



Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Altcourse

**For reporting year
1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025**

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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 (a secure facility that holds prisoners who do not require maximum security but for whom escape must be made very difficult) local and remand prison for adult and young male prisoners, now serving the courts of Merseyside, Greater Manchester and Cheshire, and is contracted for the provision of 1,204 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 2023, Sodexo won the contract to operate and manage the prison from 1 June 2023. The contract is overseen by a Ministry of Justice Controller.

There are seven residential units, a 12-bed healthcare unit, a sports hall, a care and separation unit (CSU), where prisoners are separated from the rest of the prison population, workshops and a football pitch on site. Additional portacabins house staff teams and a variety of facilities that support the daily routine of the prison and include 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

The reporting year has seen significant changes, which have impacted the day-to-day operation of the prison and posed ongoing challenges. A change in the court catchment area has precipitated the constant movement of prisoners in and out of the establishment which, together with late arrivals from court, have added to pressures in reception, already a highly charged environment. This has caused a knock-on effect in every area of prison life, including education, work allocation, substance misuse work, number of applications to the IMB and resettlement. Continuity and consolidation have been compromised.

The Board has been particularly disappointed that some of Sodexo's promised initiatives have not come to fruition. These include a specialist in-patient mental health unit, a fully operational crèche in the visits hall, and a new build workshop.

Safety

- The late arrival of prisoners, particularly those from out-of-area courts, has increased pressure on an already stretched reception area.
- Increased prison population and intake of prisoners from different areas have made the safe location of vulnerable prisoners and those with rival gang affiliations more challenging
- A positive culture and good staff and prisoner relationships have contributed to low levels of use of force.
- High mandatory drug testing figures (MDT) have been identified as a priority within the prison for 2025.

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 the care and separation unit (CSU).
- The Board continues to be concerned about the holding of mentally unwell men in the CSU, due to an insufficient number of beds in secure facilities.
- 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 senior manager to lead on equality and diversity, with identified managers for every protected characteristic to give this area of work a greater focus.
- A charity, User Voice, has been introduced into the prison. It features prisoner councils, which give men the opportunity to air their concerns and offer feedback to decision-makers.
- Applications to the IMB have risen significantly (see table under section 8). By dealing with these, the IMB helps resolve a diverse range of day to day problems facing prisoners in a timely way. The rise is down to the changed cohort of prisoners coming from outside of the Merseyside area, the early release schemes introduced during the year and the churn of prisoners coming into and leaving the jail.

Health and wellbeing

- The retention of GPs has proved challenging.
- This year saw improved mental health provision, due to the addition of a range of new disciplines such as social work, occupational therapy, and neurodiversity specialists.
- There are ongoing challenges in engaging with short-term prisoners in the management of substance misuse.
- The reduced reliance on multiple agency nursing staff has improved continuity and consistency.

Progression and resettlement

- The introduction of 'bite-size' courses in English and Maths, so that short-term prisoners can complete more courses, has been beneficial; however, an improvement in the IT provision, which will allow prisoners to continue their courses across the prison estate, must be maintained.
- The Board is disappointed about the loss of vocational workshops and the failure to deliver the planned workshop included in the Sodexo bid.
- The lack of a permanent visits hall crèche has severely affected prisoners' ability to maintain good family relationships.
- The Board remains concerned about the high proportion of prisoners released with no accommodation to go to.

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 in-patient mental health treatment come into effect?
- How does the Minister intend to address 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 our observations and frequent discussions with prisoners, staff and User Voice, that the daily allowance for prisoners' food (which Sodexo follows) is inadequate, particularly in this economic climate. How and when does the Prison Service plan to review and increase the food budget ?
- Does the Prison Service plan to enlarge and improve the kitchen facilities to take account of the increased prisoner population? If not, what is the reason behind the decision ?

TO THE DIRECTOR

- When will education be reinstated for prisoners in the CSU?
- What is the timescale for full-time re-opening of the crèche in the visits hall?
- What is the schedule for rolling repairs of netting and kitchen equipment?
- How does the prison plan to tackle high MDT levels, in line with the stated priorities for 2025?
- Are there any permanent solutions to the problems caused by housing an overspill of vulnerable prisoners on the induction unit (Bechers)?

- When will the Director prioritise replacing the Catholic priest and Imam?
- How and when will the Director increase employment opportunities for vulnerable prisoners (VPs)?

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4. Safety

4.1 Reception and induction

HMP Altcourse is recognised as the busiest reception prison in the country and has remained close to or at operational capacity throughout the reporting year. Consequently, reception continues to be a highly pressurised environment.

The Board remains concerned about the late arrival of prisoners, as referenced in last year's report, as 'lock outs' in other prisons mean that prisoners often do not reach their residential units until the early hours. The change of court catchment areas has added to this pressure, with prisoners travelling longer distances from court to the prison.

Work on the refurbishment of the reception area has, at last, started and should be completed in the next year. Whilst this will cause some disruption, it will bring longer-term benefits, including more space and light and a more welcoming environment for prisoners on arrival.

Prisoners are medically screened, assessed for addiction issues, interviewed by the safer custody team and by prisoner mentors before being located on the induction unit.

This dedicated induction wing provides daily sessions facilitated by two prisoners. Prisoners are also supported by information, advice and guidance (IAG) mentors, the charity, Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM), which focuses on preventing suicides, and equality representatives. The IAG mentors are particularly pro-active at this early stage in a prisoner's stay at Altcourse.

4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody

There were seven deaths in custody recorded in the year ending June 2025. Two initial reports from the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) have been received and one is awaited, as the death occurred in late June. Of the other deaths, recommendations have focused on risk assessments undertaken at reception. The PPO made a recommendation, following a death in July 2024, for the healthcare unit to provide more thorough reception assessments. Unfortunately, the same recommendation was made following a death in December 2024, when documentation accompanying the prisoner from court - i.e. the prisoner escort record (PER) and the suicide and self-harm (SASH) information - were not properly taken into account in the risk assessment. It is good to note that additional resources have since been made available in reception, with the appointment of another nurse. Another recommendation has been acted on, followed the falsifying of ACCT (assessment, care in custody and teamwork) paperwork relating to another death in December 2024.

Of the seven deaths, five were apparently self-inflicted. Whilst these are investigated independently by the PPO, the prison does have its own procedures to ensure all pertinent information is captured. This includes retrieving body worn video camera footage, which can be shown to the PPO. There appears to be an issue with it being shared electronically with the PPO, due to Sodexo's IT systems, as this used to be able to be shared under the system used by the previous contractor, G4S.

Whilst the prison was designated a 'cluster site' (this is when it experiences a higher than expected number of deaths, usually self-inflicted, in a short period of time) during the reporting year, it was not deemed such by the end of the period in review. It is not

clear to the IMB what additional help and support is provided to a prison that is thus designated. A safety seminar looking at and identifying issues around self-harm and suicide was presented to staff in the reporting year.

Self-harm has increased, with 957 incidents in the year (compared with 850 in 2023-2024 and 762 in 2022-2023). The Board is of the view that this might be partly due to changes in the prison's catchment area and prisoners differing expectations regarding cell sharing and regimes.

There were 854 prisoners on an ACCT (assessment, care in custody and teamwork) plan (used to support those at risk of self-harm and suicide), which is broadly the same number as last year. The prison has put in place measures to enhance the more structured management of ACCTs.

The safer custody team sends a daily list of 'trigger dates' to unit staff. These are significant anniversaries for prisoners that could result in a 'crisis', allowing staff to offer additional support. In addition, AIM (alert, intervene, monitor) allows staff to identify when prisoners are not ordering meals, booking social visits or engaging with the regimes offered; it has been a valuable tool in enabling timely intervention to avert a crisis.

There is a helpline, run by a team of prisoners who are on the enhanced (top) level of the prison's incentives scheme, with training provided by the Samaritans; it is available until 9pm. The IMB is monitoring this development with interest, as the idea has been initiated by prisoners via User Voice.

4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation

This year, prisoner-on-prisoner violence has increased. As previously noted, the population of the prison has changed, drawing from new geographical areas. Consequently, there is less 'intelligence' around prisoners, the risks they might present or the gangs with whom they might be associated. The prison has a gang liaison officer who works with the police to address this.

There have been 504 violent incidents in the year: 83 of these were assaults on staff, seven of which were serious, including a sexual assault, and all were referred to the police. The numbers, whilst concerning, are at the lower end for comparator prisons. Each residential unit has appointed prisoner violence reduction representatives, whose role is to identify potential violent situations and help de-escalate them.

The weekly safety information meeting (SIM) is a useful forum where discussions take place on all incidents that have occurred and the necessary interventions. This is also a forum in which prisoners who are self-isolating are discussed, as are those who are on a challenge, support and intervention plan (CSIP), which is used to manage prisoners who pose an increased risk of violence.

4.4 Use of force

The number of incidents where force was used has risen in the year, with 752 recorded, in comparison with 650 in the previous year. Of these, 167 were planned. Cuffs were used in 284 incidents and body worn video cameras (BWVCs) activated in 565 of all incidents. It is pleasing to note the increase in the use of BWVCs, but more work is still required to increase this further. In the Board's view, strong management communications in this regard have undoubtedly helped.

Whilst prison custody officers have been issued with batons, there were no recorded incidents of their use this year. PAVA incapacitant spray is to be rolled out when the 'firearms licence' is issued by the police.

Monthly meetings take place to review and learn lessons from use of force incidents, with BWVC footage a key part of this process. Prisoners are separately involved in giving feedback. HMP Altcourse has the second lowest number use of force incidents amongst comparator prisons. Feedback from a recent HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) inspection commented positively on the good scrutiny and culture within the prison, in relation to incidents of force, and that prisoners reported that they felt safe.

4.5 Preventing illicit items

An intelligence-based risk assessment which is ratified at monthly security meetings assists admission staff in the decision making of performing searches on admission and on exit, using an X-ray machine and a body scanner. All staff and visitors are searched on entry and a random selection on exit. There have been 886 finds of illicit items in the reporting year, with a wide variety of contraband discovered.

Whilst drones, clearly an issue at other establishments, are not a common occurrence at HMP Altcourse, the prison's inability to repair netting quickly has created a vulnerability that needs to be closely monitored.

Good intelligence remains vital in preventing the entry of illicit items into the prison, with one search conducted on 33 cells producing 33 positive results. In another 'routine' search exercise, 17 positive results were achieved on 30 cells. Positive results are also achieved through routine staff searches.

Mandatory drug testing results remain high, but not as high as those in comparator prisons. Addressing this issue remains a constant challenge.

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food

The prison has a contracted capacity to accommodate 1,164 (with a further 60 Available Prisoner Places, APPs) prisoners and has been very close to operational capacity for much of the year.

The number of prisoners on remand has remained at around 60-65%. The induction unit (Bechers) continues, on occasion, to accommodate vulnerable prisoners (VP) because the VP unit is full. This causes additional safety management problems for unit staff and particularly in relation to the lack of dedicated toilets for these prisoners.

The accommodation improvement initiatives that began when Sodexo took over the contract from G4S in June 2024 have continued, with positive outcomes for prisoners. For example, all accommodation units now have access to PICS (prisoner in-cell solution). This gives each prisoner, via their cell phone, the ability to book social visits, order canteen (a facility where prisoners can buy snacks, toiletries and other essentials using their allocated funds) and contact the IMB. All exercise yards, including the one on the healthcare unit, are now kitted out with fitness equipment.

Two units are designated as 'calm' units and suitable prisoners can apply to be located there. Some of the benefits on these units include access to a large screen television and games consoles in the activity room, plus exercise matting and equipment in the association area.

Two further units are designated for enhanced and family unit prisoners, where prisoners who undertake courses on good parenting are housed. Both units enjoy additional privileges because of their compliance and good behaviour.

During induction, prisoners are given clear instructions about the amount and type of clothing allowed. On some occasions, certain sizes of prison issue clothing (particularly extra-large sizes) have not been available, which has resulted in applications (prisoners' written representations) to the IMB.

Applications concerning complaints about food are rare but are frequently raised by prisoners and staff during members' visits to units. However, this issue has also been highlighted extensively this year by User Voice (see 5.3). As was the case last year, most complaints relate to portion size, and an issue has been raised suggesting that ladle sizes are different to those in other prisons. This matter is being investigated. Staff supervision at serveries is a key element in ensuring fairness in distribution of food. However, from our observations, we have been pleased to note that, in the main, food quality appears to have improved this year.

The main kitchen continues to experience problems with the flooring and equipment failures, particularly the main freezer units. The kitchens were built to cater for an original capacity of 750 prisoners and are now catering for almost double that number. This issue has been raised repeatedly in previous annual reports. The environment is not a pleasant place in which to work: it gets very hot and airless and has no natural light. Staffing levels in the kitchen are frequently at full stretch and managers were constantly recruiting new prisoners to replace those who had left. Vetting and security clearance are particularly important when employing kitchen workers. There have also been ongoing issues with the recruitment and retention of paid members of staff, and

the Board have been concerned to note, on occasion, only one staff member to manage the entire kitchen.

5.2 Segregation

The care and separation unit (CSU), where prisoners are kept apart from the rest of the prison population, 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 two occasions this year). Occupation of the unit over the reporting period has averaged ten, but reached 15 at the highest level and four at the lowest. The unit has a small, well-stocked library. However, education provision for prisoners (reported on last year) has still not resumed, although the IMB understands there are plans to reinstate this. Prisoners can access distraction packs and jigsaws, but the IMB is of the view that this is a poor substitute.

In the 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 positive staff and prisoner relationships in the CSU and the professionalism of staff when managing prisoners with challenging and disruptive behaviour, often due to their complex mental health needs. It has been pleasing to see prisoners, apart from those on a three-man unlock, collecting their meals from the servery.

However, the IMB remains concerned about the length of time that some mentally unwell prisoners are held in the CSU while awaiting transfer to secure mental health facilities. Numbers appear to have fallen since Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust took over the mental health contract. But the impact of detaining such prisoners cannot be underestimated, in terms of their wellbeing, that of other prisoners on the unit and resource implications for staff.

5.3 Staff and prisoner relationships, key workers

The daily churn of prisoners via court appearances and transfers in and out of the prison limits the time staff can give to individual prisoners. Nonetheless, the prison has always enjoyed, and still maintains, a good reputation for staff and prisoner relationships. This may be a factor in the relatively low levels of staff assaults and use of force in comparison with comparator prisons.

The last 12 months have seen specific management attention directed towards improvements in the key worker role in the prison. This has resulted in the number of sessions rising from 18.09% at the end of June 2024 to 81.7% at the end of June 2025. The quality of sessions is monitored monthly by a senior manager. These are then sampled randomly by the Ministry of Justice Controller.

All prison custody officers participate in key worker sessions. New prison custody officers receive instruction in this role during their initial training, with each officer allocated a caseload of eight prisoners. All prisoners are allocated their key worker within one day of arrival at HMP Altcourse, with the first session taking place within four days.

The charity, User Voice, which works with offenders, has, this year, been introduced into HMP Altcourse. Meetings with prisoner representatives from each residential unit

take place weekly, facilitated by an ex-prisoner and also attended by a senior manager. This initiative has proved pivotal in giving prisoners a voice to air their concerns and has resulted in positive changes. These include the initiation of the helpline and the various issues around food and portion control.

5.4 Equality and diversity

The reporting year has seen the establishment of nine focus groups, covering all protected characteristics (including, among others, race, religion, age, disability, sex and sexual orientation), each with a senior manager at the helm; the groups meet once a month. In previous reports, 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 had not been replaced temporarily. Consequently, this area of work did not receive the degree of focus that it perhaps required. It has been pleasing therefore to see this development. The number of discrimination incident reports (DIRFS) has remained low, at four, and this may be due, in part to prisoners having more opportunities to voice their concerns. The equality action team continues to meet bi-monthly to consider, inter alia, issues raised within these groups. Each residential unit has an equality representative. Food portions were mentioned by each group; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer prisoners (LGBGT+) voiced some concerns about not feeling secure enough to be open about their sexuality; and older prisoners complained that they were struggling to keep warm at night after the heating goes off at 7pm. The veterans' group were the most positive and proactive. This year, they have established a breakfast club and have also created a remembrance garden for those killed in action.

Throughout the year, religious festivals, including Ramadan, Eid, Christmas and Easter, have been marked with services in the chapel and special meals.

The number of foreign national prisoners has continued to rise, with the main countries of origin being Albania, Vietnam, Poland, Romania and Ireland. Immigration officers visit the prison at least once a week. In the early part of the reporting period, HMP Altcourse consistently had the lowest disparity in its comparator group for use of force based on ethnicity. However, the latter part of the year has seen an increased number of black and minority ethnic prisoners from outside court areas skewing results.

The Board continues to be impressed with the level of care and consideration afforded to transgender prisoners detained at HMP Altcourse during the reporting period. However, there were concerns about one such prisoner, who was housed on the healthcare unit for several months. They were, necessarily, on a restricted regime and were eventually transferred to a specialist transgender unit. However, whilst at HMP Altcourse, the Board observed that they were treated with compassion and sensitivity.

5.5 Faith and pastoral support

Faiths represented in HMP Altcourse are predominantly Church of England, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu. However, the only full-time chaplains are from the Church of England and the Free Church. The Imam left during the reporting year and there are no Pagan or Buddhist representatives. Perhaps of more pressing concern (given the denomination breakdown of prisoners) is the continued absence of a Roman Catholic priest. Consequently, the celebration of Mass has not been possible, a loss felt keenly at Christmas this year. The Deacon holds services using pre-consecrated hosts for Holy Communion, but this may be regarded as a less than adequate substitute to practising Catholics.

Whilst many prisoners profess to having no religion, the chaplaincy team plays a major role in prison life. The volume of prisoners arriving at HMP Altcourse is stretching the ability of chaplaincy staff to see them all via the induction process, but the team sees all prisoners within the first 24 hours of arrival and visits each residential unit daily. Requests for private meetings to talk about family matters or bereavement issues remain a significant feature of chaplaincy work. All relevant festivals and holy days have been marked appropriately throughout the year, and a collaborative mural project has seen prisoners of different faiths, and none, creating a range of spiritual pictures on the walls of the chaplaincy.

Courses run by the chaplaincy team include Living with Loss (bereavement course) and a Bible study group. Unfortunately, the very popular Sycamore Tree course, which looked at the impact of crime on victims, has been discontinued on the grounds that it was considered unsuitable. However, funding was secured to run an alternative, Storymode, an eight-week rapping course facilitated by the Wings charity. This course is delivered across several northwest prisons and focuses on exploration, through the medium of rap music, of offending behaviour and its effect on prisoners, their families, their victims and society. Prisoners compose a rap song and there is a performance and an awards ceremony at the conclusion of the course. Board members had the opportunity to observe the performance and it was apparent, from talking to the participants, that they had gained much in terms of self-esteem, confidence and insight. The Board hopes that funding for future courses can be secured.

5.6 Incentives schemes

The prison has continued to refine the Incentives Policy Framework (IPF) to reflect its role as a local and remand prison. Prisoners are now placed on the standard (middle) regime on arrival at the prison. If they complete the full induction process into the prison satisfactorily, they progress automatically onto the enhanced (top) regime. This has resulted in prisoners with relatively short stays in HMP Altcourse being able to experience the benefits of compliance and good behaviour from the start of their stay in prison. Prisoners who are on the basic (lowest) regime are also allowed to continue to work or attend education, provided they have not been involved in violence.

5.7 Complaints

The average monthly number of complaints received is around 80, similar to last year. The complaints team has focused specifically on canteen and finance issues, working more closely with unit managers and the finance department to resolve matters earlier and without prisoners needing to resort to the complaints system. This appears to have reduced the number of complaints.

Yet again, a new complaints clerk was appointed halfway through the year, the constant changes in this important role being a matter of concern to the IMB in previous years. However, the Board has found the new post holder to be helpful and knowledgeable.

5.8 Property

Property continues to be the most common source of complaints. GeoAmey, which is responsible for transporting prisoners, limits the number of bags of property per prisoner they will carry. This creates a build-up of outstanding property in the reception area. Admissions staff have, on occasion, spent a weekend clearing the backlog to resolve associated complaints and applications concerning property.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Healthcare general

Practice Plus Group (PPG) provides the GP services for the prison. Unfortunately, retaining GPs has proved challenging, with four leaving during the reporting year. There are vacancies for a public health nurse, a GP and a pharmacist.

The Board continues to receive applications, for the most part relating to medication and appointment waiting times. Overall healthcare applications have increased significantly this year. The Board's view is that this is mainly due to the changed cohort of prisoners coming from different courts compared to the previous year. However, there have been fewer applications than last year about missed appointments due to staff escort shortages.

All prisoners are assessed on admission to identify those in need of immediate attention and, again, three or four days later to look, in greater depth, at both physical and mental health needs.

This year has seen the introduction of a daily handover sheet, focusing on new admissions, prisoners on an ACCT and in the CSU, and any others on units presenting problems such as food refusal or medication issues. This closer monitoring is intended to identify concerns at an early stage and prevent them escalating.

6.2 Physical healthcare

The in-patient unit has 12 beds and, generally, occupancy is high. The Board has spoken regularly to prisoners on end-of-life care. These men, as with all the in-patients, have invariably said they were being well looked after and that staff treat them with compassion and professionalism.

There has been an increase in the number of elderly patients in wheelchairs, or with limited mobility, who are subject to personal emergency evacuation plans, or PEEPS (which provide assistance to those who cannot get themselves out of the prison unaided in an emergency) this year. In addition, as in previous years, a high proportion of in-patients appear to be suffering from mental health challenges.

The association room has been refurbished and has a good selection of books, games and a large screen television. The Board has also been pleased to note prisoners being allowed more time out of their cell, where appropriate.

The Board has also been concerned about the prison using the healthcare unit to house two new admissions when there were no other beds in the establishment.

There continues to be a heavy reliance on agency staff, although one positive change has been the fact that the prison now only uses one staffing agency instead of a variety, as was the case in previous years. This has speeded up vetting and improved consistency of staff cover.

The waiting list for a GP appointment has fluctuated over the year, with an average wait of six to seven weeks, remaining much the same as last year. However, the triage system and daily visits of nursing staff to residential units helps ensure that prisoners have access to medical advice and treatment quickly.

There is a two-week wait to see an optician. The dentist, however, still has a lengthy waiting time of approximately 12 weeks, although emergencies are prioritised as

necessary. Dental provision is provided by Time for Teeth, a company that holds the contract across the prison estate. This allows for continuity of treatment as prisoners transfer to different establishments. A podiatrist has been recruited this year, but there is not a long waiting list for this service.

6.3 Mental health

The proposed in-patient mental health facility, included in the original Sodexo bid, has not materialised. There were very mixed views about this proposal in any event, with a number of prison mental health practitioners believing that most prisoners with mental health needs are better managed on a standard residential unit, with regular input from the mental health team. In this way, they can participate as much as possible in normal prison life and have full access to association, education and employment.

Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trusts holds the contract for the provision of mental health services. Any prisoner wishing to see a mental health practitioner can do so on request within 24 hours. In June, 568 prisoners were admitted to HMP Altcourse, with all being screened by the mental health team within 48 hours of arrival.

By June 2025, the mental health team was at full strength and included 15 mental health nurses and a mental health social worker. An important area of her work is to encourage family involvement in mental health review meetings (care programme approach), so that their voices are heard and their role in supporting the prisoner is recognised and enhanced.

Additionally, three occupational therapists and a speech and language therapist have been recruited during the reporting year. The multi-disciplinary team also includes two neurodiversity nurses. A counsellor and talking therapists from the charity, Rethink Mental Illness, complete the team.

Mental health resource within the prison has been enhanced and diversified to reflect a much more multi-disciplinary approach. This has been a welcome development, once again highlighted by HMIP in section inspection report in July.

The prison continues to receive support from visiting psychiatrists attached to local secure units, their chief role being to assess prisoners' suitability for hospital transfer. The Board continues to be concerned about the number of very unwell prisoners awaiting beds in secure units. This problem has been reported on for many years and little has changed.

The increased movement in and out of prisoners has led to increased pressure on the mental health team: in the last two months 1,000 duty calls, which involved mental health crises and/or welfare checks, were answered. Routine caseloads are also high.

One final concern is the high number of foreign national prisoners held at HMP Altcourse, who have limited, if any, English, and may have suffered severe trauma in their country of origin but arrive with no written medical history records.

Recoop is a UK-based charity focused on the well-being of older people within the justice system.

6.4 Social care

The social care team comprises a social worker, who undertakes assessments and is employed by the local council, and two other support workers, employed by the healthcare unit, and the charity, Recoop, respectively. Recoop trains prisoners to

become 'buddies', their role being to support fellow prisoners with social care needs but who do not require professional intervention. The IMB has been impressed with this buddy system, which they have observed working in practice. Tasks performed may involve helping to collect meals, encouraging prisoners to eat and supporting use of the exercise yard.

Referrals for assessment have varied over the reporting year. The lowest number was one in November and the highest in March and May, when there were 10 referrals. A total of 62 referrals were received this year, of which 17 were for prisoners aged over 60.

Prisoners requiring social care have a range of different needs and a small number will require supported accommodation on release.

6.5 Time out of cell, regime

Time out of cell has remained constant throughout the year, with prisoners enjoying slightly longer association time at weekends. However, additional out of cell time on Sundays can be earned if there is no violence on a unit for that week. Evening association time has ceased, apart from prisoners on the two enhanced Foinavon units.

All residential units have exercise equipment in their yards and are allocated four gym sessions a week, including vulnerable prisoners and those on the basic level of the prison's incentives scheme. It was good to see competitive football matches on the pitch frequently throughout the summer.

It has been pleasing to see prisoners continuing to eat some of their meals out on the units rather than in their cells, as this has been concern highlighted in previous IMB annual reports. Indeed, as part of general wing refurbishment, some units now have 'booth style' seating, which has enhanced a sense of social interaction amongst diners, as well as providing a space for prisoners to speak confidentially to medical staff and members of the chaplaincy team.

6.6 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation

Phoenix Futures are the main provider of rehabilitation work in the prison. All prisoners arriving at HMP Altcourse are screened for any substance misuse or alcohol issues as part of an initial medical assessment, before moving on to one of the dedicated units (Furlong Red and Green.) As part of their induction process, they are given a leaflet, *Substance Stay Safe Guide*, which explains the risks of taking illicit substances in prison, particularly mixes of substances, such as, for example, Spice. The leaflet also deals with the consequences of accepting drugs in terms of debt and punishment. Advice is provided about how to contact the team for information and support, including services that offer support in the community.

New prisoners tend to be housed initially on Furlong Red (the detox unit). Those who are suitable and want help and support in overcoming their addictions are offered 2½ hours daily out of their cell for association and to work with support agencies. Welcome sessions are run by IAG mentors. The more intensive intervention work takes place on Furlong Green. The courses, run by Phoenix Futures, tend to be oversubscribed, with a good level of engagement by participants. A morning course runs for five weeks, focusing on rehabilitation from addictions, and an afternoon session, running for four weeks, is aimed at improving self-awareness and commitment to change. Additionally, there is an eight week Thinking Skills programme, which is very popular. Numbers attending courses average around 60-65 prisoners at any given time.

The dedicated work undertaken by staff on both sides of the unit has resulted in positive outcomes for many prisoners. Fellowship groups, 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. The ongoing motivational work done by IAG mentors cannot be underestimated. They run a range of distraction activities, including fitness sessions, chess and pool competitions, and guitar playing, all of which have proved vital in supporting prisoners as they tackle their addictions. User Voice meetings are held every week on both units.

However, as the prison has moved to accepting many more remand or short-term prisoners, it has been frustrating to note that the work of Phoenix Futures seem to have been hampered, to some extent, by the transient nature of the population.

6.7 Soft skills

The reporting year has seen prisoners taking part in several innovative projects, particularly those involving art and creativity. The prison has, once again, engaged with the charity, Koestler Arts, and submitted competition entries in the fields of art, sculpture and poetry. It has been pleasing to note that the competition has been extended to the whole prison population, rather than being restricted to art class participants.

Manchester Pride Week afforded an opportunity for students to design posters, which were displayed as part of the celebrations. The prison has continued to collaborate with external agencies, including the Tate Liverpool, and this year Novus has engaged the artist who was involved in last year's 'We Roar' project to work with small groups of prisoners who have been on ACCT plans.

The library staff have continued to develop and promote reading strategies. On World Book Day in March, the team worked with education tutors to encourage prisoners to read a book relevant to their subject, then take part in a discussion. This was a very successful initiative, which enhanced prisoners' confidence and built on the successful Six Book Challenge, where prisoners read six books and give feedback to receive a dictionary.

Older prisoners have been able to take part in veterans' combat stress events in the gym; and, during the summer, mini football 'Euros' were held, which were open to all prisoners.

7. Progression and resettlement

7.1 Education, library

Most education classes throughout the reporting year have been well attended. The achievement data from that period indicates that achievement rates are disappointing. Overall, 2,277 courses were completed, with 1,505 achievements (achievement rate of 66%). For ESOL (English for speakers of other languages), the figures were 159 completions, with 70 achievements (44%). All English courses had 580 completions, with 305 achievements (53%), with Functional Skills English at 41% achievement. A total of 466 maths courses were completed, with 251 achievements (54%), with Functional Skills maths at 44% achievement.

The average length of stay of a prisoner at HMP Altcourse is just four weeks. As a result of this turnover, many prisoners embark on a course they cannot complete. To deal with this challenge, the education provider, Novus, has introduced 'bite-size' courses for English and Maths, which provide 10-hour units for those with short release dates. An upgrade to the IT support system, due in the autumn of 2025, should ensure that study progress is documented and follows a prisoner across different establishments.

Novus is prioritising provision of better personal development opportunities for prisoners, so all course leaders are required to include elements in their classes that deal with collaborative skills, confidence and employability.

Library

The librarians have supported the reading initiative across the prison by providing training for prisoner reading champions on residential units. The library also provides packs for new prisoners, containing short stories and puzzle books.

A successful initiative has been the launch of the 'simple little library' system which, via PICS, allows prisoners to browse library stock, reserve books online and submit reviews.

All units have two library sessions per week, which are well attended.

The provision of new books is keeping the volume of available books at around 6,700, but the various early release schemes have seen many books disappear, as there is no provision for fining late returns.

One area of concern is the limited availability of books for foreign national prisoners in their own language. The library is planning to explore the use of audio and e-books via Radio Altcourse over the coming months.

7.2 Vocational training, work

There are six workshops operating at HMP Altcourse: three were designated for vulnerable prisoners (VP), but this was then reduced to two, which is insufficient to meet the numbers of VPs requesting and able to work. This situation is being monitored by the IMB.

Workshops have all run below capacity throughout the year, because of the constantly changing population.

There have also been times during the year when operational constraints and redeployment of officers due to staff shortages have closed the workshops. However,

this has been much less of an issue this year than in previous years, as management have prioritised workshops over other areas of the prison.

The workshops include a laundry, a compact disc unit recycling unit, a welding/engineering workshop, dry paint coating for metals, a metal drilling area, and furniture component manufacturing. Contracts exist for the provision of metal cabinets for HMP Northumberland, metal window frames for HMP Altcourse, laundry contracts for several Merseyside catering companies, fencing components for crowd control, metal fixtures for road signs and corner components for desks. Prisoners can achieve welding qualifications. Unfortunately, attempts to link with outside companies have been made but yielded few job opportunities for released prisoners. This is disappointing, as the quality of metal work and supervision given is excellent, in the Board's view.

The IMB regretted the closure of the vocational learning workshops for bricklaying, plastering and carpentry when Sodexo took over the contract. Other closures include the in-house bakery, which taught useful and transferable skills. The rehabilitation opportunities to replace the lost vocational training, which were promised when Sodexo won the contract to run HMP Altcourse, have not materialised, due to third-party providers pulling out.

7.3 Offender management, progression

In the light of the average short stay of most prisoners at HMP Altcourse, the various government short-term release schemes did not materially impact the workload of the offender management unit (OMU). The department was already struggling to keep pace with case management and risk assessments for the volume of prisoner releases. Extra members of staff were recruited during the year to help manage the high workload. Management also reduced cross deployment from the OMU at times of staff shortage elsewhere in the prison, which helped keep caseloads up to date. Rates of completion of offender assessment systems (OASys), a tool to assess the risks and needs of prisoners, are good, and public protection issues appear to be well handled by the team.

The early release schemes announced through the year did not give rise to many enquiries from prisoners about their status. This was down to early and comprehensive communication from the OMU to prisoners.

7.4 Family contact

The IMB has continued to raise with management the reopening of the crèche facility in the visits hall. Whilst the crèche remains closed during general visits, there has been some limited progress in the provision of additional family sessions run on an ad hoc basis by a staff member on secondment from Liverpool City Council. This has been much welcomed by prisoners and their families, particularly for children with additional needs and/or who are neurodivergent.

External organisations have facilitated several family-oriented courses, including Fathers Inside, Reading with Kids, and Man Up. These have all proved to be popular, and informal feedback is that they lead to positive outcomes and behaviour change.

Another cause for concern was the cessation of weekend social visits for vulnerable prisoners, which the IMB considered to be discriminatory. These visits have now been reinstated.

7.5 Resettlement planning

It has been a busy year for the resettlement team. The number of prisoners leaving HMP Altcourse with no accommodation has been high and stands at 24%. Part of the problem has been the number of out-of-area prisoners redirected to HMP Altcourse because of 'lock outs' at other prisons (this is where a prison no longer has cell accommodation to take on new arrivals), but there has also been a lack of available and suitable housing. Prisoners being released homeless are more likely to reoffend and be recalled.

Seetec, a commissioned rehabilitative service provider, holds the contract for finding accommodation for both long-term and short-term prisoners. Finding suitable accommodation in Cheshire has proved difficult over the year whilst, in Sefton and Merseyside, it has been easier. High levels of recalls through the year have added to the workload.

A prisoner release meeting is held weekly, which has helped coordinate releases among the different departments more effectively.

The resettlement hub, located just outside the prison gate and staffed by relevant services, has been of significant help to released prisoners in attending their first day appointments with probation officers, employment services and housing, thus avoiding needless recalls.

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	8
Total number of visits to the establishment	212

Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	Current reporting year
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	4	13
B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives schemes, sanctions	11	23
C	Equality	2	2
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, time out of cell	5	22
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection, restrictions	12	31
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	7	19
F	Food and kitchens	6	9
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	33	80
H1	Property within the establishment	9	32
H2	Property during transfer or in another facility	6	35
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogues	1	15
I	Sentence management, including HDC (home detention curfew), ROTL (release on temporary licence), parole, release dates, re-categorisation	27	96
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	12	18
K	Transfers	3	11
L	Miscellaneous	24	36
	Total number of applications	162	442

Annex A

Service providers

- Prison escorts: GeoAmey
- Education: Novus
- Substance misuse: Phoenix Futures
- Resettlement: Seetec
- External visits centre: Safe Ground
- Mental health: Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust
- GP service: Practice Plus Group
- Prisoner council: User Voice
- Older prisoners: Recoop



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