



Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Altcourse

**For reporting year
1 July 2021–30 June 2022**

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Introductory sections 1 – 3

1. Statutory role of the IMB

The Prison Act 1952 requires every prison to be monitored by an independent board appointed by the Secretary of State from members of the community in which the prison is situated.

Under the National Monitoring Framework agreed with ministers, the Board is required to:

- satisfy itself as to the humane and just treatment of those held in custody within its prison and the range and adequacy of the programmes preparing them for release
- inform promptly the Secretary of State, or any official to whom authority has been delegated as it judges appropriate, any concern it has
- report annually to the Secretary of State on how well the prison has met the standards and requirements placed on it and what impact these have on those in its custody.

To enable the Board to carry out these duties effectively, its members have right of access to every prisoner and every part of the prison and also to the prison's records.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) is an international human rights treaty designed to strengthen protection for people deprived of their liberty. The protocol recognises that such people are particularly vulnerable and aims to prevent their ill-treatment through establishing a system of visits or inspections to all places of detention. OPCAT requires that states designate a National Preventive Mechanism to carry out visits to places of detention, to monitor the treatment of and conditions for detainees and to make recommendations for the prevention of ill-treatment. The IMB is part of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism.

2. Description of the establishment

HMP Altcourse is situated six miles north of Liverpool city centre and is set in an 80-acre site surrounded by woodlands.

It opened to prisoners in December 1997. It is a category B local and remand prison, now serving the courts of Merseyside and Cheshire, and is currently contracted for the provision of 1,164 places. This recent change in taking remand prisoners from Merseyside has led to a high turnover of prisoners, many spending short periods in custody.

Altcourse was purpose built in 1997 under the government's private finance initiative, on a design, build and finance contract by Group 4 and key partner, Tarmac. G4S holds the 25-year contract to operate and manage the prison, which is overseen by a Ministry of Justice controller. That contract expires this year and bidding for the new contract is ongoing.

There are seven residential units, a 12-bedded healthcare unit, a sports hall, a care and separation unit (CSU), vocational training units and a football pitch on-site. Several portacabins house resettlement and safer custody staff and workshops together with a variety of facilities which support the daily routine of the prison. Other small structures that house birds of prey and beehives are situated across the site.

A number of services are contracted out to private companies, including catering to Aramark, education to Novus and resettlement to Interventions Alliance. The site is well laid out and maintained and open in aspect.

3. Executive summary

3.1 Background to the report

This reporting year has been one of flux in terms of how the Board has been able to monitor. At the commencement of the year lockdown restrictions necessarily limited the Board's ability to visit the establishment and maintain face-to-face contact with prisoners. As the year progressed and restrictions relaxed it has been possible to return to a more hands on approach. This period has coincided with the loss of three experienced Board members and despite concerted recruitment initiatives, they have yet to be replaced.

3.2 Main judgements

How safe is the prison?

In the judgement of the Board, Altcourse remains a safe prison and this is evidenced, particularly during the challenges of lockdown and the immediate post-lockdown period, by the continuing reduction in levels of self-harm and violence. There have been three apparently self-inflicted deaths during this reporting period but none since October 2021. Although good progress has been made by the prison the Board remains concerned by the number of deaths in custody this year.

How fairly and humanely are prisoners treated?

The Board considers that overall prisoners have been fairly and humanely treated during this reporting year as the prison has returned to pre-Covid life. Morale has been enhanced by the very positive attitude of all staff and good channels of communication across the establishment. The Director has continued to keep prisoners informed about the pathway towards resumption of normal regime.

Food is pivotal to a prisoner's daily life and whilst there have been some improvements in the quality and variety of food on offer, the quantity still leaves a great deal to be desired. The Board is of the opinion that the national budget allocation for prisoners' food is neither fair nor humane.

Additionally, the Board does not consider that it is humane to hold men with severe mental health issues in a primarily custodial setting where they are unable to access the treatment and support they require.

How well are prisoners health and wellbeing needs met?

Overall, in this reporting year the Board considers that prisoners' health and wellbeing needs have largely been met. Waiting lists for GP and dentist consultations have kept pace with the community. Notwithstanding this, there are still concerns about the specific needs of the increasing number of older prisoners and those requiring social and palliative care.

The prison is beginning to feel the effects of enforced isolation on prisoners' mental health and wellbeing (see para 5.4). Addressing this will present an ongoing challenge.

How well are prisoners progressed towards successful resettlement?

Initially the Board was concerned about the transition from Shelter to Seetec Interventions Alliance but the majority of these teething problems have been resolved. The offender management unit has returned to full strength but the complement of probation staff is still below what it should be. A number of initiatives have been introduced to enhance employment opportunities for released prisoners which, together with specialised support for those with substance misuse issues, have contributed to prisoners' successful resettlement.

3.3 Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

- Once again, the Board has highlighted the plight of severely mentally unwell men being contained in totally unsuitable conditions and without access to appropriate treatment for long periods of time before being transferred to appropriate secure units.
- The lack of offence-related courses for men convicted of sexual offences is delaying their progression and could have a detrimental impact on public safety.

TO THE PRISON SERVICE

- The Board is of the opinion that the national budget allowance for prisoners' daily food is insufficient, particularly in the context of the current economic climate.
- The prison was designated a 'cluster death site' in October 2021 but no additional support/training was forthcoming from the centre which would have been helpful in identifying any areas for development.

TO THE DIRECTOR

- Recruitment of staff has to be a priority to minimise the redeployment of staff from designated roles to cover for vacancies elsewhere.
- Timely recruitment of a complaints clerk and family unit social worker to ensure that the current level of service in those areas is maintained.
- More focus on diversity in recruitment.

3.4 Progress since the last report

- The refurbishment of the healthcare inpatient unit which has greatly enhanced prisoners' general wellbeing, as has the development of complementary therapies, in particular by the counselling team and the introduction of yoga.
- The continuing reduction in levels of self-harm and violence.
- Improvements in variety and quality of food and establishment of an in-house bakery
- The introduction of new roles including that of information, advice and guidance (IAG) mentors, equalities officer (EO), and wellbeing officer.

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4.Safety

4.1 Reception and induction

The reception process has remained challenging for staff, who are called upon to deal calmly and professionally with prisoners who refuse to be transferred or arrive in a frightened and distressed state. The average number of daily admissions is 15 based on a six-day operating week.

Managing social distancing during Covid was difficult due to the limited space available in admissions. All new prisoners were offered and encouraged to take a Covid test. The X-ray machine is fully utilised and the Board seldom learns of prisoners bringing in illegal items via the admission process, as was previously the case. The reception area is brightly painted with eye catching posters displaying information about opportunities on offer to prisoners. Prison mentors staff a desk in admissions and speak to all prisoners on arrival. Many prisoners arrive at Altcourse late in the day, take time to process and arrive on their residential unit too late in the evening to have a shower. The late arrival of escort vans often means that reception staff have to work past the end of their shift in order to process new prisoners– a process that should not be hurried. Despite this staff make no complaints.

The induction process, previously group-based, was impacted by Covid when the induction unit was being used as an isolation/reverse cohort unit and the programme was delivered to prisoners individually by staff. The unit has now reverted to its former full induction role with peer-led group work and the prison is in the process of updating its induction package.

All new prisoners are risk assessed for potential vulnerability and enhanced support plans are put in place. Prisoners with medical needs are assessed by the healthcare team and those whose needs relate to social care are referred to social workers. However, difficulties with security clearance have resulted in a persistent absence of outside agencies during this reporting year.

4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody

During the 12 months of this reporting year there were eight deaths in custody; three of which were apparently self-inflicted and five from natural causes. As a consequence the prison was designated a cluster death site in October 2021. This has been a cause for concern for both the prison and the IMB. The Director and his team have put in place a number of initiatives to address this issue (see section 4.3 appointment of a wellbeing officer) and these appear to have made an impact in that there have been no further apparently self-inflicted deaths since October 2021. In April 2022 the prison came out of cluster death status.

The five most recent deaths were as a result of natural causes and reports from the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) are awaited. PPO reports from three apparently self-inflicted deaths which occurred in this reporting year made a total of eight recommendations for the prison and two for healthcare; all these recommendations have been accepted and action plans put in place. Two further deaths from natural causes in this reporting year had

a total of three recommendations, again all of which were accepted and are the subject of action plans.

One of this year's deaths in custody occurred on 23 October 2021 when a prisoner with a long history of substance misuse died from a heroin overdose just two days after his release from Altcourse. The PPO's findings were that while staff at Altcourse gave the prisoner training on how to use naloxone (a medicine that rapidly reverses an opioid overdose) they failed to give him a naloxone kit when he was released from prison. Actions have been put in place to ensure this does not happen again.

The prison and healthcare have a robust system for monitoring recommendations and the implementation of actions plans. As mentioned in section 6, the majority of healthcare recommendations relate to procedures as opposed to care and treatment which is, by and large, equivalent to that which prisoners would have received in the community. The IMB has monitored the recommendations and have instigated closer scrutiny of healthcare who have been frank and open in their discussions with the Board.

Following a death, the IMB always speak to staff and prisoners on the prisoner's residential unit and, although morale is understandably low following such a traumatic incident, the Board is satisfied that the support given to prison staff and prisoners is of a high standard, with counselling being offered if required. However, the Board has had to remind the Director, on occasion, of the importance of the IMB being notified of any death in custody at the earliest opportunity, and necessary reminders have been sent out to staff.

Self-harm has decreased steadily over the last 12 months as follows:

2021		2022	
January	(85)	January	(60)
February	(70)	February	(51)
March	(93)	March	(39)

This pattern has continued throughout the year. As has always been the case, prolific self-harmers accounted for 32% of overall incidents. Work is in hand to address self-harm issues with the appointment of the wellbeing officer (see section 4.3) and by the mental health team and counsellors from Rethink (see para 6.3).

Safer custody now makes a clear distinction between those who self-harm as a means to an end and those for whom it is entrenched reactive behaviour, developed over many years and requiring a completely different approach. A number of key staff have now received training in this approach.

4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation

During this reporting year there have been a total of 328 incidents of violence. This figure is made up of a total of 67 assaults on staff and 261 assaults/fights between prisoners. Total assaults reached a maximum of 35 in October 2021 and dropped as low as 19 in March 2022. The overall trend in violence has continued to fall despite the opening up of the

prison, bringing with it more opportunities for prisoners to become involved in conflict. For example in June 2019 there were 11 staff assaults, 14 in June 2020, three in 2021 and six in 2022. Monthly figures for prisoner on prisoner assaults have ranged from 28 in October 2021 and just 15 in April 2022. The spike in violence in October 2021 is thought to be related to the influx of out of area prisoners which Altcourse accepted when other local prisons were locking out. The mix of Liverpool and Manchester prisoners proved particularly toxic.

There are two main factors that influence violence levels and the prison is taking action to tackle both. Gang affiliations are a major feature and the prison's gang liaison officer focuses on the first 30 days in custody, ensuring prisoners involved are located appropriately.

Debts have always been the other key factor and the safer custody team are developing a debt strategy based on ideas which came from prisoner focus groups. There are plans to give prisoners £20 credit on admission rather than sweets and vapes so that they can choose to buy what they require rather than borrowing from other prisoners, which can, in turn, lead to debt.

Challenge, support and intervention plans (CSIPs) were put on hold during Covid but these are now being reactivated by the violence reduction officer, also a member of the safer custody team.

There have been 64 incidents at height, most of these being of short duration which have not necessitated opening the command suite.

Following an unprecedented number of deaths in custody, the prison was declared a 'cluster death site' in October 2021. However, contrary to expectation, this did not lead to any additional input or support from the Prison Service. The safer custody team initiated a new post of wellbeing officer. A member of the team, he has been taken off shifts and works individually with both victims and perpetrators of violence, self-isolators and other vulnerable prisoners. It would appear that this post is having a substantial impact on violence reduction.

4.4 Use of force

There has been a continuing reduction in the use of force over this reporting period: recorded incidents have reduced from 695 in 2020-21 to 431 in 2021-22; equivalent to a 38% reduction. This reflects well on the prison as this period saw a return to more time out of cell as Covid restrictions relaxed. The monthly average has also been reducing over the year from 4% incidents, recorded by month as a percentage of the population, down to 3% at the end of the year under review.

The prison retains its approach in managing prisoners, which focuses on persuasion, and without the need to use batons or PAVA spray. Good staff-prisoner relationships have been a contributory factor in these reduced figures. In most instances, indeed in over half of incidents, force (generally a firm hold on the arm) has only been used to encourage reluctant prisoners to return to their cells after limited periods of association. Cuffs have been used in a third of recorded incidents. There were 12 injuries reported during the year (six each to staff and prisoners), but none were considered serious.

Use of force continues to be reviewed regularly. A suggested improvement is for staff to use body worn cameras more consistently and they have been reminded of this. It is anticipated that the appointment of a use of force coordinator in mid-August will lead to a further reduction.

4.5 Preventing illicit items

Drugs and mobile phones continue to come into the prison via throwovers; these average two to three per week and netting installed some years ago has not prevented it. Parcels are launched from homemade catapults and are often doused in petrol and ignited, thus melting the netting. In addition items enter the prison via visits despite searches and the vigilance of staff. There have been debates for many years about the possibility of installing phone blockers but the IMB understands that the cost would be prohibitive and the proximity of a major hospital to the prison might mean this is not viable. The prison uses its X-ray machine in admissions and there is also a drug testing machine. However it is the view of the security department that the two drug dogs are more reliable and effective at identifying illicit items than the machine.

All new admissions are screened for alcohol and drugs by nurses and if necessary are referred to a prison GP. Opiate substitutes are prescribed if required and detoxification medication for alcohol withdrawal as appropriate.

There are no statistics available for mandatory drug testing as no testing took place in the 2020-2021 reporting year and testing only resumed on a limited basis this year, with no testing up until October 2021, stopping in January 2022 and only just starting up again in May of this year. Since that date only 5% of random testing has taken place (this figure should be 15%) due to staffing shortages. However, a substantial number of those testing positive fall below the threshold for adjudication. Many prisoners only spend short periods in the prison and should not be tested within 30 days of their arrival as a 'positive' test might be due to substances remaining in the system prior to imprisonment. Mandatory drug testing will be closely monitored by the Board in the forthcoming year (see also section 6.6).

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food

There have been a number of minor changes to residential units since the relaxation of lockdown:

- The Brook unit, which was used pre-Covid as a step down from the care and separation unit (CSU), has not been reopened as fewer prisoners are placed on basic regime, violent incidents have remained relatively low and the IPF (incentives policy framework) is used more effectively to maintain good order.
- The role of Furlong as a detox/rehabilitation unit is now being revived with reintroduction of group work and recruitment of eight staff to replace those who left the prison during and after the pandemic.
- Bechers Green, currently the reverse cohort unit, is gradually returning to its original role as an active induction/first night unit.
- The introduction of a bed manager who works across units to ensure that bed spaces across the prison are maximised.

The Board has received few complaints regarding standards of cleanliness on residential units. Decency has been a major priority for the prison and the IMB has seen evidence on weekly rota visits that this is being achieved. The Director praised unit cleaners for their work in the pandemic in his weekly bulletins. Prisoners no longer raise issues with the Board about cell repairs, broken televisions or kettles, something that has featured in the past. This is because stores are now situated closer to units and replacements are given out more promptly thus avoiding prisoner frustration.

The 'handyman' role mentioned in last year's report has not yet materialised but there are plans to progress this in the forthcoming months. Another significant development has been the appointment of a prisoner information, advice and guidance (IAG) mentor on each unit. Mentors are trained and supported to offer practical support and advice to prisoners. They also maintain a supply of complaint, IMB application, and discrimination incident reporting forms (DIRFs) – lack of availability of such forms has for a long time been a concern for the Board and was highlighted in last year's annual report.

Other work to improve the prison experience has been the siting of gym circuits on exercise yards, replacement of sofas, easier to read notice boards and installation of safes in selected cells to allow more prisoners to administer their own medication.

Food:

Issues relating to food quality and quantity have long been of concern to the Board and have been highlighted in previous annual reports. Last year the IMB commented on significant improvements which continued until February of this year. Sadly the situation deteriorated once again in February with prisoners complaining consistently to Board members and at prisoner engagement council (PEC) meetings about food quantity and portion size. These concerns have been reflected weekly in IMB rota reports. After investigation the Board learnt that a kitchen employee had been over generous with portions. Once this came to light the prison had to revert to correct portion sizes. This

sudden reduction clearly came as a shock to prisoners. Notwithstanding this, it is the IMB's view that the quantity of food offered is often inadequate.

The prison has recognised that there is a problem and made a number of changes, including moving the one hot meal of the day to the evening, introduction of monthly theme nights, improvements to the cold lunch to include crisps and fruit and a new four-weekly menu cycle. However, these moves will only partially address concerns about the amount of food offered.

Servery practice has improved with greater consistency in the wearing of whites and gloves and more regular use of temperature probes. Recruitment of reliable servery workers can be an issue due to high turnover of prisoners and the fact that workers have to deal frequently with disgruntled prisoners complaining about portion size.

The IMB has regularly raised concerns about the state of the flooring in the main kitchens which is often swimming in water and cannot be a comfortable or safe working environment. The prison is well aware of this and various attempts have been made to rectify it but to no avail. This problem was also identified in a HMPS food safety audit in April 2022.

One positive development this year has been the addition of a bakery so that the prison can produce its own rolls which are popular with prisoners, who can now also train for a national vocational qualification (NVQ) in bakery practice.

5.2 Segregation

The CSU has the capacity to hold 22 prisoners, with a small number of special accommodation cells. During the reporting year occupancy has ranged from a high of 18 to, just four, with an average occupancy of nine.

Of grave and continuing concern, and reported in numerous annual reports, remains the number of mentally unwell prisoners awaiting transfer to secure facilities, with the most unwell often having to be held in the CSU as they are considered to be too high risk to be accommodated in the inpatient healthcare facility.

Although clearly this is not satisfactory, it is accepted by the prison and IMB that these disturbed men can be more safely managed in a low stimulation structured environment with the safeguards of regular rule 45 boards attended by mental health nurses. Nurses also visit the unit frequently. It is challenging for CSU staff who must continually balance the needs of the prisoner with the duty to keep everyone safe and they deserve great credit for dealing with these prisoners with patience, compassion and professionalism. This issue of such severely unwell men being contained in a prison setting has for many years been a major concern to the Board but the solution lies outside the remit of the prison.

During the reporting year Board members resumed weekly rota visits to all prisoners held in the unit. They also monitored review boards and internal adjudications although this was less frequently than previously. Independent adjudications take place rarely and, when they do, are conducted via Cloud Video Platform. The majority of cases that hitherto went to the independent adjudicator involved the possession of mobile phones but this appears to be a lesser problem, possibly due the enhanced security team referenced in last year's annual

report. Consequently most adjudications are dealt with in-house and therefore more promptly.

5.3 Staff-prisoner relationships, key workers

Good staff-prisoner relationships are partially evidenced by the low levels of violence, particularly assaults against staff (see section 4.3) and the reduced use of force (see section 4.4) this year.

The IMB has regularly monitored staff-prisoner relationships via rota visits. It is a credit to the prison staff, and indeed the prisoners themselves, that despite the rigours that the two years of a pandemic have imposed, good staff-prisoner relationships have been maintained and also enhanced by a number of initiatives such as the appointment of a wellbeing officer (see section 4.3) and IAG mentors (see section 5.1). The presence of these mentors has eased the pressure on unit staff, allowing them more time to develop relationships and deal with the more complex prisoner issues.

Face-to-face meetings of the PEC resumed in March. This is an opportunity for prisoner representatives to engage with managers and see issues they have raised taken forward, thus supporting good relationships between staff and prisoners.

The year has seen a significant decrease, particularly over the last six months, in applications to the IMB, which could be interpreted in many ways but might signal a more satisfied prison population and that staff and the new mentors are dealing with issues at an early stage at unit level. Checks with the complaints clerk also confirmed a reduction of complaints about staff (see also section 5.7).

A number of frontline experienced staff have left the prison and inevitably been replaced by inexperienced staff. Many have had little experience of 'normal' prison life when not in lockdown. It remains to be seen if these new staff are able to adapt to the less restrictive regime and the different challenges this will pose in terms of staff relationships with prisoners.

5.4 Equality and diversity

The equality and diversity team comprises the head of safer custody, a cluster manager and the EO (equalities officer) who has been in post since January of this year. He handles discrimination incident reporting forms (DIRFs) and complaints, and takes a lead on foreign national prisoners. During staffing shortages, the equalities officer has been moved to cover vacancies elsewhere and this has had an impact on his role.

It is disappointing that a number of protected characteristic scheduled meetings have not taken place this year. There have been just two focusing on disability and only one for Travellers, older prisoners and foreign nationals. Prisoner representatives attend meetings and the EO also meets them individually.

It is pleasing to see the resumption of the support groups for all categories of vulnerable prisoners but, once again, the lack of relevant courses for men convicted of sexual offences

(MCOSO) is a cause for concern. Older prisoners have benefited from involvement with beekeeping and the production of honey.

There has been a fall in the number of foreign national prisoners this year. An immigration officer visits the establishment once a week and holds a monthly surgery. Unfortunately, the prison has reflected life within society and there have been issues with modern slavery to contend with. The Salvation Army provide valuable support with sourcing accommodation. Since his appointment, the EO has met with Home Office Immigration Enforcement staff and has produced a pack for foreign nationals in 10 languages. The pack includes first night information; the range of support available to prisoners, particularly useful to first timers; and the role of immigration enforcement.

On sampling responses to DIRFs, the IMB found them to be both clear and respectful. The highest number were regarding race (90%). In the last reporting year there were eight DIRFs concerning staff and this year 15, none of which were upheld. Of the 26 DIRFs concerning prisoners, 11 were upheld. The IMB has also received three applications relating to discrimination issues.

As in previous years the population of Altcourse has remained predominantly White British and the proportion identifying as Black remains identical. Statistics for the Asian population, those identifying as mixed race, White Irish and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) have also remained much the same.

Ethnicity statistics regarding the use of the basic incentives scheme level and use of force are 9.35% and 8.8% respectively which is on a par with the 8% non-White population in the prison.

Prisoners who have chosen not to disclose their sexual orientation has risen significantly in this reporting year and only a small number have identified as gay. The age profile of the Altcourse population has not changed significantly

This reporting year has seen an overall increase in prisoners declaring that they have a disability as follows:

Total numbers of prisoners with a disability increased dramatically from 273 – 547: learning disability from 19 – 38, learning difficulty from 54 – 117, reduced mobility from 25 – 33, and mental illness from 158 – 432. The impact of Covid lockdowns on prisoners' mental health has been recognised nationally by the Chief Inspector of Prisons. This increase will need to be factored into planning future prison provision.

5.5 Faith and pastoral support

The chaplaincy has four full-time members of staff, the manager being a member of the prison's senior management team. Remaining staff cover the Church of England, Roman Catholic and Muslim faiths. All other faiths, including Judaism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Paganism, have their needs met by part-time clerics or via contacts established within the local community. There is a multi-faith chapel which was closed during lockdown but services were broadcast on the prison radio and television. Live services have now resumed.

The chaplaincy plays a major role in induction, each prisoner being visited within 24 hours of arriving at Altcourse. In addition regular visits are made to housing units, the CSU and the healthcare inpatient unit. Demand for bereavement counselling increased during lockdown, many prisoners also utilising the opportunity to light a candle in the chapel and pray over the loss of a family member or friend. Memorial services were held for prisoners who had died, often attended by family members.

During lockdown most of the work undertaken had to be one-to-one but the chaplaincy was eager for restrictions to ease so that many of the long established groups could start up again and these courses resumed in early spring 2022. Courses address issues such as victim empathy, anger management, dealing with emotions and living with loss. The courses are invariably delivered by community groups and voluntary organisations and are popular with prisoners.

5.6 Incentives schemes

Previously known as IEP (incentives and earned privileges) this is now known as the IPF (incentives policy framework).

A new IPF was developed over the reporting year and will be issued in July 2022. This emanated from consultation with prisoners via the PEC. The focus is on encouraging and rewarding positive behaviour, challenging poor behaviour, and helping prisoners to make the right choices.

IPF information will be displayed in the reception area and throughout the prison and will include the credit and negative points tariff scheme so that all prisoners can see, recognise and understand what constitutes good behaviour. The intention is to offer a consistency of approach and ensure that criteria for progression and demotion are explained clearly and accessed easily. The induction compact, signed by all prisoners on admission, also explains expected standards of behaviour. Staff are encouraged to give explicit positive verbal reinforcement for good behaviour and achievements and to adhere to the four principles of procedural justice – voice, neutrality, respect and trustworthiness.

Following the IPF review, a number of changes and incentives have been introduced including increases in telephone credits and money available for canteen for standard and enhanced prisoners.

Additionally, the enhanced unit has seen positive changes, with more allocated gym time and time out of cell. A pleasant relaxed environment has been created in the association area with the advent of a fish tank and television, and there are plans to introduce microwaves and toasters.

Basic prisoners are reviewed every seven days and promoted at the earliest opportunity, moving away from what used to be the standard 28 days, thus acting as a greater incentive to behave well.

On average this year 2.50% of the population were on basic, 66% on standard and 32% on enhanced.

5.7 Complaints

The current complaints clerk has been in post since April 2021. The IMB has previously expressed its concern to the Director that this role has often been covered on a temporary basis, resulting in a lack of consistency in processing complaints.

During the year, the total number of complaints has increased from 901 to 1,180. The clerk has developed an efficient system for returning those complaints that are more appropriately dealt with by unit staff, resulting in a speedier resolution for prisoners. He coordinates the monthly quality assurance meeting, to which the IMB is invited, and has initiated training for managers in responding to complaints – something which requires a degree of tact.

Unfortunately this clerk is also leaving the prison and the Board is concerned that the prison prioritises the timely appointment of a permanent replacement to ensure continuity.

5.8 Property

Property applications have always constituted the highest number of total applications to the IMB, although these have reduced dramatically during this reporting year, including those relating to property (see 'The work of the IMB'). As most property goes missing during inter-prison transfers, the fact that Altcourse has become a reception prison may partially explain this reduction. The prison still receives property complaints from prisoners who go to court without their property, expecting to return to Altcourse, but are sent to another prison. These complaints are usually resolved quickly, property following shortly afterwards.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Healthcare: general

There have been eight deaths in custody during the last 12 months, three of which were apparently self-inflicted and the remaining five from natural causes (fully discussed in section 4.2), two of these occurring very shortly after release. PPO findings relating to healthcare highlighted issues around record keeping or failure to follow procedures as opposed to treatment and care, both of which were largely equivalent to what prisoners would have received in the community. Action plans, developed following PPO recommendations, are monitored by the prison and by external bodies but the Board maintains a watching brief and will continue to do so.

During the last year the ground floor 12-bed inpatient unit has undergone a major uplift in terms of fabric and facilities. Cell buzzers have been renewed and cells, recreation room and common dining area repainted. A number of other improvements, which had already been planned, came about more speedily when the Board raised concerns about the paucity of stimulation and meaningful activity in and out of cells on the unit (indeed this concern was raised in our annual report last year). The prison responded promptly with a range of improvements as follows: the recreation room now has a small library, board games, a sofa, comfortable chairs and a large screen television. There is a pool table at one end of the dining area. The exercise yard appears less stark with planters, seating and a marked 'fitness pathway' for use by the more mobile prisoners. The inpatient unit is now regularly attended by education staff who deliver and mark work. The net effect has been a significant improvement in prisoners' experience on the unit.

6.2 Primary healthcare

Healthcare provision has been stretched over the past year with staffing a particular issue, even bank staff being difficult to find. Much of this is a consequence of the pandemic and reflects wider issues in the NHS. Despite these pressures, the healthcare team have continued to prioritise delivery of the Covid vaccination. Referrals are triaged and waiting times for the doctor, dentist and optician have fluctuated but are generally equivalent to those in the community. Since Altcourse has become a local remand prison there is a higher demand for nurses and the GP in the admission process.

Access to external hospital consultations has worked well, assisted by monthly mobile ultrasound and X-ray clinics held on site. In-cell medication possession was felt to be one of the successes of lockdown, allowing prisoners greater ownership of their health; this is set to continue and expand with the location of safes in selected cells (see section 5.1).

6.3 Mental healthcare

At the end of our last reporting year, the number of prisoners awaiting transfer to hospital had fallen from 12 to just six. Sadly that reduction has been short lived and in the last nine months the average has once more risen to 12 and at one point stood at 14, all of these prisoners exceeding the 28-day time limit. Whilst such prisoners can be contained in prison,

delays to their treatment impact on their ability to recover. Many of these men are severely unwell and a number are held in the CSU (see section 5.2).

As noted in previous annual reports, the 12-bed inpatient unit houses prisoners with mental health problems alongside those with physical health problems and an increasing number of prisoners receiving palliative care. This is a difficult mix for staff to manage and at times noise levels can be distressing for some of the more infirm patients.

The first floor of healthcare, which now houses a range of complementary mental health services, has been decorated by prisoners with an impressive mural.

The integrated mental health team are based on the first floor with a room for group work and space for individual sessions. The sole prison counsellor works with a team of four colleagues (employed by Rethink) to offer one-to-one sessions dealing with issues such as sleep problems, depression, anxiety, bereavement and childhood abuse. Another interesting addition to mental health services has been the employment of a yoga teacher.

As reported in section 5.4 of this report, the number of prisoners reporting issues with their mental health has increased dramatically since our last reporting year: mental illness from 158 to 432 and learning disability and difficulty from 73-115. This has inevitably added to the daily demands on healthcare staff.

6.4 Social care

A new social care manager has been in post since March of this year and a new care provider, Community Independent Living, was appointed in August 2021. The social care team now provides daily care and comprises six staff working in pairs. If a prisoner is initially assessed by the prison as needing a social care package a social worker visits weekly to do an assessment but interim care, such as fitting grab rails and walking aids, can be offered by the healthcare team. There is currently discussion taking place about the possibility of healthcare having oversight of the provision of care plans and it seems likely that this will be implemented.

Vetting of social care staff is a problem and takes time but this issue has been a longstanding concern with previous care providers.

During this reporting year, 38 prisoners were assessed for social care. Such prisoners were usually over 50, predominantly White and were all assessed within the required 28-day timeframe. There are frequent social care staff changes, a problem not unique to the prison but which can result in a lack of continuity of care.

Prisoner independent living assistants (PILAS) perform a valuable role helping and supporting prisoners with some social care needs, such as pushing wheelchairs and manual handling; courses are run to facilitate this.

Prisoners with dementia and diagnosable learning difficulties are relatively low in number but a dedicated learning difficulties nurse is on hand to assess them and resolve any issues they may face.

6.5 Exercise, regime

Association time was severely impacted by lockdown when different areas had to isolate. Limited association time was available from July 2021 and the number of hours increased in October/November 2021, a move which was well received by prisoners. There was a further relaxation of restrictions in March 2022 and although this improved spirits and the morale of prisoners, there was a lack of understanding as to why this relaxation could not have taken place as quickly as in the local community.

There is currently discussion between the prison and the Ministry of Justice controller about the balance between keeping prisoners safe and maximising work, meaningful activity and time out of cell. Currently prisoners either attend work or education for just half of the day and this is having an impact on their pay. This issue has been raised with IMB on a number of occasions.

During this year, opening of the gym has been limited to short slots due to staffing shortages or Covid concerns. Gym equipment was moved to unit exercise yards and was well used by prisoners during association. The more creative units set up circuit training to give variety and better focus to gym time. Once again prisoners were kept informed of the availability of exercise in the gym but many failed to understand why things were moving so much more slowly than in the community.

During lockdown periods, when the sports hall was available, activities had to be socially distanced and this necessarily impacted upon team sports. Now that the prison is moving back to its usual regime there is better access for prisoners, with longer slots and a greater variety of activities on offer.

6.6 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation

The SOAR (stay out and recover) team's activity has not been as extensive this year, primarily due to the pandemic and a subsequent depletion in the team's resources.

During lockdown the team was reduced to data collection on new prisoners and ensuring that medication was available on release. Interventions were limited to cell workbooks and behind-the-door activity with none of the usual group interventions. In addition, team members were frequently called to work on other units to fill gaps caused by Covid-related staff sickness. There is some anecdotal evidence from conversations with SOAR staff that a number of the team felt demotivated and undervalued. This may have led to a number of them choosing to leave the team.

However, towards the end of the year the team was reconstituted to its former strength and a training programme was run to give new staff the necessary skills. There are now two workers on each residential unit allocated to substance misuse work including issuing daily medication. At any one point there are around 240 prisoners on the team's caseload but this figure is becoming more manageable.

There are two new Ministry of Justice-sponsored initiatives supporting released prisoners currently being piloted. The first, a Cheshire East project, started in November 2021 to run for a year. This provides one-to-one support for released prisoners with a pick up at the gate. In addition it provides accommodation in Warrington, Crewe, Horton and Congleton. It

also organises appointments with psychologists and a benefits package. This project is one of 16 in the country. Part of the requirement of this programme is a commitment to total abstinence. It is too soon to measure its impact.

The second initiative is the ADDER project (addiction, diversion, disruption, enforcement, and recovery) which is a holistic government-sponsored approach to tackling drug crime. The programme began in Blackpool in 2021 and has now been extended to other areas including Merseyside from where the majority of Altcourse prisoners originate. All opiate users are offered support in the community on discharge with a pre-release form being completed and an appointment made with the appropriate external team.

7. Progression and resettlement

7.1 Education, library

Education has been available throughout the year although, like all other prison activities, it has been affected by constantly changing regimes and restrictions. Predominantly classes are maths and English, however ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) is also offered, but places are limited and supply does not meet the demand. Art and IT classes have also run. The contract for education is held by Novus and during an Ofsted inspection in November 2021 it was noted that the education provision required improvement across the board. A new manager, with a background in further education, was appointed in December 2021 to take forward inspection recommendations.

The IMB has noted in rota reports that relationships between tutors and prisoners have been good but classes were not always full and from time to time prisoners have not been able to access education due to Covid. All prisoners are encouraged to gain qualifications that will benefit them once released. Prisoners have an early diagnostic test to ascertain what level of course would be best.

During the more restricted periods, written resources were made available and workbooks and lesson notes delivered to cells. Areas such as the healthcare inpatient unit and the vulnerable prisoner unit were able to take advantage of these resources which were marked and returned efficiently.

The education department works well with the Shannon Trust, a charity which trains prisoner mentors to assist those prisoners struggling with literacy. This has been done sensitively, away from the classroom, often in the library or on units to ensure prisoners are not stigmatised.

Library:

Prior to this reporting window two long-term members of library staff left. This inevitably impacted on the service but these librarians were eventually replaced by two keen prison custody officers who are completing library qualifications.

The library was closed throughout lockdown until May this year. However with the relaxation of regimes the service has now improved, with the recruitment of prisoner mentors and prisoners able to visit the library.

There is a good range of books, both fiction and non-fiction, and the foreign language book section is expanding. However due to the changing profile of foreign national prisoners it is challenging for the library to reflect this demographic.

Links between education and the library are better integrated and prisoners attending education are encouraged to use the library to support their learning. Smaller satellite library resources have been set up in healthcare and the CSU to allow more prisoners access to books.

7.2 Vocational training, work

Vocational and engineering workshops have continued to feel the impact of the pandemic throughout the year. Whilst the easing of restrictions continued through the summer and autumn of 2021, another spike of Covid cases in November 2021 resulted in workshops being either closed or limited to employing only small numbers on in-house tasks such as kitchen workers, unit cleaners and in the laundry. Radio Altcourse and work with the birds of prey and bees also offered work to limited numbers. Understandably most prisoners were keen to have as much time out of cell as restrictions allowed so the prison utilised a half-day shift system, maximising this opportunity.

Workshops fully reopened during spring 2022, continuing to use the half-day two-shift system. A number of initiatives have now been introduced such as 'skills passports' and organising training into bite-sized portions, enabling prisoners serving short sentences to attain qualifications. Advice for prisoners about the range of courses available and potential career paths is provided by trained mentors on all residential units as part of induction. Personal learning plans (PLPs) are also produced. The presence of the Jobcentre Plus office within the vocational training unit is a useful addition.

The opening of both a barber's shop and a bakery has been a great success and this is reflected by long waiting lists to work there. The vulnerable prisoner unit now has beehives and a gardening tunnel, ensuring that this prisoner group has the same access to work opportunities as the main population.

Moving forward, the prison is reviewing prisoners' pay for work and training/education. This is to take account of the increased costs of canteen and the impact that the half-day shift system is having on the total amount prisoners can earn, an issue regularly raised with the Board on rota visits. The prison is also looking into introduce a 'prisoner employee of the month' scheme and hold award ceremonies to recognise prisoners' achievements.

7.3 Offender management, progression

This year has seen the return to a more hands on approach by the offender management unit (OMU) following the constraints imposed by the pandemic in the last reporting year. Offender management in custody (OMiC) staff returned to face-to-face meetings with prisoners in July of last year and it is pleasing to note that they have consistently managed to keep up to date with offender assessment system (OASys) reports. Staffing levels within the probation team, however, are currently under the establishment's target, with only two officers in post rather than 3.5. This, inevitably, has caused some difficulties in terms of delivery of the Thinking Skills Programme. Another issue that has emerged during this year is the fact that, as a local remand prison, the churn rate of short term prisoners has made it increasingly difficult to undertake any meaningful work with prisoners whose stay can be only a matter of weeks.

Remote parole hearings, introduced out of necessity during lockdown, have been retained as part of a hybrid process but there has been an increase in the number of face-to-face hearings.

It is concerning to note that there have been issues with regard to release on temporary licence (ROTL) and home detention curfew (HDC) mainly due to processing delays within social services and the police. However, the unit has adopted a proactive approach to track and push cases where appropriate.

Progression remains problematical for MCOSO due to the availability of places in establishments where they can access appropriate offending behaviour courses.

Numbers of imprisonment for public protection (IPP) prisoners and lifers are relatively low within the prison, as are category B prisoners. Their numbers are monitored monthly and their presence with the prison subject to constant review.

7.4 Family contact

The family visits hall is bright and welcoming with new carpets and coloured chairs. The screens, erected during lockdown, have now all been removed, no masks are required nor do visitors have to show a negative Covid test. These regulations were very unpopular with prisoners and families who complained that they had difficulty hearing during their visits. The kiosk serving refreshments for families is set to reopen shortly, as is the crèche which is staffed by PSS (Person Shaped Services). The number of visits is also set to increase with the addition of evening visits.

Social video calls are still popular, affording older relatives with long distances to travel a useful alternative. An extra social video call kiosk is available on the family intervention unit, a section of the enhanced unit.

Courses run in the family intervention unit have now resumed after the relaxation of the lockdown regime. A parenting course which uses drama and role play, rather than more traditional methods, is much in demand. The course looks at the impact of imprisonment on the family and prisoners are encouraged to make a book or a picture for their child.

Unfortunately, the family intervention lead has just left the prison. He was responsible for many of the family work initiatives. This year he made links with local Sure Start and also took forward an initiative where prisoners could invite family into the prison and cook a meal. Prison staff who worked closely with him will continue this work.

7.5 Resettlement planning

2021 heralded the unification of resettlement and release planning and with it a change of housing provider for released prisoners. Shelter lost the contract which went to Seetec Group, a member of the Interventions Alliance, in June 2022.

Although a number of Shelter staff moved to the new provider by TUPE transfer, it was clear from the outset that the Seetec housing resettlement provision was chronically under-resourced. Altcourse-based staff were expected to handle referrals for all north west prisons as well as their own. A number of urgent meetings between senior managers from the company and the prison, attended by the IMB, took place and it became clear that the contract was based on insufficient data. The volume of referrals was going to be far greater

than had been scoped for in the Intervention Alliance bid and the specific needs of remand prisoners had not been taken into account.

Board concerns about this state of affairs were shared with the IMB Secretariat and in turn brought to the attention of the Ministry of Justice. Some extra resources were brought in, but it was only towards the end of 2021 that referrals were being handled in a timely manner.

In addition to the shortage of manpower, the system was not well understood by those using it, with communication problems between partner agencies exacerbating an already difficult situation. In November 2021 an unannounced HMIP inspection observed that *'Release plans we reviewed were reasonable, but finance, benefit and debt support was very limited, and prisoners could not open a bank account'*. This task was then taken on by prison staff or the Probation Service and eventually led to the appointment of a manager at the end of January 2022 with a specific role for securing bank accounts for released prisoners.

The Board is now able to report that the situation is much improved. The resettlement team deal with a caseload of around 60 per week which they say is manageable. Numbers of released prisoners with no fixed abode on release have fallen from around one in five at the end of 2021 to one in 10 at the end of the reporting year. It should be noted that Seetec are measured on the time taken to handle a referral and the number of intervention sessions held, rather than any measure reflecting success in rehousing released prisoners in appropriate housing— not a particularly qualitative approach from a prisoner perspective. Referral information is often of poor quality and missing basic facts such as the prisoner's location.

Another concern is that multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) meetings have not been taking place but prison management have initiated meetings of housing providers (Seetec and Reconnect), the Probation Service, the short sentence team, the pre-release and resettlement team, and the Department for Work and Pensions. This has resulted in more favourable outcomes for released prisoners.

This year has seen the appointment of a housing specialist whose role is to find accommodation for prisoners who are homeless leading up to release. Recruitment is currently underway for banking and employment leads and a neurodiversity support manager.

Another promising development has been the establishment of a resettlement services hub next to the visitor centre where agencies will offer services to families and released prisoners on leaving the prison and also offer shelter from the rain. The Board has long been concerned about the welfare of prisoners released, particularly in winter months, in poor weather and with inadequate clothing.

In terms of future development, the next step is the provision of an improved service for short sentenced and remand prisoners serving less than 10 months. There is a natural sense of apprehension amongst staff, shared by the IMB, that any change does not follow the pattern of June 2021, when the sudden removal of Shelter and the inadequate provision which followed badly impacted resettlement outcomes for released prisoners.

The work of the IMB

Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	16
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	11
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	8
Total number of visits to the establishment	195
Total number of segregation reviews attended	N/A

Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	Current reporting year
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	17	12
B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives scheme, sanctions	25	10
C	Equality	14	3
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, library, regime, time out of cell	16	9
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection restrictions	31	19
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	32	10
F	Food and kitchens	26	13
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	59	47
H1	Property within this establishment	25	17
H2	Property during transfer or in another establishment or location	29	16
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogue(s)	16	7
I	Sentence management, including HDC, release on temporary licence, parole, release dates, re-categorisation	71	12
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	23	23
K	Transfers	29	1
L	Miscellaneous, including complaints system	63	29
	Total number of applications	476	228



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