robust guideline from the sentencing council that could have made significant inroads in addressing racial disparities in sentencing and incarceration. The government's legislation actively inhibits the ability of the sentencing council to provide guidance that explicitly address racial disparities is likely to worsen outcomes even further. Understanding that additional challenges, disadvantages, and adversities are often faced by Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage individuals can enrich PSRs. They positively influence sentences and crucially, the lives of individuals by enabling the judiciary to respect the fundamental principle of fair treatment.

Q6: What are the biggest changes that need to be made to the design, configuration and condition of the prison estate in the next five to 15 years to improve outcomes?

The material conditions of the prison estate are in a dire conditions. Over 20% of people in prison are currently housed in prisons with Victorian-era accommodation. These establishments can be characterised by poor-quality accommodation and a relative shortage of opportunities for purposeful activity. The Victorian estate can exhibit some of the worst conditions across the prison system, with HMIP frequently reporting dark, damp cells with poor ventilation and drainage. Victorian prisons comprise a significant component of the urban prison estate - 70% of the Victorian prisons currently in operation are within the boundaries of major towns and cities, where Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people predominantly live. It is reasonable to assume that Victorian prisons disproportionately house prisoners from these ethnicities, leading them to experience overall worse material conditions.

Alongside improvements to the material conditions of prisons, dedicated resources must be assigned to address racism. Organisations led by and for Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people are integral to disrupting long-standing patterns of harm and systemic racism in prisons and should be proactively commissioned to deliver services in prisons. They offer culturally competent perspectives that ensure Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people in prison feel supported and able to rehabilitate.

Theme 3: Security

Q7: What are the main current and future risks to prison security and the management of high-risk offenders in England and Wales?

Existing security measures over rely on use of force in place of proper staffing. Use of force in prison and in particular its disproportionate use on Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people, is not a sustainable or appropriate risk management strategy. Rather, it risks creating further security risks. HMPPS (2025) found use of force was linked to age, gender, and ethnicity. In 2024, Prison Reform Trust found Black prisoners

were eight times more likely to have a baton used against them despite being 12% of the prison population. Muslim prisoners also experience disproportionate rates of force higher than their population. Entrenched racial disparities in use of force threaten prison security because it damages prisoner-staff relationships, it also accustoms people to violence leading to a cyclical environment. It is unlikely then that high-risk people can be meaningfully engaged.

The prison overcrowding crisis is both a current and future risk. The Public Accounts Committee's (PAC) 2025 inquiry found a quarter of prisoners were sharing cells designed for one person, with fights between prisoners up by 14%, and attacks on staff up by 19% at September 2024. Hence, overcrowding compromises resources, directly impacting life in prison. This has consequences for Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage people, who are already more likely to have negative experiences such as poor relationships with staff, disproportionate use of force and limited access to educational services. Moreover, managing high-risk people is made difficult as staff are unlikely to have the capacity to monitor and support them.

Lack of rehabilitative services such as education, training, and employment itself is a security risk. The Justice Committee found budgets to prison education had been cut by up to 50 per cent and they urged the government to explain the rationale behind the cuts. Prison Reform Trust note that people are more likely to be locked in their cells for significant periods of time, and even when unlocked, people had little to do and often resorted to substances to pass the time. Black and Muslim people are also more likely to be put in the segregation unit, where they may spend longer in the cells. Without access to consistent services and long lock-up times, people in prison are denied constructive outlets to learn and self-reflect. This keeps them suspended in a vulnerable state.

Q8: What are the biggest opportunities in the next five to 15 years to address these risks and improve the security of the prison estate?

Whilst the increase in non-custodial sentences under the Sentencing Act is welcomed, this change shifts responsibility from prisons to community organisations, probation services, and local authorities. To enable effective and sustainable community groups, these organisations must be well-funded and equipped with the necessary infrastructure, training, and staffing to deliver effective services.

Prisons must reconsider the role of family ties in helping vulnerable people, especially those at risk of self-harm and violence. HMI Prisons (2026) found that although families were seen as essential to rehabilitation; some were unable to alert prisons about welfare or safety concerns. Therefore, strengthening family ties is both a security and rehabilitative measure that must be utilised.

Another opportunity is for HMPPS to develop its Race Action Programme that began in 2020. Its projects reflect key areas of improvement in the prison system such as improving cultural competency, staff wellbeing, and ensuring fair and consistent outcomes for all. However, as outlined above, the impact of this work has been limited and speaks to the system's enduring resistance to change. ARE recognises that the HMPPS Disparities Unit has been formed to continue developing work established under the Race

Action Programme. It is crucial this work remains a priority and is properly supported to actualise the aims of the Race Action Programme and necessary changes beyond.

Theme 4: Prison leadership and workforce

Q9: What are the main current and future risks relating to the prison workforce in England and Wales?

The prison workforce is facing a staffing crisis that is having a direct and negative impact on provision and rehabilitation.

MOJ statistics from 2023 show that 60 per cent of prison officers had more than 10 years of experience in 2017, but this reduced to 30 per cent by June 2023. Meanwhile, prison officers with less than three years of experience rose from 27 per cent in 2017 to more than 36 per cent. These findings suggest a worrying trend in recruitment and retention. If prisons are understaffed, and more staff are inexperienced, it is likely there will be increased use of force, less time out of cells, reduced cultural competency and disregard for discrimination complaints. These outcomes may disproportionately impact Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage people in prison who already face higher levels of force and have little faith their discrimination claims will be recognised.

Another current risk is the lack of diversity and representation in prison staff which affects relationship building with Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage people in prison. HMPPS (2024) found that 85.7% of the staff force were White, 6.2% were Black or Black British, 4.4.% Asian or Asian British, 2.9% of Mixed Heritage – this is reflective of the broad population but not prison populations. HMI Prisons (2022) noted many Black staff described elevated levels of stress at work and discrimination that hindered career progression. They worried about being viewed with the same suspicion that affects Black prisoners and being accused of collusion or corruption. Such experiences undermine their ability to work and deny Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage people in prison with the ability to connect with staff from similar backgrounds.

One of our partners, Prisonlink, an organisation that supports people to resettle once they have left prison, informed us that with prisons at near-full capacity and staffing levels falling, reducing reoffending depends on staff having the time and wellbeing to build relationships with people in prison and bring community partners in. However, the prison workforce is stretched thin, inexperienced, and struggling with burnout, making it harder to safely unlock people and run rehabilitation programmes.

Prison staff are also not sufficiently trained to resolve the complex challenges of people in prison. HMI Prisons (2026) found that prisoners with mental health issues are increasing, but staff are not receiving mental health training. On the contrary, staff are being equipped with weapons such as Tasers and PAVA spray which are disproportionately used against Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people. This positions staff at odds with the support many people in prison require.

Q10: What are the biggest opportunities in the next five to 15 years to address these risks and improve outcomes for staff and the wider prison system?

One organisation that is filling in the gap created by an underexperienced and resource tapped prison staff is Spark Inside, which deliver coaching to prison staff and people in prison. Evaluation has found coaching supports prison staff to build resilience, manage stress and improve wellbeing. Participants felt more confident resolving different situations, less burnt out, better able to communicate and more likely to remain in their role. These positive outcomes address some of the risks above and show prison staff also require investment and tailored support.

Prisonlink also delivers a Basic Training in Prison Work course for those interested in working with people in prison. The main ethnic composition of the cohorts is African and Caribbean, signalling excellent work by Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage community groups to improve diversity and representation in prison staff. However, they add that unless recruitment, pay, training, and wellbeing are urgently addressed alongside new prison places and the introduction of the Sentencing Act 2026, we risk a system where safety suffers and meaningful resettlement work cannot happen.

Theme 5: Safety and decency

Q11: What are the main and current future risks relating to safety and decency in prisons in England and Wales?

The material conditions of prison life are increasingly deteriorating, with significant evidence that there is a disproportionately negative effect on the safety and decency of Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage prisoners. Not only does racism exacerbate negative outcomes for these cohorts in prisons, the racist treatment itself can be a prime cause of mental health concerns.

Staff cuts and restrictive regimes have exacerbated the risks and vulnerability of prisoners with mental health issues. The ways prisons address the needs of prisoners who are 'at risk' or who have mental health issues are informed by day-to-day racial discrimination. In August 2026, the Chief inspector of HMIP called for assessments in police custody to prevent seriously mentally ill people ending up in prison. This crisis of poor mental health in prisons correlates with a noted lack of support, especially for young adults who feel alone and 'left to fend for themselves' despite the fear and chaos surrounding them in the prison environment.

As one young person told us: "They just throw you in there, it is like a war zone. I saw some kid get hot water thrown in his face. The officers didn't care. The officers come over, they stopped it, they separated them and they took the kid to hospital. Next day the kid gets brought back. You get so normalised to violence that violence is then so normal to you, and you start feeling institutionalised."

In prison, there are higher incidences of psychosis, anxiety and depression, self-harm and attempted suicide than in the general population. Government data shows that Black people are detained under the Mental Health Act at rates up to 5 times higher than white people.

Basic psychological needs are frequently left unmet, with prisoners not feeling safe, and unable to positively engage with work, education, or therapy. More than half of people in prisons inspected in 2019–20 were negative about the quality of healthcare services in their prison. From 2022-2024, there were 262 self-inflicted deaths in prison, and in 2024, there were 13,897 individuals who self-harmed in prison. The

statistical analysis also does not offer an explanation as to why in both 2022 and 2024 there was one self-inflicted death of a Black person in prison, but in 2023, there were 15.

Prison statistics show a sustained increase in the frequency of fights and assaults. Between 2022 and 2024 the rate of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults rose by approximately 40%, from 174 to 233 per 1,000. Prison staff are responsible for determining if an incident is defined as a fight or assault, and assigning the correct role (assailant, victim, fighter etc.) to individuals involved in an incident. Zahid Mubarek Trust highlight that the data records a disproportionately high number of assailants as Black or Black British (20%). In a climate where many Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage prisoners complain that they are discriminated against, and treated less favourably and with less respect by prison staff, this raises concerns about the recording of incidents.

Being in prison and experiences of violence also have a long-term impact on mental health, as one person told us: “Within two weeks of my sentence, two big guys that were on the wing walk up in my cell. Keep in mind his is two weeks into my sentence that I'm serving for stuff that I've done months ago that I've even tried to rehabilitate. They were just running up on my cell, trying to cause an issue. Luckily, I was taught how to de-escalate the situation, but to this day, every single time I hear a noise outside my door, I wake up just like I heard those keys jangling outside the door.”

The HMIP 2016-17 annual report found that Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people were less likely to feel they have been treated fairly by the IEP scheme: some 35% of aggregated ‘Black and minority ethnic’ prisoners felt that the rewards scheme was fair compared to 44% of white prisoners, and 31% of Muslim prisoners compared to 43% of non-Muslim prisoners. Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage prisoners were less likely to be released on temporary license (ROTL), less likely to be located on favourable wings, and more likely to face adjudications. Nationally, Black people are more likely to be placed on Basic status, and less likely to be Enhanced; 8.6% of Black prisoners were on Basic, compared to 5.4% of white prisoners. Research shows negative experiences included examples of IEP downgrades without procedural clarity or perceived fairness, cultural or racial stereotyping and lack of cultural awareness by prison officers, and a lack of empathy by the prison regime in relation to family or sensitive issues.

Q12: What are the biggest opportunities in the next five to 15 years to address these risks and improve prison safety and decency?

There is a wealth of quantitative data collected by the prison service that shows stark disparities in the treatment and experience of Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people in prisons. The HMIP annual report 2025-26 shows that confidence in the discrimination reporting system is lacking at many prisons, so even this quantitative data is likely failing to record the scope of these problems. However, explaining these disparities requires qualitative data, to develop remedies informed by user experience. The Prison Reform Trust recommend that the government develop an independent DIRF complaints process including involvement of a paid external invigilator to visit the prison to give the complaints process greater legitimacy in the eyes of prisoners. Even where disparities are well documented, HMIP report little action taken to improve them. Data collection is not an end in and of itself; documenting and understanding disparities must be followed with appropriate action to improve outcomes.

Greater efforts must be taken to divert people from prison to interventions which support their rehabilitation, especially for those with mental health issues, young people, and vulnerable people. For

those in prison, their basic needs must be met, and opportunities for rehabilitation must be prioritised over further punishment on top of their imprisonment. Rehabilitative interventions could benefit from being tailored to specific needs. Research across four different prisons conclusively showed that well-thought-through self-development cultural workshops administered by the Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality had a significant and positive impact on the negative perceptions of the Black and Muslim prisoners involved.

Addressing the interpersonal and structural racism that robs Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage prisoners of access to decency and safety requires greater prioritisation of equalities work, stronger mechanisms of accountability, and tailored staff training. Equalities work in prisons cannot be an optional extra, as racism infects all aspects of prison life. The Prison Reform Trust outline a range of recommendations in their 2024 report 'Race to the top: A PPN report on race and ethnicity in prisons'. Key amongst them are the proper resourcing and prioritisation of Equalities work, including in governor's meetings, as well as prisoner-staff forums and training of prisoners and staff on issues of ethnicity and race. HMPPS should create a good practice guide based on the work of other organisations that are conducting meaningful work on racial literacy/structural racism to provide governors with a constructive toolkit. They also recommend proactive work to help people in prison maintain a connection to their cultural background, be it connecting them with local places of worship, procuring reading materials, allowing people to decorate their cells in ways that remind them of home, etc. Prisons should build culturally appropriate public health messaging about depression that encourages early intervention self-reporting.

Theme 6: Rehabilitation and reducing reoffending

Q13: What are the main current and future risks which might prevent prisons from effectively rehabilitating prisoners and reducing reoffending?

ARE is deeply concerned about the poor regime offered in prisons, and the lack of commitment to tackle entrenched racial disparities in service access and delivery.

One of our partners, Prisonlink, notes that lack of service access and positive regime means that rehabilitation is ineffective. As prisons are overcrowded and understaffed, there is little time for purposeful activity, support and partnerships that help people turn their lives around and reduce reoffending.

Racial disparities in how Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage people access rehabilitative services also hinders their success. The Being Well Being Equal campaign and report (2023), found that Black and ethnic minority prisoners were more likely to report poor access to purposeful activities than white prisoners and have low expectations of rehabilitation and release support. Black people were also more likely to be placed on Basic reward status, and less likely to be put on the Enhanced status. This suggests ethnic prisoners are at a disadvantage; disparities may also be replicated in the earned progression model which hinges on engagement with purposeful activity. Therefore, Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage people in prison may be less likely to earn their release, staying in custody longer than their white counterparts.

We understand from our network that services face numerous barriers when operating in prisons. Current commissioning and procurement services are unnecessarily long and overly complex, meaning that organisations without dedicated resource struggle to compete for contracts. Furthermore, by and for

organisations report facing discrimination that has blocked their success. For organisations who can secure contracts, they may face additional barriers if they have lived experience. These structural barriers prevent organisations well placed to transform the experiences of people in prison.

Action for Race Equality's Routes2Success team, which delivers our flagship mentoring programme, has also faced challenges developing partnerships with prisons. High staff turnover has prevented them from building and sustaining relationships with governors, leading to inconsistent delivery of rehabilitative programmes. A lack of staff ownership has meant sessions are inefficiently coordinated and prisons fail to incorporate them into the wider regime. Additionally, due to security risks outlined above, they have been unable to deliver group-based programmes to their core target audience, Black men. As a result, prison infrastructure resists rehabilitation, increasing the likelihood of reoffending.

Q14: What specific activities and interventions in prison would be most effective in supporting prisoner rehabilitation and reducing reoffending?

ARE recognises that organisations led by and for Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people are integral to disrupting long-standing patterns of harm and systemic racism in prisons. They offer culturally competent perspectives and services that ensure Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people in prison feel supported and, importantly, able to rehabilitate.

In 2013, Routes2Success delivered a two-day creative writing workshop in HMP Wayland. It was led by role model, DD Armstrong. As a former prisoner, DD was able to build a rapport with prisoners through his lived experience. Black prisoners under the age of 25 found the sessions, 'brilliant', 'educational' and 'inspiring'. This case study illustrates how led by and for activities increase engagement and set people in prison on the path to rehabilitation.

In 2024, ARE worked in HMP Wormwood Scrubs to deliver workshops with young Black men during Black History Month. These workshops encouraged creative expression and personal reflection, empowering participants to take control of their stories. This demonstrates that interventions must treat each prisoner as an individual with tailored exercises based on their specific circumstance, as opposed to generic one-size-fits all approaches.

HMPPS must re-strategise operational delivery in prisons. For too long, HMI Prisons have found prisons lacking in purposeful activity and time out of cells. Correcting this can offer significant improvements; an MOJ analysis of more than 4,500 prison learners found that those who studied with The Open University were 22% less likely to reoffend within a year of release than comparable prisoners who did not study. They also committed 37% fewer offences. Thus, prisons must standardise educational interventions as it supports prisoner rehabilitation and reduces reoffending.

Unlocked Graduates have recently spearheaded an initiative in HMP Pentonville and HMP Wandsworth using the Scandinavian prison model. The aim was to test the effects on rehabilitation if prison officers are effectively trained. Officers were selected and given additional training based on the rehabilitative Scandinavian approach to prisons and received continual support. Initial results show a 45% reduction in assaults, a 57% drop in self-harm and a 62% fall in disorder compared with the rest of the prison. This suggests one of the most effective interventions in supporting rehabilitation and reducing reoffending is staff related; high-quality staff with appropriate and continuous training can have a marked difference in prisoner rehabilitation.

One young person told us how engaging with a by and for service transformed their experience: “There was no rehabilitation or there was no opportunities to get out. There was just you are who you are. We've labelled you as that. I went to jail three times before I was 18, nothing was put this in place to support you. I didn't meet (the service) until I was 18. He was the first worker I actually locked in with and actually wanted to support me and help me. Before that it was like I was written off. Now I've got stability and I've got structure and security. If I just thought it was possible that would have happened a lot earlier, I wouldn't have had to go to jail six times. I wouldn't have had to waste all that time in prison, and I had to waste all that time in my life, a key part of my life as well”.

Theme 7: Women’s prisons

Q15: What are the biggest risks facing women’s prisons within the English and Welsh justice system, including risks that may affect outcomes for women during custody and following release?

The biggest risks facing women’s prisons are self-harm, use of force, racial disparities in access to rehabilitative services, victimisation, and poor release planning.

Self- harm is one of the biggest risks facing women’s prisons. Women in prison are often dealing severe mental health issues, childhood trauma, and domestic abuse. HMI Prisons (2026) found self-harm rates remained eight times higher in women’s prisons than men’s and in 2024, women were disproportionately involved in 1,209 self-harm incidents. Despite these figures, women point out that services are not culturally competent, specific or trauma informed. Therefore, prisons are failing to understand women’s complex needs. This may increase feelings of isolation and disengagement from rehabilitative programmes that could improve outcomes in prison.

Poor prisoner-staff relationships are mirrored in the use of force against women and reports of victimisation. Use of force incidents have risen from 3,268 in 2021/2022 to 6,932 in 2024/25. Research has found that women are being increasingly handcuffed, restrained or subjected to “pain-inducing techniques.” The prison experience is significantly worse for Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage women; data shows they are more likely to have negative outcomes such as verbal abuse, intimidation, and theft by staff. These conditions exacerbate their vulnerability and risks worsening mental health challenges.

There are no women’s prisons in Wales meaning that the English justice system prescribes how Welsh women experience prison. As of December 2024, Welsh women were being held in all 12 women’s prisons in England. This is a risk for women as the distance from familial networks may undo or undermine the

impact of positive interventions; hence there must be a distinct strategy for Welsh women in prison to not compromise their outcomes.

Racial disparities and disproportionality in prison affect the outcomes of Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage women. Despite being overrepresented at every stage of the criminal justice process, HMI Prisons notes that analysis of data to identify disproportionality was limited, even where there was evidence of a problem. This is corroborated by Dr Angela Charles (2026) who found that HMPPS were unlikely to uphold DIRFs by Black prisoners and women are hesitant to use the process due to fear and lack of faith in the system. Hence, prisons are entrenching disproportionate outcomes by failing to act, enabling disparities to become part of prison culture.

An additional element to these disparities is women's migration status. The APPG on Women in Contact with the Justice System (2023) noted that Black, racially minoritised and migrant women are disproportionately remanded. They make up 16% of the remand population and are more likely to be in prison for less serious offences. Hibiscus Initiatives, an organisation that supports migrant women in contact with the criminal justice and immigration system, suggest this is because of fears they may abscond. Prisons may therefore compound and exploit the vulnerability migrant women already feel due to their immigration status.
Release planning is also fundamentally weak, increasing the likelihood of reoffending. Prison Reform Trust (2026) found that around 60% of women leave prisons without settled accommodation. Release on Temporary Licences (ROTL) was also severely underused for Black women. Dr Charles found that Black women in prison did not feel their rehabilitation was prioritised, citing disparities in the length of time for forms to be signed and eligibility. This reinforces the Being Well Being Equal findings in the male estate.

Similarly, Welsh women are being released without appropriate support for resettlement. Those without a fixed address increased by 34% in 2024, and 560 prison leavers were rough sleeping on the day of their release in 2024/25. Stable accommodation in an environment free from criminogenic influences is crucial to aiding crime free lives.

Q16: What changes to the custodial estate and targeted interventions would have the greatest impact on improving outcomes for women over the next five to 15 years?

Women in the custodial estate are often disregarded due to their smaller numbers, yet they exhibit some of the most severe challenges across the prison population. Much of the research has advocated for a gender specific, trauma informed approach that recognises women's distinct realities. The Women's Justice Board has also advocated for this approach to be put on statutory footing.

Prison Reform Trust has identified several interventions such as coordinated action across government departments and locally, training and information sharing and building quality relationships between service providers and women in custody.

In practice, some targeted interventions include greater collaboration and strategic partnerships between prisons and women's centres. This would go a long way towards realising that prisons are not the experts

in behaviour management, and there are more effective and sustainable alternatives already happening in the community.

Prisons must also take greater care in planning and delivery support during custody. Too often, women's needs are either unidentified or misidentified. It would be beneficial if prisons adopt a presumption against restrictive or punitive interventions and instead prioritise better communication and de-escalation. This requires investment in prison staff, so they have the skills required to improve outcomes.

In 2025, the government announced girls would no longer be placed in YOIs because of the same risks mentioned in this response. The rationale that prompted this decision must be extended to the adult women's custodial estate. Women in prison were once young girls who were systematically failed; imprisonment often exacerbates that trauma.

Theme 8: Different cohorts

Q17: Which cohorts of prisoners have specific needs and vulnerabilities in prison?

Prison service has a responsibility to take care of the wellbeing and transitions into adulthood for young people as they 'grow up' in prison, especially for young adults transitioning from the youth custody estate. Young Adults in prison (under the age of 25), in particular are not safe, experiencing high levels of violence and self-harm. One young person told us how being sentenced to prison made them feel like a lost cause "Imagine a 14-year-old kid getting told in court. 'Yeah, there's nothing else we can do for you,' and then sending me to prison. Then going back to prison when I'm 15, then going back to prison when I'm 17, and that goes for a lot of kids in my area. I feel like that made the problem worse because now you're just giving up on a whole generation and I feel like in my area they gave up on all of us."

In 2025, the highest rates of self-harm incidents in prisons were in the 18-20 age range, with this being even higher for young women. The challenges facing young adults in prison fall on a racially disproportionate population. Among young people facing a life sentence, the proportion who come from a ethnic minority group is rising. Among people serving a life sentence, who were sentenced when they were 25 or younger, with tariffs over 15 years, the proportion from Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage groups is increasing. Black or Black British people make up 21% of those under 25 in prison. Poor relationships between black prisoners and staff are characterised by suspicion and are likely to be contributing to escalation of perceived risk and the disproportionately high use of force against black prisoners.

42% of adult prisoners have been permanently excluded from school. Exclusions are disproportionately used against Black, Asian, Mixed Heritage, and Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children and their families. The high levels of exclusions for Black children are firmly rooted in racial discrimination and adultification, and there is a fundamental failure of care that creates an exclusion to prison pipeline. There are acute educational needs and vulnerabilities for people in prison, as a direct result of structurally racist school experiences. 47% of adult prisoners had no qualifications compared to 15% of working age population.

The number of Muslims in adult prisons has nearly tripled since 2002, rising from 5,502 to 16,051 by 2025. They make up 18% of the prison population, compared with 6% of the general population. Muslims in prison reported to Maslaha that they were not receiving basic care, not easily able to receive or send

parcels or letters, and not easily able to make complaints. All respondents to this research consistently raised the way in which access to Friday prayers was used as a punishment in violation of prison guidance and Muslims' right to worship. There needs to be an effective and trusted monitoring process in place that can challenge this. Muslim prisoners are less likely to say they feel safe, treated respectfully by staff, or that they could turn to a staff member for help. Muslims in prison are subject to disproportionate use of force such as PAVA spray, and being isolated from others in segregation centres.

5% of prison detainees in the adult estates identify as Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller. This is a disproportionate overrepresentation, but likely to be an underestimate with many Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people choosing not to disclose their ethnicity due to concerns over discrimination. These communities experience disproportionately high levels of poverty, and discrimination across many other aspects of their lives, including higher rates of custodial sentences. Prison service attitudes to these communities are reported as being blatantly discriminatory.

Foreign nationals currently make up 12% of the prison population in England and Wales. The lines between those who are serving criminal sentences and those held under immigration powers are often blurred, including holding age-disputed children in adult prisons. The use of force against those in immigrant detention is inconsistent, disproportional, and unjustified. Foreign nationals were more likely to say they felt unsafe, that they spent more time in their cells, and that they wouldn't have a staff member to turn to if they had a problem, according to inspectors. In 2022, prison inspectors found that immigration detainees held in prisons are substantially disadvantaged compared with those held in immigration removal centres. This group has distinct needs which are often not met, including access to legal representation and advice, Home Office caseworkers, and interpreting/translation services. They are often held for unacceptably long periods and given very little notice that they will be subject to indefinite immigration detention. Immigration detainees include, but are not limited to, foreign national prisoners who have served their sentence and continue to be held under immigration powers while the Home Office attempts to deport them. Immigration detention is an administrative process, not a criminal procedure. That means people can be detained—potentially in prison—by immigration officials rather than courts. Unlike most other European countries, there is no time limit on immigration detention in the UK.

Q18: What are the biggest changes that are needed to address the needs of different cohorts in order to improve outcomes for the prison system?

Addressing racial disparities for Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people in school exclusions, policing, and sentencing, upstream of prisons are urgently needed. The government must encourage non-policing and non-custodial solutions, with harm-reduction approaches to violence and appropriate diversion and support for mental health issues and substance abuse.

There must be specific work for different cohorts; the groups discussed above have distinct needs in the face of structural disadvantage and face particular barriers to their rehabilitation. This is due to experiences of social and economic inequalities, institutional racism, and a lack of services that take into account different cultures. HMPPS should undertake mandatory tailored assessments of purposeful activities to address the needs of these communities. These should include appropriate diagnoses of neurodiversity needs, and tailored wellbeing services to meet the specific needs of young Black men in prison.

Due to high staff turnover and a lack of seniority amongst prison staff, robust training provision is crucial to addressing these issues. Prisons should provide mandatory equality and diversity training to all staff. Prisons should seek the advice of organisations led by Black, Asian, Mixed Heritage people, Muslims, Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller people who are aware of critical approaches to diversity and equality. Prisons should focus on building relationships with external stakeholders from Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage groups and invite leaders of such communities to visit the prison and assist in building a more inclusive culture. Prisons should embed structured, permanent advisory roles for people with direct experience of the prison system within both policy development and operational decision making. They should also be part of all prisons external scrutiny panels. These should review a wider set of outcomes for Black, Asian, Mixed Heritage, Gypsy, Roma, Traveller, and Muslim people in prison, including existing commitments to Use of Force and IEP panels, as well as an overhaul of the DIRF process, to ensure racism from staff is given due regard in the investigation process. All incidents need to be logged and recorded for impact assessments.

Across the board, HMPPS should record ethnicity, disaggregated by religion and gender. HMPPS should put in place outcome measures for all prisons on race equality that should include reference to specific cohorts, like Muslim prisoners. Research shows that recording inequalities can reduce prisoner deaths. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) should as a matter of urgency put in place a strategy for reducing the increasingly disproportionate numbers of Muslim adults and children entering custody. To support the development and implementation of this strategy, the MoJ should commission an independent review into the rise of Muslims receiving prison sentences, and the treatment and outcomes of Muslims in prison. This review would build on the Young Review and Lammy Review.

Theme 9: Technology and digital tools

Q19: What further role should technology and digital tools play over the next five to 15 years in helping to address the risks highlighted in this Call for Evidence and improve prison outcomes?

As prisons become increasingly data-driven, tools like OASys (Offender Assessment System) and other algorithmic risk models hold influence over key decisions such as categorisation, parole, and early release. Yet these tools remain opaque and problematic. Prisoners and legal representatives are rarely provided with a clear understanding of how scores are calculated or how to challenge them. There is a robust and growing body of evidence that technology, and especially artificial intelligence, reproduce and exacerbate existing racial inequalities. Liberty have raised concerns that artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithm-based technologies will contravene fundamental human rights, result in unlawful discrimination, and exacerbate and entrench systemic racism. New algorithmic based technologies are at risk of being improperly regulated and are reliant on state data sets in which Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage communities are over-represented. This runs a high risk of having a disproportionate impact on Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage communities, who are more likely to be mis-identified, over-policed, and face unequal treatment in prisons. Instead of rolling out new tools which continue to subject Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage people to racist decision-making, the government must look instead towards community-led solutions which have social justice, equality, participation and human rights at their heart.

The government has indicated an intention to adopt a range of new biometric technologies to be used by law enforcement agencies, including increased use of facial recognition technologies and other predictive

and inferential analysis in policing. As police reforms introduce increasingly criminalising technologies, there may be consequences for capacity and racial disproportionality in prisons. Every new technology introduced into the criminal legal system needs to be treated independently and cautiously, with appropriate consultation and further legislation. Transparency and accountability must be at the core of new technology use, with explainable AI, meaningful audit rights, and independent review mechanisms. The government must introduce a cohesive, flexible and future-proof approach to the risk of AI systems, which protects people from the risks of state-sponsored AI harm and discrimination. The absence of a coherent regulatory framework attuned to emerging technology like AI, leaves the UK reliant on outdated laws ill-suited to protecting human rights.

Prisoner access to in-cell technology can provide key opportunities for improving disparities. Technology can offer prisoners more autonomy in managing their education, wellbeing, and release planning. However, digital transformation must be pursued with care in prisons, to avoid entrenching and worsening existing racial disparities. Access remains inconsistent to in-cell technology, e.g. through laptops via the Launchpad programme. Eligibility criteria based on sentence type, security category, adjudication history, and people on remand, all have the potential to exclude participation in a system where Black, Asian, and Mixed Heritage people already face unequal treatment from prison staff. This is particularly concerning if digital access, education and wellbeing tools become factors in parole hearings, sentence planning, or IEPs. Accessibility must be treated as a core legal obligation, not a secondary technical challenge. Where technology facilitates remote participation in court hearings, it must not be allowed to erode procedural safeguards, or hinder a defendant's ability to engage meaningfully in proceedings.

Theme 10: Best practice in England, Wales, other UK justice systems and overseas

Q20: Are there any further examples of best practice in prisons in England and Wales that the review should consider?

There are many organisations that are led by and for minoritised groups in prison who are delivering essential services in prisons which are delivering crucial outcomes regarding safety and resettlement. This includes Action for Race Equality's own mentoring programme, R2S, which has delivered mentoring sessions in HMP Wayland and HMPYOI Wormwood Scrubs to young men. 89% of young men said they were inspired by R2S role models during the sessions, and 95% of the young men said they were more likely to return to education after the R2S sessions, with one saying: "This event was very helpful and has made me see things like how I can change my life around even though I have been to prison".

Other organisations delivering programmes which provide best practice examples include Prison Link and Spark2Life, which we have already referred to in earlier sections of this submission, as well as Maslaha, the Zahid Mubarek Trust, and Muslim Women in Prison.

Stakeholders external to by and for organisations have also spearheaded crucial streams of work which provide examples of best practice. This is well demonstrated by a co-ordinated working group situated within the London Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime which sought to tackle ethnic disproportionality in adult justice. MOPAC coordinate four groups across the justice journey, but a best practice example comes from the offender and sentence management group which included representatives from across

agencies including London Prisons, Probation, the Metropolitan Police Service, and other commissioned services who sought to tackle ethnic disproportionality across prisons and probation. The group worked to collate disproportionality data across their organisations and identified clear areas of overrepresentation across the offender and sentence management journey. This type of data sharing cross-agency is not standard practice, but in collating in the organisations were able to conduct analysis and design interventions which targeted pivotal points which could worsen disproportionality.

Examples of some interventions the group produced included an action plan in consultation with people in prisoners to tackle disproportionate use of force and adjudications, introduction of training which led to a 5% reduction in disproportionality for Black individuals in tagging data, and identification of areas which required further work such as improving data collection, heightened scrutiny of body worn video, and improvement in regional leadership. This type of scrutiny and driven working indicates further need for coordinate cross agency working which seeks to go beyond evidence collection and into intervention which delivers an end to disparities.