



Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Altcourse

**For reporting year
1st July 2023 to 30th June 2024**

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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 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 for adult and young male prisoners now serving the courts of Merseyside and Cheshire and is currently contracted for the provision of 1,164 places¹, the majority sharing cells.

Altcourse was purpose built under the Government's private finance initiative, on a design, build and finance contract by Group 4 and key partner, Tarmac. In January of 2023 Sodexo won the contract to operate and manage the prison from 1 June 2023 which is overseen by a Ministry of Justice Controller.

There are seven residential units, a 12-bedded healthcare unit, a sports hall, a care and separation unit (CSU), workshops and a football pitch on-site. Additional portacabins house staff teams and a variety of facilities which support the daily routine of the prison and including aviaries for birds of prey and beehives.

Services contracted out to private companies are listed in Annex A.

¹ Figures included in this report are local management information. They reflect the prison's position at the time of reporting but may be subject to change following further validation and therefore may not always tally with Official Statistics later published by the Ministry of Justice.

3. Key points

3.1 Main findings

This reporting year has seen the transfer of the contract to run the prison from G4S to Sodexo in June 2023. A number of experienced staff left the establishment at that point, and this impacted negatively on staffing levels. Thankfully, following a period of uncertainty, and sustained recruitment by the prison, full staffing complement has almost been achieved. Consequently, a period of relative stability exists within the prison, despite the population pressures currently experienced nationally. The Board must give credit to senior managers and frontline staff for their commitment to maintain a safe prison.

Safety

- Late arrival of prisoners, particularly those from out of area courts, has increased pressure on an already stretched reception area
- Increased prison population has made the safe location of vulnerable prisoners and those with gang affiliations more challenging
- Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) and safer custody mentors have had a positive impact on all aspects of prison life
- There is a concern that the introduction of Pava incapacitant spray and batons may detract from good staff/prisoner relations

Fair and humane treatment

- The kitchen is not fit for purpose, bearing in mind the increased population and prisoners' concerns regarding quality and quantity of food
- There is no longer any education provision for prisoners in CSU
- The holding of mentally unwell men in CSU due to insufficiency of beds in secure facilities continues to be of concern for the Board
- The recent improvements in key working need to be maintained
- The improved gender and race profile of staff and management team has had a positive impact within the prison
- The focus on consistency in the complaints clerk role is a welcome development in the light of observations contained in last year's report
- The prison has recognised the need for a dedicated manager to lead on equality and diversity and give this area of work a greater focus

Health and wellbeing

- Staffing shortages have led to difficulties in escorting prisoners to outside hospital appointments
- In the Board's view there has been a significant improvement in mental healthcare provision since Mersey Care took over the contract
- Ongoing challenges in engaging with short term prisoners in the management of substance misuse is of concern

Progression and resettlement

- The introduction of a highly successful reading strategy which has become embedded in prison life has been enthusiastically welcomed by prisoners

- There are now increased employment opportunities for released prisoners following the forging of links with several local employers
- The Board is disappointed about the loss of vocational workshops and the failure to deliver the planned workshop included in the Sodexo bid
- The disappearance of a dedicated family unit and current lack of a visits hall creche have severely impacted upon maintaining good family relationships
- The Government early release schemes have exacerbated pressures on both the Offender Management Unit, Resettlement team and Seetec and led to an increase in the number of prisoners released without accommodation

3.2 Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

When will the statutory 28-day time limit for the transfer to hospital of prisoners requiring inpatient mental health treatment come into effect?

Can consideration be given to the negative consequences, in terms of late arrivals, lost property and levels of violence, when locating prisoners outside their home area?

TO THE PRISON SERVICE

The Board continues to hold the view, based on their observations and frequent discussions with prisoners, that the current daily allowance for prisoners' food (which Sodexo follow) is inadequate, particularly in the current economic climate. How and when does the Prison Service plan to review and increase the food budget?

Are there any plans to enlarge and improve the kitchen facilities to take account of the increased prisoner population?

TO THE DIRECTOR

How will the prison monitor the use of batons and Pava?

Are there any plans to reinstate education provision in the CSU?

Can an assurance be given that the provision of hospital escorts will be prioritised?

Is there any timescale for re-opening the creche in the visits hall?

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4. Safety

4.1 Reception and induction

Reception is a pressured environment with a high volume of prisoners and their property being processed daily. In addition, significant numbers are released both into the community and for transport to courts (93 over a sample three-day period), all of these via reception.

A longstanding issue is the late arrival of prisoners, exacerbated by numbers arriving from courts outside the northwest. Late arrival has an impact on staff and prisoners, who on occasion do not arrive at their residential unit until midnight. Initial processing should take two hours but often exceeds this and the IMB noted one occasion in May 2024 when 15 prisoners were kept for five hours in a holding cell with only one toilet and no windows.

Prisoners are seen in reception by a range of professionals including healthcare, the safer custody team and prisoner mentors. The Big Word phone interpretation service is regularly used.

The introduction of a digital prisoner escort record (PER) is now a more consistent means of passing vital information from the courts than the previous paper system. This assists in assessing any immediate support required, whether the prisoner should be placed on an ACCT and his suitability to cell share.

Those prisoners who indicate they have a problem with substance misuse are transferred to the drug detoxification unit, others to the vulnerable prisoner unit, and the remainder to a dedicated induction unit.

Several improvements are in train to streamline reception and enhance the experience for prisoners and working conditions for staff. A major refurbishment is due to take place later this year, work being undertaken at night to minimise disruption. An 'early days' clinical lead nurse has been appointed, and changes to rules around property should ease some of the pressures on the department.

Induction works well with key roles being played by IAG and 'early days' induction mentors. They help with practical tasks including sorting phone pins (a prisoner's personal identification number, which they use to make calls), booking visits and ordering meals and canteen. Visits to the chapel and gym take place, and further assessments are undertaken by healthcare, safer custody and education.

4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody

There have been three apparent self-inflicted deaths in this reporting year. All had a profound impact on the staff who discovered the prisoners, particularly on one occasion, when they tried valiantly to save his life. One of these three apparently self-inflicted deaths occurred in the CSU and this was the first time a prisoner has died in this unit in the prison's history. Ombudsman's reports on these four cases are awaited. Just one elderly prisoner has died from natural causes. Another elderly prisoner is in receipt of end-of-life care at the time of writing.

A number of themes have emerged from the six PPO reports received by the IMB this year, relating to deaths that have occurred in previous years. A significant proportion of these prisoners had only been in the prison a matter of days, often on recall. Substance misuse has been a recurring factor in most deaths, highlighting the crucial role played by the substance misuse team in engaging with and supporting prisoners.

There is a national focus on self-harm and the Director has made it one of his seven priorities for 2024. The total number of incidents last year was 762 compared to approximately 850 this year. Levels fluctuate but these variations can be attributed to a small number of prolific self-harmers in the prison at any one time. Prisoners placed on ACCT (assessment care in custody and teamwork) are then visited and supported by a member of the wellbeing team and are discussed at reviews and at the weekly multi-disciplinary SIM (safety intervention meeting). A focus on purposeful activity may enhance a prisoner's self-respect and, in some cases, lead to a reduction in self-harm. However, this is often a long-established coping mechanism.

Two new tools have recently been introduced which should support the work of the safer custody team in identifying prisoners at risk: a Safety Diagnostic Tool and AIM (alert, intervene, monitor). The latter can quickly alert the team to a prisoner who has failed to use the unit console to order meals, canteen or social visits, and might require additional support.

4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation

Violent incidents continue to average around 30 per month but in May and June of this year they rose to 42 and 43 respectively. A piece of work is ongoing to identify the causes and plan remedial action. An initial finding is that 18 (i.e. 40%) of the incidents in June involved out of area prisoners, a number of which were gang affiliated but generally gang activity does not appear to be the root cause. Most assaults are prisoner on prisoner, with assaults on staff ranging from four to nine a month.

The gang liaison officer works closely with the violence reduction manager and the IMB understands that this is a role unique to Altcourse. In June of this year there were 209 prisoners with a gang affiliation, but this number fluctuates as the population constantly changes. Due to the high numbers and the fact that the prison is operating at almost full capacity it becomes increasingly challenging to locate these prisoners safely.

When a violent incident occurs, the parties are interviewed and a CSIP (challenge, support, and intervention plan, which is used to support and manage prisoners who pose an increased risk of violence) referral is made. Prisoners are then seen by a member of the wellbeing team and targets for improved behaviour are set. Cases are reviewed at the weekly SIM meeting. Prisoners involved in bullying can also be referred.

User Voice is conducting an anonymous survey asking prisoners' views about the causes of violence and whether they feel safe. It is hoped that this will also inform the prison's approach to managing violence.

There have been 83 serious incidents from end of July 2023-1 August 2024, compared to a similar period the previous year when there were 64. This increase

may reflect the constantly changing population of the prison. Most incidents are resolved quickly and involve prisoners climbing on unit bars. Two incidents have led to opening the command suite (which means that the response can be coordinated nationally). One involved a prisoner climbing on the bars in the CSU and the other involved a group of prisoners barricading themselves in a cell and consuming a large quantity of 'hooch' (homemade alcohol). Both were resolved satisfactorily following intervention by the National Tactical Response Group (a team trained to intervene in dangerous, high-risk situations). New data collection has been introduced to monitor potential causes of such incidents, for example tool loss, key compromise, releases in error, and drone activity.

However, in relation to its comparator prisons, Altcourse figures for violence are at the lower end of the spectrum.

Prisoners who self-isolate are identified and referred to the relevant team, be it safer custody, mental health, the wellbeing team or unit IAG mentors.

4.4 Use of force

In October 2023, the Ministry of Justice Controller served an improvement notice on the prison for its use of force. Prior to this, the use of force coordinator role had been vacant for some ten months and the post was not included in the new Sodexo contract. A temporary post was created in December 2023 with the sole focus of making improvements in practice and procedures and since April this year the prison is no longer subject to improvement measures.

Monthly committee meetings and weekly multi-disciplinary scrutiny panels, where 30% of all use of force incidents are reviewed, now take place consistently and the good governance toolkit is used by staff involved. Minority ethnic monitoring has been established, and the standard of post incident reports has improved, as has use of body worn cameras - a concern noted in last year's annual report.

Post incident debriefs afford the prisoner the opportunity to give his perspective on whether the situation could have been handled differently.

Over the reporting period there have been a total of 650 use of force incidents, 85% of which were planned and usually involved escorting unwilling prisoners between units. Over half of the unplanned incidents were considered as 'low level' and consisted of a guiding arm hold.

This year has seen the planned mandatory introduction of batons and Pava spray. Those staff members to whom the IMB have spoken appear ambivalent about this change, with experienced officers of the view that such tools are not necessary to manage prisoner behaviour. However, it is accepted that this change is mandatory and outside their control. Concerns have also been expressed by staff about the physical side effects of Pava on both staff and prisoners. Baton training has already commenced but Pava will be introduced at a later date.

Altcourse has tended to experience relatively low levels of violence and use of force in relation to its comparator prisons. It has long been the view of the IMB that this has been in no small way due to positive staff/prisoner relationships and culture that exists at Altcourse.

4.5 Preventing illicit items

On admission and release, all property and prisoners are searched, the latter using the X ray machine, and bodily orifice security scanner (B.O.S.S.) chair. In addition, all staff and visitors are searched by the enhanced gate security team.

Drugs and mobile phones continue to be found in the grounds following throwovers and drone activity and staff are encouraged to always remain vigilant. They receive specific training in identifying vulnerable areas and suspicious activity. New dog handlers are about to commence training, and this will supplement current security measures. The Board will continue to closely monitor this development during the coming year.

The most common illicit items entering the prison are cannabis, tobacco, psychoactive substances and ketamine, all of which are cheap in the community but reach premium prices in the prison environment. There is also some abuse of prescribed medication particularly Pregabalin and Gabapentin and the security team are working with the healthcare team to address this.

Targeted cell searches, based on mandatory drug testing results and intelligence from prisoners and staff do take place but staffing shortages have meant that such searches cannot take place as frequently as the security team would like. Recent finds have included paper impregnated with Spice (a synthetic cannabinoid), SIM cards and an improvised weapon. The security team are alert to the possibility of other illicit items that may start to appear including powdered alcohol and Nitazene (a synthetic opioid).

Some new posts have been created to enhance existing security measures, including the appointment of a staff corruption officer. Following this a member of staff received a suspended prison sentence in June 2024. Further appointments include a permanent police intelligence officer and police liaison post, both designed to enhance safety in the prison.

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food

There have been several new initiatives in relation to prisoner accommodation since Sodexo took over the prison contract in June 2024. Operational capacity (the maximum number of prisoners that can be held without serious risk to safety, security, good order and the proper running of the planned regime) has risen from 1164 to 1194 with substantial numbers requiring single cell accommodation due to high-risk status. Approximately 60 to 65% of the prisoners are on remand. Some residential units have been designated as 'calm' and eligible prisoners can apply to be located there. An upgrade programme has seen all housing units undergo redecoration.

On occasions the induction unit has had to accommodate vulnerable prisoners because the dedicated vulnerable prisoner unit is full, and this has required careful management to keep these prisoners safe.

The IMB noted in last year's annual report that 'the quality and quantity of meals produced by the kitchens has improved significantly since the Sodexo handover'. However, this improvement was short lived, and the board has continued to receive complaints about food but more often relating to portion size.

Disappointingly, the popular monthly 'theme' evening meal on a Friday has been discontinued as has the production of bread baked on the premises. However, celebratory meals are still produced for occasions such as Christmas and Eid. No concerns have been raised about the provision of special diets. At the time of writing the kitchens are seeking to recruit two new chefs. The kitchen facilities are cramped, with no natural light and get very hot during the summer months. Kitchen equipment is often out of order and awaiting replacement parts. The state of the floor and problems with flooding are frequently noted in IMB monitoring reports. It should be noted that the building was designed to cater for a much smaller number of prisoners and has never had a major refurbishment.

5.2 Segregation

The care and separation unit consists of 26 cells, two of which are designated as special accommodation where items such as furniture, bedding, and sanitation are removed in the interests of safety (used on just three occasions this year). Occupation of the unit over this reporting period has averaged ten but reaching 16 at the highest level. All cells and landings have been repainted and refurbished and this has been a significant improvement. The unit has a small well stocked library, sadly however, education provision to prisoners has now ceased. It is unclear why this has been withdrawn. Prisoners can access distraction packs and jigsaws, but the IMB is of the view that this is a poor substitute.

In this reporting year no prisoner exceeded 84 days detention and only three prisoners remained on the unit for longer than 42 days (the limit allowed without external authority). Review boards are proactive in relocating prisoners to normal location as soon as this is safe. The IMB has been impressed with the professionalism of staff on this unit when managing prisoners with the most challenging and disruptive behaviour. The apparent self-inflicted death that took place on this unit had a significant impact on staff morale (see para 4.2).

The IMB remains concerned about the length of time that some mentally unwell prisoners are held in CSU awaiting transfer to secure mental health facilities. However, the numbers appear to have fallen since Mersey Care took over the mental health contract. The introduction of the proposed Mental Health Bill, with a 28-day limit on transfer of mentally unwell prisoners to hospital, is therefore long overdue.

5.3 Staff and prisoner relationships, key workers

The IMB understands that Altcourse is regarded as one of the busiest prisons in the country, and prisoners' stay is often brief. Consequently, staff have limited time to build good relationships with prisoners. Despite this the level of serious staff assaults has remained low, evidencing the efforts made by staff to develop effective relationships within a short timescale. Both the Board and His Majesty's Inspector of Prisons have been impressed with this culture. It remains to be seen whether the introduction of batons and Pava spray changes this.

Throughout this reporting year, the prison has prioritised the development and effectiveness of key working. All prison custody officers are trained and are then allocated a caseload of eight prisoners on their unit. A key worker checklist has been developed for use in prisoner sessions. Frequency and quality of the record keeping is assessed monthly by a member of the senior management team with further random checks by the Ministry of Justice Controller. This has resulted in improved quality and quantity compliance from a low bar of 2.73% in February 2024 to 18.09% in June 2024.

5.4 Equality and diversity

The age profile of prisoners has changed with younger adults (18-21years) having increased on average from 85 to 111 over the year. This change in the proportion of younger prisoners coupled with the increase in occupational capacity presents its own management issues.

Foreign nationals have risen as a group from an average of 80 in 2022/23 to 100 in June 2024 and numbers have been increasing steadily year on year. Of these the biggest country of origin has been Albania, followed closely by Vietnam, Ireland, Poland and Romania. Immigration staff visit the prison weekly to see individual prisoners. Just three prisoners are awaiting deportation.

Only two DIRFs (discrimination incident reporting form) have been received in the last six months, which seems extremely low, particularly since figures during the last reporting year averaged at two per month. This could be interpreted in several ways: that prisoners' stay in the prison does not allow sufficient time to make such a complaint, that prisoners lack confidence in their complaint being properly investigated, or prisoners from the protected characteristic groups (these include race, religion, age, disability, sex, gender reassignment, and sexual orientation, which it is unlawful to discriminate against) are satisfied with their treatment in prison and have no cause to complain. This is an issue that requires further examination by the prison and the Board.

The equalities team continues to support transgender prisoners.

There are a number of prisoner focus groups, led by prisoner representatives, meeting at varying intervals. Work done with veterans over the last twelve months

has resulted in The Veterans Association formally recognising the prison's excellent work.

The IMB has been concerned to note that individual staff members designated to lead on equality and diversity issues have had significant periods of sick leave and have not been replaced temporarily. Consequently, this area of work has perhaps not had the degree of focus that it requires. However, a dedicated manager now leads on this issue, and it is hoped that these concerns will be addressed in the coming months. On a positive note, it is the perception of the board that there is an increase in the proportion of black and Asian staff working in the prison since the Sodexo takeover. It will be interesting to see if this perception is borne out by staff ethnic monitoring figures. In addition, it has been pleasing to note the increased number of female staff in management roles within the prison. This noticeable gender balance within the context of a male environment can only be welcome.

5.5 Faith and pastoral support

The chaplaincy has a full complement of staff with all faiths represented by full or part time personnel, supported by faith groups and contacts from the public community. Whilst many prisoners profess to having no religion, the chaplaincy plays a major role in prison life and enjoys a high profile within the prison. The team see all prisoners within the first 24 hours (often over 40 a day). All prisoners on an ACCT are seen weekly and prisoners in healthcare and the CSU are visited daily. The Buddhist leader offers meditation classes for prisoners who may be suffering from post-traumatic stress or anxiety. There is a range of courses, including 'The Sycamore Tree' (which looks at the impact of crime on victims), and 'Living with Loss' and there is always a waiting list for these. Bereavement counselling is provided, and extra support given at anniversaries of the loss of loved ones.

5.6 Incentives schemes

The IPF (Incentives Policy Framework) was reviewed in early 2024 when changes, designed to improve the compliance and behaviour of the prisoners, were introduced. Time spent on standard regime was reduced from twelve to eight weeks, meaning that prisoners can apply for enhanced status sooner. There are early signs that these incentives are having a positive impact on prisoner behaviour. A recent snapshot showed that 349 of 1171 prisoners (29.8%) were on enhanced, 768 (65.58%) on standard, and just 54 (4.61%) were on basic level. A member of the management team regularly reviews these levels to ensure consistency of application.

5.7 Complaints

Property (total 269), canteen (264) and finance (85) have generated most prisoner complaints during this reporting year. Many of these, particularly those relating to property, originate from other prisons.

The IMB has previously expressed concern about the frequent changes of personnel in the complaints clerk role, but this year has seen a period of stability with an experienced staff member taking this post. This role requires diligence and patience particularly when pursuing responses to complaints from other establishments.

There are plans to reintroduce the monthly assurance meeting, designed to improve consistency of approach when dealing with complaints and IMB will be invited to attend for monitoring purposes.

5.8 Property

Many prisoners pass through reception every day (see para 4.1), each movement involving the searching and processing of property. It is not surprising therefore that items sometimes get mislaid. GeoAmey, who transport prisoners between prisons or to court, limit the number of bags of property per prisoner they will carry leading to a build-up of outstanding property in the reception area. On several occasions, reception staff have spent a weekend sorting through the backlog alongside associated complaints and applications (prisoners' representations to the board). Measures have recently been introduced to limit the window when prisoners can apply for property to be brought in on social visits and it is hoped that this will ease pressure on the department (it is also anticipated that this measure will reduce demands experienced by families faced with constant requests from prisoners for new clothing).

There was a slight fall in IMB property applications from 19 to 15 this reporting year.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Healthcare general

Two important contract changes took place in April 2023 with Mersey Care taking over mental health and Practice Plus Group (PPG) taking over general healthcare. Both have recruited staff to provide the services for which they are contracted, with the IMB noting a significant improvement in mental health provision. PPG struggled initially to recruit staff but has been helped by the provision of significant “on job” training and professional development opportunities. However, the slow pace of vetting has often led to potential staff finding other job opportunities rather than await the end of the vetting process.

Waiting times for an appointment to see a doctor, dentist or an optician have fluctuated throughout the year under review, but generally the healthcare provision in the prison is equivalent to that expected within the community.

Healthcare complaints are lower than in previous years and run at an average of 12 to 14 per month. They all focus on medication or delays in appointments. The IMB received 33 healthcare applications during this year which represents 20% of all applications received. Most of these related to medication and reflect the churn of prisoners coming into the prison.

6.2 Physical healthcare

The inpatient facility at Altcourse has held between nine and 12 prisoners most weeks over the period. IMB visit the unit weekly and speak with all prisoners who, with few exceptions, speak highly of the care and treatment they receive. It is also noticeable that those prisoners who are mobile spend more time out of their cells engaging with staff and other prisoners which is pleasing to see.

With Aintree University Hospital adjacent to the prison, access to hospital treatment should ordinarily be quick and efficient. The IMB has noted however that throughout 2023/24 the availability of staff escorts to the hospital for treatment has been problematic and the Board was particularly concerned to note that on two occasions prisoners were unable to attend vital hospital appointments.

Outpatients is based on a two-week waiting time to see a doctor which compares to the situation on the outside. There are now two full time general practitioners. Similar waiting times exist for an optician. The dentist's waiting time is longer at around eight to ten weeks on average, but urgent cases are seen as required. Dental staff now work weekends to reduce these waiting times.

The prison has eradicated Hepatitis C without the intervention of Public Health England and has continued to check all new prisoners for blood related disorders, treating anyone found with one promptly.

6.3 Mental health

The provision for mental healthcare has improved significantly over the period since Mersey Care took over the contract in April 2023. Under the banner “Behind the Wall” the team now comprises 36 care professionals with additional external help from psychiatrists, Outspoken (a trauma charity) and the Veterans Support Services. Rethink are subcontracted for counselling work. At the start of the contract Mersey Care adopted the screening process used at HMP Liverpool and now all new

prisoners are seen within 48 hours of arrival. This has allowed the team to plan interventions much earlier and more thoroughly than previously.

The IMB continues to be concerned about the numbers of severely mentally ill men held in the prison, often in the CSU, due to the lack of appropriate beds in the secure mental health system. This problem has been reported in many previous IMB annual reports and remains a national issue. Unlike in the case of primary care, the mental health team have been well supported by Sodexo prison staff whenever the need has arisen to move mentally unwell prisoners to hospital.

6.4 Social care

The year has seen an increase in the number of prisoners requiring a social care plan. The last quarter (April to June) saw 19 assessments carried out. From the Board's observations, disabled prisoners receive any equipment they need within 24 hours and assessments are carried out in a timely way.

6.5 Time out of cell, regime

Time out of cell has remained constant throughout the year with little noticeable difference despite a change in how regimes were delivered in October 2023. These changes were received positively by prisoners who were able to associate at the same time. However, prisoners find the weekend regime much more restrictive, as they are locked up for longer. Views amongst staff are more mixed i.e. whilst recognising it is in many ways easier, the ability to provide meaningful activities for all prisoners remains frustratingly difficult. Some of the less experienced staff find it more challenging to manage when larger numbers are unlocked at the same time having been accustomed to the restrictive Covid-19 regimes.

All residential units have exercise equipment in their yards and are allocated weekly gym sessions, including vulnerable prisoners and those on basic regime. It was good to see competitive football matches on the pitch frequently in the early summer.

The changes which were introduced in October have seen the prisoners eating out on the units rather than behind their doors which was a concern noted in last year's IMB report.

6.6 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation

Phoenix Futures provides the major thrust of rehabilitation work in the prison, offering face to face engagements or group sessions on the two dedicated substance misuse units (Furlong Red and Green). As the prison has moved to accepting many more remand or short-term prisoners the work of Phoenix Futures has been hampered by the transient nature of the population. As the system works on self-referral, the numbers who actively engage in rehabilitation are small. Phoenix also provides the necessary contacts with external support services on release. One PPO report identified the failure of the substance misuse team, prior to Phoenix Futures tenure, to supply a prisoner with a naloxone kit (which contains a medicine that rapidly reverses an opioid overdose), a factor in his subsequent death following release. More recent PPO reports have also highlighted the role of substance misuse in deaths in custody (see para 4.2)

The dedicated work done by staff on Furlong Green (Incentivised Substance Free Living) has resulted in positive outcomes for many prisoners. Alcoholics Anonymous

and Narcotics Anonymous attend the prison regularly and run group sessions. This is supplemented by inspirational talks given by ex-offenders in the Chapel on a quarterly basis.

6.7 Soft skills

Mersey Care and Rethink have organised a 5km charity run as well as a Row the English Channel challenge using gym equipment. They have also run health promotions highlighting Stress Awareness Week and Mental Health Week.

The Board continues to be impressed by the innovative approach of staff to engage prisoners in life enriching activities.

Altcourse's education provider, Novus, entered an exhibition, called "We Roar" funded collaboratively by the Arts Council England and sponsored by Novus and the Prison Creative Arts Project. The exhibition featured work by prisoners from both the UK and USA and is touring England before going to the United States. Altcourse was represented by two exhibits. When the exhibition came to Altcourse in March, it was well received by prisoners and Novus received over 70 written reflections from those who attended the exhibition.

Radio Altcourse has continued broadcasting with regular interview slots. The birds of prey calming activity has expanded with eight new birds arriving in July 23 moving the total to 20 and allowing for more prisoners to be selected to handle them. Beekeeping has also continued with up to 18 prisoners involved in this activity.

7. Progression and resettlement

7.1 Education, library

In June 2023 Sodexo introduced a new reduced contract for the education provision at HMP Altcourse. The department was reduced from approximately 40 staff to 23. Additionally, changes to the prison core day in the reporting year have altered the working patterns of education staff and, as a disappointing consequence of this, classes do not run on certain days. With close to 600 new receptions each month the education department is very busy, evidenced by being the top establishment in the country for creation of Personal Learning Plans (PLPs). The curriculum has been adapted to meet the needs of short stay prisoners with bite size qualifications. Unfortunately, many learners are lost due to transfer but of those who stay and complete courses, qualification achievement stands at 95%.

Since implementation of the new contract there has been a 14% cancellation in classes for a variety of reasons, including the re-training of existing staff to teach different subjects, staff sickness and vacancies within the staffing model. However, classes are well attended, and prisoners engage well.

The library continues to be a popular resource, appreciated by prisoners. Throughout the year, librarians display books on different topics at relevant times of the year e.g. Black History month, LBGQ+ and Pride weeks etc. Christmas and Easter poetry competitions were popular and well received. However, provision of reading matter for prisoners whose first language is not English remains a challenge. All education classes visit the library once a week and it is pleasing to see both education and library staff working closely together, particularly with individuals who have additional needs and/or are non-readers. There is also a time slot allocated specifically for prisoners with neuro-diversity issues. Prisoners on the vulnerable unit, healthcare and CSU can request books on the CMS machine (these are situated on all residential units and are used by prisoners to order food, book visits and make general applications to various prison departments) and the staff deliver them around the prison. In reception, prisoners receive a first night pack which includes a book, bookmark and pen.

This year has seen the successful implementation of a reading strategy throughout the prison, supported by the Shannon Trust. Each workshop has a mini library, with books available for prisoners to read during break times. IAG mentors on every unit have set up activity rooms, furnished with comfortable seating and stocked with books, games and puzzles. Book clubs encourage prisoners to talk about books they are reading in a relaxed environment over a cup of tea. Reading champions work individually with prisoners with a low reading ability and those without any literacy skills. This initiative has been well received by all prisoners, particularly the IAG mentors themselves who have found the experience of helping others both rewarding and confidence building.

7.2 Vocational training, work

The high turnover of prisoners has impacted negatively both on the availability of work for prisoners and opportunities to complete NVQs. However, prisoners can still gain qualifications in welding and health and safety. Workshops offer employment in engineering, office assembly, painting table legs, recycling and laundry work. In addition to internal laundry work the prison has two external contracts to launder

hotel bedding and laboratory coats, resulting in positive feedback on the quality of the work from the companies involved. A new progress tracker has replaced the previous passport scheme as a tool for prisoners to track their progress based on self-assessment. The neuro-diversity support manager has been supporting six prisoners with autism to find work in the workshops which is an encouraging innovation.

The manufacture of new skips for Recycling Lives has finished but work is still available repairing old and damaged skips. The two main customers are Block and Mesh and Nationwide, both of which offer NVQ qualifications. It is pleasing to hear that a number of prisoners leaving Altcourse gain employment with these organisations. Earlier this year it was a cause for concern that workshops were often closed due to redeployment of staff elsewhere in the prison. However, towards the end of the reporting year this situation greatly improved with such redeployment reduced to a minimum.

Unfortunately, the vocational training unit closed during this reporting year, removing opportunities to gain qualifications in joinery, bricklaying and painting and decorating. These courses were popular and well attended and it is a matter of concern to the Board that they are no longer available.

It was also disappointing that the proposed plans to build a workshop 'block' on the old football pitch appears to have been shelved despite it featuring clearly in the successful Sodexo bid.

7.3 Offender management, progression

During this reporting year the ad hoc use of Offender Management Unit (OMU) staff to cover for staff shortfalls in other areas of the prison has caused concern. Caseloads remain high and Prisoner Offender Managers (POMs) have less time than they would like to visit and discuss sentence plans. However, staffing reached its maximum after an erratic year. The pre-release team now share a large open plan office with the Probation Service and OMU, a positive move which lends itself to collaborative working and easier communication.

The volume of basic custody screening which takes place has increased year on year by 30%, reflecting the increasing churn of admissions. The introduction of the Ministry of Justice fixed term recall provision, designed to help current prison overcrowding, is having a significant impact on workloads. There are delays in screening and it can still take up to eight weeks for prisoners to secure a bank account and a number are released without accommodation.

Over 60% of prisoners at any one time are serving less than 28 days, so there is constant pressure to liaise with agencies and on probation to develop pre-release plans.

The team is generally meeting all OASys (offender assessment system) targets and there is no back log in assessments. Public protection issues however have increased due to high turnover, short term sentences and the recently introduced early release measures.

7.4 Family contact

A range of voluntary organisations encourage family contact by running sessions, such as 'Man Up' dealing with aspects of masculinity and 'Fathers Inside', an art-based course which focuses on self-control, problem solving, family roles, and healthy relationships. Both courses are popular with prisoners who can access two hours of family counselling on completion of a course. When Sodexo took over the contract it was disappointing to learn that the residential unit specifically designated as a "family unit" did not retain that unique identity. However, Liverpool City Council are continuing to fund some excellent family focussed work, including several very successful programmes for fathers with babies and young children to facilitate the development and maintenance of family ties. This was evaluated by Liverpool John Moores University and the project feedback was very positive, with a recommendation that it should continue.

The crèche in the visits hall was closed last year and has not reopened, so there is no play area for visiting young children which is clearly unsatisfactory. Staff are supplying younger children with crayons and colouring books as distraction material if required. Safe Ground, the group responsible for this area, consider that they do not have sufficient staff to safeguard children. It was pleasing to note that during the Christmas period the visits hall was cheerful and welcoming with a Christmas tree and decorations.

There are four social visit sessions daily but evening social visits have ceased causing difficulties for families with school age children. It is hoped that these visits may be restored. Several innovations beneficial to prisoners have been introduced this year. Each housing unit takes turns to host a monthly family day with a buffet, and children's activities provided by 'New Ground', a new organisation to the prison. These events bring together men and their families outside of their statutory social visit entitlement in a more informal setting and are much appreciated by prisoners.

A family counsellor has been recruited and her role is to support families who are distressed at the time of their visits and again this is a welcome addition.

7.5 Resettlement planning

The prison accommodation target for released prisoners stands at 90% on the first night of their release. At the beginning of May this year, the figure was 70-75%, reducing to 65% which is disappointing and may increase the likelihood of reoffending. The Government's early custody release scheme has undoubtedly adversely impacted on these figures, combined with the high numbers of short-term prisoners. However, these statistics must be viewed within the context of the nationwide prison capacity crisis.

Moreover, available accommodation on Merseyside remains scarce which makes the task of housing released prisoners increasingly difficult.

A Resettlement Hub has been established in a portacabin outside the prison gates and assists newly released prisoners with issues including organising transport and supporting attendance at Probation and housing providers. Representatives from drug and alcohol services, Probation, and Merseyside Mentors are also available for advice.

Against this background, it has been a matter of concern to the Board that there have been few or no Seetec (the organisation responsible for provision of prisoner accommodation) staff members for significant periods during this reporting year. In addition, as in the case of OMU staff, the remand team were required to cover for staff shortages on residential units. This situation has now improved to some extent with a more visible presence of Seetec in the prison. This improvement is underpinned by a weekly coordination and review meeting set up by a senior manager in January 2024.

A multi-agency resettlement board meets weekly to discuss the needs and issues of prisoners being released and includes discussion about employment links which is proving beneficial to prisoners. Several local employers from areas such as engineering, hospitality, retail, construction, and forklift truck training have links with the prison. This is a welcome initiative, and it is pleasing to note that the number of prisoners retaining employment six months post release regularly exceeds the 30% target. A Job Centre Plus team as part of a national pilot, also provides employment guidance and initiates benefit claims prior to release.

8. The work of the IMB

Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	16
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	7
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	7
Total number of visits to the establishment	231

Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	Current reporting year
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	1	4
B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives scheme, sanctions	6	11
C	Equality	2	2
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, time out of cell	2	5
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection, restrictions	18	12
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	4	7
F	Food and kitchens	4	6
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	28	33
H1	Property within the establishment	10	9
H2	Property during transfer or in another facility	9	6
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogues	2	1
I	Sentence management, including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, re-categorisation	27	27
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	4	12
K	Transfers	2	3
L	Miscellaneous	42	24
	Total number of applications	161	162

Annex A

List of service providers

- Prison escorts: GeoAmey
- Education: Novus
- Substance misuse: Phoenix Futures
- Resettlement: Seetec
- External visits centre: Safe Ground
- Mental health: Mersey Care
- GP service: Practice Plus Group



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