Good Practice: Equalities in Prisons

18 July marks Nelson Mandela International Day – an occasion honouring the man who spent 27 years incarcerated, yet who emerged committed to human rights and social justice. The day is a reminder that everyone, and every establishment, bears responsibility for advancing those values that Mandela championed.

Mandela's own experience of imprisonment lent particular weight to his conviction that human dignity does not end at the prison gate. In December 2015 the UN General Assembly adopted the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, renaming them the *Nelson Mandela Rules* in recognition of his legacy. The Rules established clear benchmarks for upholding human dignity within prison systems worldwide.

Rule 2 of the Nelson Mandela Rules states that there must not be "discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or any other status" and that "prison administrations [should] take into account the individual needs of prisoners".

This paper examines how prisons in England and Wales are working to advance equality through the inclusion of prisoners in forums, careful scrutiny of data, and targeted awareness-raising. Drawing on examples of good practice in the UK NPM's Reporting Dashboard over the 2025/26 reporting year, it considers what it might look like when the Mandela Rules move from paper to practice, and what lessons these examples offer for building fairer, more humane systems across the UK's deprivation of liberty landscape.

Structured inclusion

Often the most effective approaches to ensuring fair treatment and equality within prisons were those where inclusion was actively structured into the routine of the establishment through forums and detainee representation at meetings. Achieving fair treatment for all detainees necessitates architecture, not just intention, and offering a defined role in equality work builds both trust and accountability.

At HMP Chelmsford, a forum for young Black, Asian and minority ethnic prisoners had become embedded in the prison routine, seeking to tackle the problems that these populations face within the criminal justice system. A broader model operated at HMP Risley – regular forums ran for several different groups, supported by an Equality Representative on all wings. The approach taken to older and disabled prisoners stood out: an initial joint group was later split into two once it became clear the two populations had distinct needs. This demonstrated a willingness by the establishment to keep these structures adaptable, rather than treat them as a single model fit for all.

Prisoner-led scrutiny was in place at HMP Drake Hall, where women were encouraged to monitor how well existing policies were applied in practice – giving them the opportunity to form part of how the establishment was held to account. At HMP Erlestoke, a scrutiny panel

had been introduced as part of the discrimination incident reporting system, which comprised eight prisoners, with as many as possible appointed from minority groups. Giving those most likely to experience discrimination a formal role in reviewing how complaints are handled adds both legitimacy and lived experience to the process, and offers a transferable model for any establishment seeking to strengthen confidence in its own system.

Across these examples, the common thread is that forums and detainee inclusion work best when prisoners are given a genuine route to question staff, raise concerns and shape policies and activities that affect them. However, structures alone are only as effective as the people running them. At HMYOI Werrington, an "enthusiastic" equality and diversity manager engaged well with the young people in custody and actively encouraged their participation in forums, demonstrating that the quality of staff-detainee relationships can play a role in determining the genuine value of such forums. A similar quality of engagement was recognised at HMP Usk and Prescoed, where staff were recognised to be making an effort to support prisoners with protected characteristics.

Taken together, these examples suggest that structured inclusion is most effective when it combines protected spaces for prisoners to be heard and staff who bring genuine energy and skill to making them work. The establishments mentioned have made deliberate decisions to embed the prisoner voice into the culture of the establishment, rather than treating equality as a matter dealt with only when something goes wrong.

Data as a tool

A recurring marker of good practice was the collection, analysis and scrutiny of data relating to equalities. As noted in Good Practice Thematic 4, effective data recording creates a reliable and transparent record of decisions and events, helping to safeguard detainee rights and ensuring accountability.

At HMP Erlestoke, an "excellent" system was in place, capturing statistical information and identifying departures from the expected across a whole range of activities and circumstances. The information was then used to identify areas of potential inequality or discrimination, showing how data can assist with spotting negative patterns before they become too firmly entrenched. Similarly, at HMYOI Wetherby, there was thorough scrutiny of the ethnicity of young people who had been restrained, separated or had chosen to self-isolate.

The quality of HMP Thameside's discrimination incident reporting forms was praised: every report received a thoroughly investigated and in-depth response. This example serves as a reminder that data only aids equality if what it records is followed through with action. At both HMPs Warren Hill and Bure, data was not only recorded and scrutinised, but also regularly shared at meetings attended by prisoners, providing accountability and reassurance that

inequality was being actively identified rather than overlooked. This gave prisoners direct sight of the monitoring process, rather than asking them to simply trust that it was happening.

Staff at HMP Littlehey diligently recorded, analysed and reviewed use of force data monthly. The data recorded was disaggregated by day of the week, time of day, location, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation and neurodiversity. This is important: discrimination rarely affects a single characteristic in isolation, and seeing one protected characteristic at a time can risk missing where disadvantage and inequality compound.

Data, when accurately and actively recorded and analysed, can be a genuine driver of equality. However, it is important to note that recorded data can only ever capture what is reported and it is expected that some discrimination and unfair treatment within prisons goes unreported.

Awareness raising

Alongside formal structures and use of data, prisons doing well on equalities also created space and time for celebration, dialogue and shared experience. Purposeful events built around faith and identity help prisoners themselves feel understood, but also help the wider prison population, including staff, understand experiences different from their own.

Faith services within prisons play a particular role in this respect. At many prisons, including HMPs Coldingley, Grendon and Frankland, arrangements had been made to celebrate Ramadan, Eid, Passover, Christmas and other faith-related festivals, including for minority faiths.

Similar events and programmes have been created around non-faith markers of identity. Black History Month at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, for example, included a range of social events, speakers and regional foods, giving the whole prison population a shared opportunity to engage with Black history and culture. HMP Risley's Black Hero's Journey (a one-to-one coaching and self-development programme) took a targeted approach, recognising the particular challenges faced by black and mixed-race prisoners, and providing tailored support built around their specific experiences.

At HMP Frankland, the equality team had held a Pride celebration in support of LGBTQIA+ prisoners, which went on to produce more informal, social team meetings and a larger support and social group for those prisoners – suggesting that a single, well-run event can create momentum and relationships that outlast the event itself. An innovative approach was taken at HMP Whatton, where prisoners from protected groups recorded podcasts for the prison's TV and radio channel, allowing peers to learn directly about each other's experiences and raising awareness among both prisoners and staff. Peer-led formats such as this carry a credibility that top-down communication can lack.

These examples highlight a recognition that equality is not only about correcting unfair treatment when it occurs, but about actively building understanding and connection across a diverse population. Celebrating differences in culture, identity and religion can seemingly have effects that extend well beyond the event itself.

Equality beyond the prison gate

The examples in this paper do not rely on a single dramatic intervention. Instead, each shows an establishment deliberately and consistently choosing to give prisoners a voice, to look at its own data, and to make space for difference. This demonstrates a practical application of the Nelson Mandela Rules, themselves necessitating sustained commitment to the idea that human dignity does not end at the prison gate.

That said, none of the examples shared are unique to England and Wales, nor to the prison estate – each of them could be adapted to deprivation of liberty settings across the UK. They are not grand gestures, but proof that equality and dignity in detention is a choice available to any establishment willing to make it.