



**Annual Report**  
of the  
**Independent Monitoring Board**  
at  
**HMP Altcourse**

**For reporting Year  
July 2016 – June 2017**

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*Monitoring fairness and respect for people in custody*

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## **A Sections 1 - 3**

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### **1 STATUTORY ROLE OF THE IMB**

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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 or centre is situated.

The Board is specifically charged to:

- (1) 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.
- (2) Inform promptly the Secretary of State, or any official to whom he has delegated authority as it judges appropriate, any concern it has
- (3) Report annually to the Secretary of State on how well the prison has met the standards and requirements placed on it and what impact these have on those in its custody.

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

### **Main judgements**

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#### **Are prisoners treated fairly?**

Overall prisoners are treated fairly within this establishment. The Board has been pleased to note a greater emphasis on a prisoner's first impression of Altcourse as he enters the admissions process. The prison is working towards ensuring that safety, decency, and dignity are embedded throughout the establishment.

#### **Are prisoners treated humanely?**

The treatment of prisoners segregated in the Care and Separation Unit and held on Healthcare reflects a positive and humane attitude from staff at all levels. During this year a number of seriously ill prisoners have received palliative care delivered with compassion and professionalism. The conditions of the VP waiting area within Healthcare are considered to be inhumane (see para 8).

#### **Are prisoners prepared well for their release?**

The Board is pleased to note a number of positive initiatives developed to prepare prisoners for release. However, work undertaken by different departments, Offender Management Unit, Resettlement, Healthcare, Interventions and Community Rehabilitation Companies does not reflect a joined up approach.

### **Main Areas for Development**

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#### **TO THE MINISTER**

As highlighted in last year's report, a small number of prisoners with complex mental health and behavioural issues continue to be held in the CSU and Healthcare for significant periods of time, with some awaiting assessment for transfer to secure hospital units. These prisoners are challenging and volatile and cause a disproportionate amount of disruption both for staff and other prisoners.

#### **TO THE DIRECTOR**

Although the Board has welcomed a significant reduction in violence and in the use of New Psychoactive Substances it is vital that this progress is maintained with the advent of smoking cessation.

The Board has been concerned about the high turn-over of experienced nursing staff and the increased reliance on locum doctors, both impacting adversely on consistency and continuity of care. Additionally, it has been disappointing to note the lack of education or purposeful activity in Healthcare for those prisoners fit enough to participate.

#### **Improvements from last year:**

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- The impact of increased staffing levels has been felt throughout the prison and has contributed to a reduction in violence, self harm and prisoners feeling safer. Safer Custody has been restructured to incorporate Admissions, Induction and Healthcare providing a seamless approach to continuity of care. Vulnerable prisoners are now located in two units with improved access to workshops and all amenities.
- There have been some improvements in the quality of food and the repair and maintenance of kitchen equipment.

### **3 DESCRIPTION OF THE PRISON**

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

The prison was purpose-built in 1997 under the government's Private Finance Initiative (PFI) on a design, build and finance contract by Group 4 and key partner Tarmac. Group 4 (now G4S) holds a 25 year contract to operate and manage the prison.

HMP Altcourse opened for prisoners in December 1997. It is a Category B Local and Remand prison serving the courts of Cheshire, North Wales and Merseyside. Currently contracted for the provision of 1133 places, it is the designated prison for all the courts in North Wales from where approximately 30% of prisoners originate. It is currently designated a Resettlement Prison.

There are seven residential units, a Healthcare Unit, Sports Hall and two football pitches, Care and Separation Unit, Workshops and Vocational Training Units on site, together with a variety of facilities which support the daily routine of the prison. The site is well laid out and maintained and prisoners are trusted to move from unit to unit without escort and with minimal supervision wherever possible.

## B Evidence sections 4 – 11

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### 4 SAFETY

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- The challenges of maintaining a safe prison environment remain. However, there are some positive signs of improvement with the number of serious incidents decreasing during the reporting period. For example, when comparing the data for the 6 month periods for January to June 2017 against July to December 2016, there has been an 8% reduction in violent incidents and 15% reduction in assaults on staff.
- The increase in staff numbers and their visible presence on the residential units is having a significant impact with prisoners saying they feel safe.
- A new Head of Safer Custody has tightened procedures and introduced a more proactive approach to targeting known violent prisoners.
- Safer Custody now incorporates admissions, first night and induction units and healthcare. This appears to be improving communications and understanding between the various departments and contributing to the drive to improve safety within the prison.
- Feedback from prisoners about their arrival at Altcourse reflects a much improved experience. Physically the building is brighter and more welcoming and a choice of hot meal is now available regardless of the time of arrival. Prisoners are given an induction pack and are seen by carers and medical staff. This has not always been the case, however, and induction sessions delivered weekly by IMB members have, in the past, highlighted serious failings in the admission and prison induction process.
- Mentors and unit carers have been in place for many years and provide strong and effective support to prisoners as required. There are now 12 full time carers and 4 part-time. To further strengthen this prisoner support mechanism, 9 Safer Custody Representatives have recently been appointed. All these new mentors and carers have more clearly defined roles, with better pay and are offered regular support sessions.
- The number of ACCT booklets opened has reduced during the year and it has been pleasing to note a reduction in the figures for self-harm within the establishment.
- There were a total of 5 deaths in custody during the reporting year; 2 self-inflicted and 3 from natural causes. This compares with 5 last year all from natural causes.
- Increased staffing has no doubt been a factor in reducing the levels of violence within the prison and this, together with the restructure of the whole admissions and induction process has made the prison feel a safer place for prisoners. The Board is pleased to note that Safer Custody is now seen as integral to prison life.

#### **Drug Strategy & Security**

- This year has seen a reduction in the use of new psycho active substances (NPS) with cannabis emerging as the preferred choice of drug. The MDT failure rate has been particularly high during the last 6 months. However, the Security Department has identified a number of routes whereby drugs come into the prison and is taking steps to address this by the installation of new netting and fencing, enhanced pitch patrols and a more proactive approach to the prosecution of offenders.
- There have been more 'lock down' searches this year and an increase in cell searches which have resulted in larger finds of illegal items.
- Random staff searches and intelligence have resulted in the apprehension of a staff member attempting to bring unauthorised items into the prison.
- There has been some success in detecting secreted mobile phones with the introduction of a 'Cell Sense Pole'.
- This year has seen a focus on improving knowledge and understanding of Organised Crime Groups and Urban Street Gangs. A nominated Gang Liaison Officer has been appointed to engage with prisoners associated with gangs both inside and outside the prison.
- The stability of the establishment has improved with a strong focus on security. There have been no major incidents during the reporting period. At Prisoner Engagement Council meetings prisoners say they feel safer and many say they do not want to move from Altcourse to other establishments.

## **5 EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS**

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- The prison has an Equality and Inclusion Action Team (EIAT). Meetings are chaired by the Deputy Director. However it is of some concern that a number of meetings have been cancelled at short notice and there does not appear to be a fixed schedule of regular meetings.
- Reflecting the population it serves Altcourse remains a largely white (90%) and Christian/no religion establishment with Black and Minority Ethnicity (BME) and Foreign National numbers being low.
- Equality issues have not proven to be a major concern in Altcourse this year (although it is recognised that there is a likely discrepancy in the numbers declaring as gay or bisexual – less than 0.5%). It is hoped that the establishment of privacy booths on Admissions for interviewing new prisoners will facilitate the disclosure of any equality issues, particularly around sexuality.
- The number of Discrimination Incidents remains low and this is mirrored in application to the Board (4). A secure box has been installed on units for discrimination complaints. However a notable increase was seen in June with 13 complaints relating to religion (Muslim). The majority of these were made by staff (8) and 5 from prisoners. Although Muslim prisoner numbers are low (35) this increase coincided with high profile events nationally.
- Prisoner focus groups for age, disability and sexuality have been established. This is yet another initiative to enhance prisoner engagement.
- Development of services for older prisoners includes special gym sessions, recreational activities and a separate health clinic. Currently 11% of prisoners are over 50, 1% over 70 and two prisoners are over 80. Specially adapted cells for prisoners who require wheelchairs are limited and a more strategic approach is required to reflect the ageing prison population in Altcourse.
- We are mindful of the need to reflect diversity within Board membership and welcome applications from all.

## **6 SEGREGATION/CARE AND SEPARATION UNIT**

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- The Care and Separation unit (CSU) has capacity for twenty two prisoners. Board members visit every prisoner held in the CSU on a weekly basis and are able to speak freely to them.
- There has been a noticeable decrease in the numbers held in the unit during this reporting year and there continues to be a focus on returning prisoners to normal location at the earliest opportunity. This process has been facilitated by the creation of a dedicated Re-Integration Unit (Brook Unit -see para 7).
- The year has seen a number of volatile and difficult prisoners housed in the CSU for varying lengths of time. This, and a number of dirty protests, has resulted in damage to some of the cells and an increase in the use of the Special Accommodation cells. The IMB were informed on every occasion and were satisfied that this use was justified.
- The end of 2016 and the start of 2017 saw several serious assaults in the CSU. Unfortunately one assault resulted in a Prison Officer receiving emergency treatment in hospital. The officer is making a good physical recovery but is still off duty.
- There are now two managers on the unit. The Board has continued to be impressed with the professionalism and commitment of the CSU staff even when dealing with the most challenging of prisoners.
- The Board is satisfied that the outcomes of all Adjudications reflect a firm but fair approach to the prisoners who are given every opportunity to state their case.

## **7 ACCOMMODATION (INCLUDING COMMUNICATION)**

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Three areas of concern relating to residential services were raised in last year's IMB report - pressure on Vulnerable Prisoner places (VP), staffing on units and prisoner engagement – and it is pleasing to note significant progress with all three:

- Extra VP provision has reduced pressure on places and has resulted in a more settled VP community. Separation of situational VP prisoners from those segregated due to the nature of their offending has resulted in a reduction in bullying. Additionally, the relocation of the

VP units nearer to workshops has increased the range of opportunities for employment for this group.

- Staff recruitment has taken place over the year and numbers of dedicated unit staff have increased. Additional numbers have reduced the need for cross deployment ensuring greater continuity on residential units. Each unit now has two managers and this has impacted positively on staff morale and prisoners sense of safety throughout the establishment.
- The monthly Prisoner Engagement Council has been reinstated and is chaired by the Deputy Director. This is well attended by prisoners and provides a forum to meet with senior managers to raise any concerns and advance constructive suggestions for improvements. Prisoners now feel that they have a voice and some ownership of issues affecting their lives.

Changes to units over the reporting year have included:

- The establishment of a dedicated unit (the Brook Unit) to re-integrate prisoners who have been involved in violence or other anti-social behaviour. It is mentor led and designed to facilitate early re-integration to normal location. There have been positive outcomes in terms of prisoner behavior and a reduction in the number of prisoners held for long periods of time in the CSU.
- Work has been ongoing over the year to improve the facilities in the Visits Hall for both prisoners and their visitors. These have included the provision of comfortable seating for enhanced prisoners, a more attractive area for young visitors with iPads (donated from local charitable funds) and the creation of a private space for nursing mothers. The prison recognises the impact upon children when a family member is imprisoned and now hosts regular family days for prisoners who have completed a specific programme. Visits for VPs and other prisoners are currently held separately in response to concerns raised over bullying. However, both of these initiatives have impacted adversely upon access to visits for the population as a whole by limiting flexibility in the choice of visiting times.
- Preparations are well in hand for the prison to become smoke free. Efforts include the provision of voluntary smoke free units, smoking is now only allowed in individual cells, and an increase in the provision of e-cigarettes, patches and lozenges. Information posters are prominently displayed throughout the establishment and a Smoking Cessation Strategy Group meets every fortnight. A crucial element in this preparation is the recruitment and training of prisoner mentors and champions.

### **Food and Catering**

- The repair and replacement of key items of equipment has resulted in significant improvements in the choice, quality, quantity and temperature of the food which is now served before roll call.
- Food is a standing agenda item at the PEC (Prisoner Engagement Council). There are always prisoner representatives at this group so the prisoner voice is heard. An IMB member attends the PEC.
- Food is ordered by individuals on CMS where there is the facility to comment and highlight any issues (negating the necessity for food comment books – hitherto unsuccessful). The kitchen manager or Aramark manager is responsible for responding to these.
- Servery practice is improving but there are still issues concerning appropriate attire in the servery. Not all servery workers wear the correct clothing or safety boots. An increase in staffing levels has led to improved supervision which contributes to an orderly service and better portion control.
- Special diet requests are increasing – some for dietary/medical and some for religious reasons.

## **8 HEALTHCARE (including mental health and social care)**

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- The role of Healthcare Manager has been reintroduced with a clear split between management and clinical roles which should in time result in a better service for prisoners.
- New Healthcare complaints forms are now well established as are dedicated boxes on each residential unit in order that prisoners complaints about their health are dealt with

confidentially. However, despite a number of requests, the IMB have yet to receive complaint statistics so this has become a more difficult area to monitor and to identify common themes.

- A Prisoner Healthcare Forum has just been established so that prisoners can raise general concerns and make suggestions about healthcare provision. This forum has only met three times so it is too early to comment on progress. There is also a regular slot on the Prisoner Engagement Council attended by a senior nurse giving prisoners further opportunities to voice concerns. A CMS satisfaction survey regarding healthcare complaints was circulated to prisoners. 700 responses were received of which 590 were positive.
- Waiting lists are now comparable to those in the community. However the DNA rate, particularly for the dentist, is very high (often up to a third of appointments). An audit of reasons for this is being undertaken so that DNAs can be reduced thus shortening the waiting times for prisoners. Prisoners can now book appointments on CMS.
- The VP waiting room is not fit for purpose. It is a very small cell with four seats and is used as a corridor for the first response team. There is no toilet or drink facilities nor any call button and prisoners have to shout for an officer. Prisoners are often waiting for long periods of time to see the doctor and be escorted back to their units.
- The prison has an 11 bedded inpatient unit and IMB members visit weekly and speak to every prisoner individually. There are now some health promotion posters on the walls, the bathroom is being refurbished and there are plans for plants and benches in the exercise yard. However patients are offered little stimulation or purposeful activity, many lying on their beds or watching television. VPs/non VPs are no longer segregated on the unit allowing more time out of cell and association with other patients. The unit has cared for some very elderly patients this year including those requiring palliative care and we have been impressed with the care and compassion shown by nursing staff.
- Prisoners with social care needs are promptly assessed and there remain good links with the provider, Lancashire Social Services.

### **Mental Health**

- A new Integrated Mental Health Team has been introduced so that primary care and In Reach are working as a team rather than in isolation.
- A new mental health referral form has been introduced – TAG (Threshold Assessment Grid) that can be completed by all staff including those with no mental health training. It is anticipated that this will lead to a more integrated response when prisoners become unwell.
- The number of prisoners awaiting transfer to secure mental health units has reduced dramatically but the reasons for this are unclear. However the prison does continue to manage a number of prisoners whose behaviour is very challenging but are not considered to be in need of specific psychiatric assessment or treatment in a hospital.

### **Areas of concern:**

- Increased reliance on locum doctors and the departure of experienced nurses has adversely affected consistency, particularly in prescribing and continuity of care.
- Poor communication at all levels.

## **9 EDUCATION AND PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY**

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- During this reporting year a number of new courses which are mindful of the resettlement pathway have been introduced including the Asbestos Awareness course and the Acsentis qualification in Independent Living which prepares prisoners for life back in the community.
- The Motor Vehicle workshop has been reintroduced.
- The prison is working with local businesses to facilitate projects which will develop prisoner skills and provide work within the establishment and employment opportunities upon release. For example, The Welding Academy Recycling Lives project was established in June and two prisoners have been taken on to the release programme.
- Additionally, Education and the workshops are collaborating on a project to refurbish a horse box into a mobile barista for use at local events. This could become a business venture for a prisoner upon release.

- The Board is pleased to report an increased number and range of employment opportunities in the workshops for vulnerable prisoners. There are now five workshops for this group. All have maintained high attendance figures.
- We welcome the introduction of part time employment combined with education. This is working particularly well in Industries. Prisoners are motivated to progress in their studies whilst continuing to work and maintaining their level of wages.

**Areas of concern:**

- Resources are still outdated and insufficient for both teaching purposes and administration. New computers and projectors have been ordered but have not yet arrived.
- The IMB regrets that there is still broken equipment in some classrooms in the College. (See Annual Report 2015/16).
- Initiatives which included a review of wages and the introduction of enrichment classes as incentives to learning and to encourage attendance at the College and the Vocational Training Unit (VTU) have not produced the desired outcomes. We noted fluctuations during the year but overall attendance has been disappointing and motivation lacking. Retention on VTU courses has dipped. The Board is also concerned at the number of attendees who are leaving classes early without good reason.
- There is no education provided for prisoners in the residential Healthcare unit.
- There has been under delivery of approximately 1800 teaching hours during the reporting year. The Horticulture course did not run for 4 months.

## **10 WORK, VOCATIONAL TRAINING and EMPLOYMENT**

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- The Establishment exceeds its target to provide 31 hours of purposeful activity to every prisoner. Prisoners can now submit a job application on the CMS system and their preferences will be taken into account subject to availability.
- This year has seen a significant increase in the numbers of prisoners involved in purposeful activity, currently 98%. It is encouraging to see an increase against last year's performance.
- There are sufficient activities to accommodate the prison population and enable the majority of prisoners to be gainfully occupied.
- Wages have been reviewed within the last reporting year with a bonus payment introduced into education if all sessions are attended. There is a greater demand for the higher paid jobs and also garden work in the summer months.
- Remand prisoners are not required to work but are encouraged to do so where sufficient work is available.
- Prisoners located in CSU are offered in cell education and prisoners on basic are offered part time work or education.
- The gym continues to be well attended. A session for older prisoners, 45 plus, has been introduced and has proved to be popular. In addition the Mental Health through Sport Course and the Football/Team Building Course run by Liverpool Football Club are new this year.
- The prison is developing partnerships within the local business community to attract new business and secure job opportunities for prisoners upon release. In particular a local company who makes fencing is prepared to provide work within the prison and offer job opportunities upon release.
- In the last reporting year concerns were raised regarding the impact low staff numbers was having on the level of purposeful activity being offered. These concerns have now been addressed by the recruitment and training of new officers.

## **11 RESETTLEMENT PREPARATION**

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- Last year the Offender Management Unit was frequently called upon to staff residential units when there was a staffing shortfall. Increased staffing throughout the prison has meant that OMU are now able to focus on their core duties.

- In addition the staff complement at OMU has been increased. As a consequence Basic Custody screenings and HDC reviews are all up to date. The IMB has been impressed by the department's child protection and safeguarding procedures.
- OMU is in a good position to identify risk of reoffending and where prisoners require support or involvement in specific programmes but closer collaborative working between OMU and the Interventions Team would improve the service to prisoners.

### **Areas of Concern**

- The Resettlement Team has a heavy workload. They have highlighted the shortage of affordable and emergency accommodation in Cheshire and North Wales. Their IT system is not always compatible with community CRCs making the sharing of information between the prison and the community more difficult.
- During the year staff have also voiced concerns about prisoners being released into the community in winter with unsuitable clothing. There is no shelter at Altcourse for prisoners waiting for onward transport. In the past the CRC/ resettlement team or probation have been involved in 'gate pick ups' for particularly vulnerable prisoners. Although the CRC are still contracted to develop and deliver a Through the Gate service (TTG) this is not in place, leaving those prisoners without adequate support.
- Closer liaison with healthcare would be welcomed and in particular with regard to the identification of suitable accommodation for prisoners with complex mental health needs.

## Section – Work of the IMB

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<b>BOARD STATISTICS</b>	
Recommended complement of Board members	16
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	11
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	12
Total number of visits to the Establishment	498
Total number of segregation reviews attended	131

## Section – Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Current reporting year	Previous reporting year
A	Accommodation including laundry, clothing, ablutions	8	5
B	Discipline including adjudications, IEP, sanctions	2	5
C	Equality	4	5
D	Purposeful Activity including education, work, training, library, regime, time out of cell	21	13
E 1	Letters, visits, phones, public protection restrictions	13	10
E 2	Finance including pay, private monies, spends	5	6
F	Food and kitchens	11	5
G	Health including physical, mental, social care	50	49
H 1	Property within this establishment	23	24
H 2	Property during transfer or in another establishment or location	26	37
H 3	Canteen, facility list, catalogue(s)	4	8
I	Sentence management including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, re-categorisation	9	6
J	Staff/prisoner concerns including bullying	13	11
K	Transfers	7	10
L	Miscellaneous	31	23
	<b>Total number of IMB applications</b>	227	217