

Why Monitoring Diversity is not about “Political Correctness”

Zephirine Barbarachild is a member of the IMB at Lancaster Farms and a member of the Diversity Working Group. She is writing here in a personal capacity.

Some years ago, as many will recall, the Home Office delivered diversity training to its 1,850 Board of Visitor members in England and Wales, employing an “approved” diversity training outfit – which unfortunately had no knowledge of prison monitoring. This manifestly expensive disaster ensured that when the word “diversity” was mentioned, your average IMB switched off or reminisced bitterly about the diversity training they had been obliged to attend.

Diversity matters are commonly misinterpreted as an issue of “political correctness” - all too easily reducing our efforts to a box-ticking exercise; such initiatives are instinctively rejected by open-minded people as an instrument of control. Diversity issues are, however, not so much an ideology of political correctness as **an agenda of decency, respect, fairness, humanity and dignity for everyone** perfectly matching the agenda that IMBs understand and practise in prisons and immigration removal centres.¹ IMBs are already conversant with the principles underlying the philosophy of diversity: our embracing of the principles of the diversity agenda is already well underway.

Diversity has six broad headings: **gender, faith, race and ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and dis/ability**. Add “inclusivity” and additional sub-categories emerge in the specific context of each establishment. Monitoring diversity is a fascinating multi-layered way of seeing the world which can readily be integrated into prison monitoring work.

Gender

Most establishments have a single-sex prisoner population, but gender issues affect both prisoners and staff. What is the male/female balance of prison officers and governors? Are male staff privileged over female staff, or vice versa? Is there gender-based bullying among staff? Are staff bullying prisoners? Be alert to inappropriate distasteful sexist language – even when passed off as “only a joke”; it affects both the target of the insult and those overhearing it.

Faith, Race and Ethnicity

Not easily separated, faith, race and ethnicity are grouped together here to encourage a holistic approach to understanding and monitoring diversity. It is commonly (but incorrectly) thought that faith matters are covered by a multi-faith room, an *imam* for Friday prayers, *halal* food for Muslim prisoners and vegetarian

¹ Wherever prisons/prisoners are mentioned, this includes IRCs/detainees.

food for Rastafarians. While special dietary needs arise for reasons of both faith and ethnicity, a diverse inclusive approach can also include everyone in these “differences”. Food is key to sharing: Eid feast food enjoyed by Muslim prisoners can be on the main menu, and a recent imaginative example of good diversity practice was food served throughout last year’s football World Cup from the countries playing on a given day.

The Chaplaincy is almost inevitably Christian-led while being sympathetic and open to other expressions of faith, including paganism - now recognized by the Prison Service - and Rastafarianism, which is not. In ensuring Islamic prisoners’ fair treatment, we should not be influenced by current prejudice. Sensitivities about Islam are currently heightened but the national debate is essentially about modernity vs. fundamentalism; our job is to encourage freedom of speech, not hatred.

Monitoring ethnicity is perhaps especially important in Immigration Removal Centres: is there adequate access to phone-calls, interpreters and reading materials in foreign nationals’ first language? Race issues are primarily about discriminatory language and bullying, whether among prisoners or from staff to prisoners: racially abusive language should always be regarded as offensive and reported.

Age

Age issues cover the whole life-spectrum. In a Young Offenders’ Institution 75% of detainees are barely literate: many are school-refusers, suspended or excluded from school, for whom access to all forms of literacy are crucial to effective rehabilitation, to reduce phenomenally high recidivism rates. Consider access to the prison library, what magazines and newspapers can be ordered through canteen, help with form-filling, requests and complaints, and what basic literacy classes Education offers.

Elderly prisoners often have age-related medical needs, and some may have spent many years deprived of their liberty while those convicted when older may struggle to acclimatize to prison.

Sexual Orientation

Everyone has a sexual orientation. Can prisoners have conjugal visits (normally regarded as a heterosexual privilege – but it might equally extend to include same-sex partners)? Do prisoners have family visits with their children? How are the needs of transgendered prisoners accommodated and those undergoing gender reassignment? Does the Library carry gay magazines?

Juveniles and young offenders are exploring and/or questioning their sexuality; sexual relationships may occur in the custodial environment and prisoners are entitled to adequate protection from sexually transmitted infections: are health education and condoms available? Never assume all detainees are heterosexual, and consider whether gay and bisexual detainees fear bullying, or are being bullied. Homophobic language from both staff and prisoners should not be tolerated.

Dis/ability

Dis/ability issues can affect both staff and prisoners, most visibly in physical access; older establishments may have very limited access for anyone with restricted mobility. Other disabilities are hearing and/or sight impairment, learning disabilities, autism, agoraphobia, bulimia and anorexia, and the gamut of mental health problems many establishments manage despite few mental healthcare-trained nursing staff. Consider disability issues both in the Healthcare context and the wider prison environment, remembering that many disabilities are invisible because prisoners are often reluctant to draw attention to their difficulties.

These are some aspects of prison life to be aware of in monitoring diversity practically and effectively, rather than because it is "politically correct" to do so. A keen eye and an open mind, compassion, empathy and the willingness to press for change and improvement, whether for an individual or for the establishment, are the qualities IMBs bring to our work of maintaining standards of decency, respect, fairness, humanity and dignity for everyone.