

New independent chair appointed to scrutinise plan of action on race

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Barrister Abimbola Johnson to play crucial role in addressing historic disparities and a confidence gap in the relationships between Black people and the police

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Barrister Abimbola Johnson is to lead an independent scrutiny of police action on inclusion and race across England and Wales.

Ms Johnson will chair an independent scrutiny and oversight board (ISOB), which will deliver police leaders' commitment to robust external oversight to shape, check and challenge a new plan of action on inclusion and race.

This developing plan aims to build a more inclusive police service, and address negative disparities for Black people interacting with, or working in, policing.

Ms Johnson is a barrister specialising in criminal and professional regulatory defence work. Her practice predominantly centres on serious criminal cases involving gang violence, drug trafficking, and dishonesty offences. She comes to the role with both a passion to tackle racism and a professional understanding of crime and its causes.

As a Black Londoner who represents a disproportionate amount of Black people in court, she is also personally and professionally familiar with the specific concerns and anxiety that many Black people feel towards the police.

Black people have been disproportionately affected by policing for decades, as reflected in the reams of statistics and reports over the years. Many of us have had, and know of others, who have had personal experiences with the police that have been unsatisfactory, unfair or even harmful.

I hope the creation of an action plan and a parallel independent board to inform, oversee and scrutinise that plan marks a recognition by the police that the onus is on them to look inwards. At the same time, the service must listen to those who have experience and expertise to create effective and longstanding systemic change.

Having been entrusted with a high level of responsibility that I shall take extremely seriously, I will endeavour to recruit a Board that will fearlessly advocate for the interests of Black people, while working collaboratively to develop policing that wins our trust and delivers on public protection.

ISOB Chair Abimbola Johnson

The role of the ISOB Chair was recruited in an open process. The process and criteria for the role was informed by detailed consultation with dozens of experts inside and outside of policing.

Ms Johnson will now lead the appointment of the other six to eight members of the board ensuring the necessary expertise, lived experience and challenge is represented. The Chair will work with the NPCC and College of Policing to agree the plan of action, and the board will then provide scrutiny, check and challenge on its progress, including reporting publicly.

The Chair will also establish a wider external reference group of external organisations from across England and Wales to ensure that their voices are represented and listened to in monitoring progress against the plan.

The Police Plan of Action on Inclusion and Race is being led by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and the College of Policing, with partners from across policing, including police and crime commissioners and staff associations. A supporting programme will run for at least two years to deliver the plan of action.

Abi is a superb candidate from a very strong field, and ideally qualified for the important work ahead. We look forward to her Board's frank insights and challenge making our very necessary plans all the more effective.

The recent Parliamentary report on 22 years since the Macpherson inquiry was a stark reminder of how long many Black people communities have waited for policing to go

further and faster in addressing race disparities. Our urgent work with her will begin right away.

Chief Constable Sir David Thompson, NPCC vice-chair and senior responsible owner for the inclusion and race plan of action

'The appointment of Abimbola Johnson will bring exceptional insight, leadership and scrutiny of our commitment to the public: to build a more inclusive service and address disparities in the experiences of Black people interacting with, or working in, policing,' said programme board co-chair, College of Policing interim CEO Bernie O'Reilly.

'We are not looking for short term solutions, but rather a plan of action which will bring change to policing and our relationship with Black people in England and Wales. We want to strengthen the relationships we already have and forge new ones to build confidence in communities where trust in policing is low.

'The work done so far by the College of Policing, the National Police Chiefs' Council and others has demonstrated a positive start, but is just the beginning of making long-lasting changes which policing and our communities can be proud of.'

Chief Constable O'Reilly added he was grateful to the many individuals and organisations who generously gave their insights and support during the recruitment process, and for many partners' ongoing work on inclusion and race across the service.

The scrutiny chair for the Police Plan of Action on Inclusion and Race, Abimbola Johnson, is a fantastic example of someone who has fought disproportionality and disparities among marginalised communities for many years, and is a great defender of fair justice. We look forward to the working with Abi and the Plan of Action for a better future for policing.

Paul Odle, Police Federation of England and Wales Black, Asian and minority ethnic belief group chair

Deputy Mayor Alison Lowe and PCC John Campion, the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners leads on race disparity, said: 'This is a wonderful and meaningful appointment.

'Abimbola has a wealth of experience and all the right credentials to ensure the Police Plan of Action on Inclusion and Race is checked, challenged and inclusive to all the appropriate organisations needed to make a real change to how Black communities experience and interact with policing in England and Wales.

'We look forward to working with her.'

This is an excellent start in addressing the area of inclusion and race. More than ever, these matters have become front and centre in the lives of many people, so these actions and appointments are timely and provide public re-assurance.

Fiyaz Mughal OBE FCMI, founder of Faith Matters

Tags

Diversity and inclusion