



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

**HMP Altcourse**

**For full reporting Year  
July 2018 to June 2019**

**Published  
February 2020**



*Monitoring fairness and respect for people in custody*

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## A Sections 1 - 3

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### 1 STATUTORY ROLE

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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.

## **2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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### **Main judgements**

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

Prisoners are treated fairly and humanely within this establishment. The prison continues to work towards ensuring that a culture of safety, decency and dignity are embedded within the life of the prison. However, the Board continues to be concerned about the quality and quantity of food offered to prisoners.

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

The prison's commitment to the humane treatment of prisoners is evidenced by good prisoner/staff relationships and the development of a rehabilitative culture throughout the establishment.

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

Overall, pre-release preparation is good, with services working well together within the prison. However, finding suitable accommodation for all prisoners, particularly those with drug and alcohol problems, remains a significant challenge.

Furthermore, the lack of focused courses for prisoners convicted of sexual offences puts them at a disadvantage in terms of their release.

### **Main areas for development**

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#### **TO THE DIRECTOR GENERAL of PRISONS**

In the Board's view, prisoners convicted of sexual offences are discriminated against by their limited access to specific offence-related courses, and hence their eligibility for parole is compromised. An associated issue is the difficulty in transferring these prisoners to establishments where such courses are offered.

#### **TO THE DIRECTOR**

It has been pleasing to note the significant reductions in the number of acts of violence and self-harm throughout the reporting year, with a range of initiatives designed to make the prison a safer place. It is to be hoped that this momentum can be sustained.

While there have been some recent improvements in the day-to-day preparation and delivery of food, there remains a lack of consistency and it is hoped that this can be resolved.

The main kitchen was designed to cater for a much smaller population than the prison currently holds, and it is difficult to see how any improvements in the preparation and delivery of food can be sustained.

Currently, prisoners do not have access to a counsellor, and this is of some concern to the Board.

## **IMPROVEMENTS SINCE LAST YEAR**

- The work of the Brook unit, the enhanced use of prison mentors and the work of the safer custody team have all contributed to a reduction in violence and self-harm, and to prisoners feeling safer.
  - A culture of rehabilitation has been established.
  - There has been a recent reduction in the availability of illicit substances, due, in part, to a robust stance on staff corruption and a rigorous mandatory drug testing (MDT) process.
  - There have been positive developments within the healthcare department.
  - There is now low occupancy on the care and separation unit (CSU).
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### **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, 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.

Altcourse opened to 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 1,164 places, it is the designated prison for all the courts in North Wales, from where approximately 30% of prisoners originate.

There are seven residential units, a healthcare unit, a sports hall, a care and separation unit, workshops, vocational training units and a football pitch 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.

### **4 SAFETY**

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Figures for violence and serious assaults have reduced since our last report, showing a 9% reduction in violence January to June 2019. The number of serious assaults is within target and down 27% on last year, and there has been a downward trend in self-harm. The offender management in custody (OMiC)/key worker scheme was introduced in January 2019, and by March figures reflected a reduction in both self-harm and the number of prisoners on assessment, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT) documents, with harm minimisation staff visible on the units. Safer custody staff are proactive in seeking out and supporting the most vulnerable and challenging prisoners.

The ongoing work to establish an all-embracing ‘rehabilitative culture’ throughout the prison has resulted in many prisoners telling board members that they feel safer in the prison than in the past, and also than in other establishments.

All prisoners convicted of sexual offences are now located together, and feel safer than earlier in the year, when, due to large numbers, some of them needed to be accommodated on a mainstream unit, where they were subjected to abuse by other prisoners. The Board welcomes the new vulnerable prisoner waiting room in the healthcare unit.

However, it is disappointing that the enhanced support unit closed at the start of 2019. This unit’s work with some of the most challenging prisoners, many of whom also had complex social care needs, was so successful that the model has been adopted by other establishments. We have urged the Director to consider how such provision could be replaced.

There have been five deaths in custody, judged by inquest to have been as a result of natural causes.

The prison has put in place appropriate action plans following Prisons and Probation Ombudsman reports.

#### **Drug strategy and security**

Over the reporting year, the average failure rate for MDT was 23%, which exceeded the target of 21%. Cannabis remains the substance of choice. Since May 2019, the number of failures has decreased, which may be partly attributable to investigations into staff corruption resulting in resignations. As part of the greater focus on the rehabilitative culture, prisoners failing a mandatory drug test for the first time are given the opportunity to work with the drug intervention team, and if they engage, this will be taken into account at adjudication.

The Board is pleased to note that vulnerable prisoners have increased access to work and skills based programmes compared with that of the previous reporting year.

The body scanner is now a permanent fixture in admissions.

During this reporting year, the number of prisoners held in the CSU has reduced. Prisoners are reintegrated into normal location or transferred to another establishment more quickly than in previous years.

The command suite was opened 12 times for serious incidents. All were resolved satisfactorily and without intervention from specialist teams.

The prison is committed to championing equality, valuing diversity and ensuring inclusion for every prisoner, and there are consultation forums for all the protected characteristic groups. The work on developing a rehabilitative culture has re-energised these groups, which are now well attended. Each group is assigned a lead manager, and prisoners can contact the equalities team via the custody management system (CMS) or a general application. Transgender prisoners are housed on normal location throughout the prison, without issue.

Equality and inclusion meetings are held regularly, with suggestions from the prisoners considered and actioned where appropriate.

Faith provision is well integrated into prison life. The provision for Christians is good, with an enthusiastic chaplaincy holding regular victim awareness courses, which are well attended and for which there is a waiting list. A new Muslim chaplain has now been appointed.

Immigration services see all foreign nationals within seven days of their arrival at the prison and hold a monthly surgery.

The number of discrimination incident report forms submitted still remains low. Posters indicating who to contact on each unit to report an incident of discrimination have been printed and distributed.

The visits hall is a welcoming and pleasing environment, particularly with the excellent facilities for children. Regular family days are well received, both by prisoners and their families.

The Board regularly samples prisoner complaint forms, in order to ensure that the complaint is answered in a timely manner and that the issue has been resolved fairly and proportionately. There is an ongoing problem with complaint forms not being readily available on the units, despite a system for replenishing them.

There are few prisoners with physical disabilities who need support, and those who do have their needs met through the healthcare department and carers.

The CSU has capacity for 22 prisoners. There are a small number of safer cells and special accommodation cells, which are rarely used, with an average occupancy over the last 12 months at the 42% level. For the last six months in particular, this figure has been just over 30%, and on one occasion there were only three prisoners on the unit. It should be noted that the improved figure for the last six months also includes a number of prisoners being sent straight to the CSU from admissions after failing arrival body checks on the new body scanner. The role of the Brook unit in reintegrating prisoners from the CSU to normal location has also had a significant impact on the falling numbers.

Although conditions on the unit are basic, prisoners have good access to the CMS, telephones, education classes, the gym and library books.

While many prisoners are not happy about being on the CSU, they report that the staff there treat them both fairly and with respect.

Board members attend CSU reviews three times a week and are pleased to note the emphasis on the timely return of prisoners to normal location.

**Internal and external adjudications**

The Board monitors both types of adjudication regularly, and the decisions made appear to be fair and proportionate. Cases involving the possession of mobile phones are routinely escalated to the external adjudicator as part of the prison's drug strategy.

## 7 ACCOMMODATION (INCLUDING COMMUNICATION)

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As highlighted in last year's report, the Board is still concerned about the quality and quantity of the food served to prisoners, receiving numerous complaints both from prisoners and staff who supervise mealtimes. Special diets are of particular concern, with prisoners often not receiving the correct food on time. These issues are regularly reported in our weekly rota reports, and discussed with the director at monthly meetings. A persistent and unresolved issue is the regular maintenance and replacement of essential equipment. While there is a maintenance contract in place, repairs do not appear to be completed in a timely fashion.

Matters reached crisis point in September 2018, when, on a routine visit to the main kitchen, Board members found it in a state of chaos, with food and dirty cloths lying on wet floors and mouse droppings behind shelving. Few staff were in evidence. This was totally unacceptable and was immediately escalated to the deputy director, resulting in the establishment of a project board with an action plan to resolve these issues.

The Board has been pleased to note some improvements in conditions within the kitchen, staffing levels, and the menu choices and quality of food offered to prisoners. However, food shortages and the delivery of food in substandard trolleys continue to concern the Board. In particular, many trolleys do not have functional locks, and this causes grave concern to vulnerable prisoners, who feel that their food may have been contaminated. We understand that new lockable trolleys are on order.

The supervision of unit serveries and reorganisation of food distribution have led to improved portion control.

The Board understands that the kitchen was originally designed for a population of 750 prisoners but is now catering for almost double that number. This environment leaves much to be desired for the staff and prisoners working there.

### **Accommodation**

Accommodation at the prison is of an acceptable standard and there is a rolling programme of unit refurbishment.

Communication for the prisoners takes place via a CMS system, which works well. However, CMS machines are often broken and this causes frustration to prisoners.

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

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The outpatient services and their waiting lists broadly correlate with those provided in the community, with daily GP clinics and two doctors on busy days. Emergencies are supported by nurses on the units.

Healthcare staff continue to offer a wide range of well man and other clinics, with focused campaigns on specific topics such as managing stress and drug awareness.

The inpatient unit has been refurbished and redecorated this year, and continues to house, on occasion, a number of prisoners who have significant mental health/behavioural issues. It is noted that, for some of these prisoners, neither this facility nor the CSU is the appropriate location. It remains challenging for the prison to transfer these prisoners to a secure establishment.

In April 2019, a recommissioning and restructuring process took place, with a change in management, both internally and externally. This has led to the appointment of paramedics, pharmacy assistants, an attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder nurse and the introduction of a new practice nurse role. Psychologists are to be recruited in due course. Counselling provision has now been integrated into the mental health team and will, in future, be trauma based. Work is ongoing to clarify the roles of the various disciplines, to maximise the use of expertise.

The healthcare forum continues to engage with prisoners, supported by 'A Better Life', which has been commissioned by NHS England to support prisoner engagement nationally.

The Board is concerned that, at present, there is only one counsellor, who is currently on long-term sick leave, leaving the prison with no counselling provision.

### **Social care**

As mentioned previously, the Board was disappointed to note the closure of the enhanced support unit in January 2019. This was opened in April 2018 and provided enhanced support for up to 20 prisoners, many of whom had social care needs. Closure of the unit was due to funding issues.

Following a curriculum review and internal audits, new roles were identified and there are currently a number of vacant teaching posts to be filled.

New courses include health and safety in construction; OCR [Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Board] level 3 technical IT skills; and industrial cleaning and recycling. It is pleasing to note that vulnerable prisoners now have access to a number of these courses. All qualifications are externally accredited by the common awarding bodies.

A skills passport system has been introduced into the workshops, to target and develop employment- and job-related skills.

The prison has partnered with Liverpool Football Club to sponsor a sports leadership programme.

In partnership with Good Vibrations and Novus, the prison participated for the first time in the Gamelan Project, which engaged six 'at-risk' prisoners in an Indonesian music project, focusing on using communal music to develop life and work skills. Participants learned to play different percussion instruments, worked on a CD and performed a live show for staff and prisoners, enjoyed by all involved.

The education department delivers training for prisoner mentors, who play an integral role in engaging and supporting prisoners, particularly those experiencing difficulty in coping with prison life.

In June 2019, the prison held a successful Festival of Learning, attended by prisoners and representatives from partner organisations, including Liverpool John Moores University, the Shannon Trust and Complete Training Solutions.

Under the Tate Family Learning Programme, an artist from Tate Liverpool worked with prisoners and their families to stage an exhibition, held in November 2018 at the gallery.

Attendance at education classes has improved this year, with few prisoners being absent, other than for valid reasons.

The gym is always fully occupied, with weights training and the activity room proving very popular. There is now an activity class for the over-50s.

The library is appreciated by prisoners, with an average weekly attendance of 300 prisoners. However, there is still an issue with missing and damaged books.

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

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There are high levels of purposeful activity, with 90% of prisoners fully engaged, similar to last year.

There is a good rapport between prisoners, officers and instructors. Prisoners talk enthusiastically about their work and opportunities to gain qualifications which, in turn, increase their potential to find work on discharge.

A new recycling course has been introduced, which is recognised by local authorities.

About 70% of laundry work and output from the paint shop is for outside customers, who are satisfied with the service they receive, and prisoners feel a sense of satisfaction in their work.

The two academy schemes run with Recycling Lives and Secure-a-Fence Limited continue to be very popular with prisoners, and on occasion lead to employment on release.

A new four-week course in industrial cleaning, with involvement from a local football team, also has the potential to offer employment to prisoners on discharge.

The Board is pleased to report that the car workshop is back in operation.

General attendance at work is good, with valid reasons for absence.

Once again, this is a very positive picture of prisoners' engagement in purposeful activity.

## **11 RESETTLEMENT PREPARATION**

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The rollout of OMiC and key workers has had a positive impact on the completion of offender assessment system (OASys) reports. Key workers support the process and pick up any identified outstanding work in a timely manner, to ensure compliance with key targets. The Thinking Skills Programme is popular with prisoners and specifically targets the reasons and consequences of reoffending.

Reducing reoffending meetings take place bi monthly, chaired by the head of OMiC, and are well attended by pathway leads, including from the healthcare unit, the chaplaincy, the offender management unit, Shelter, Job Centre Plus, Industries and the gym.

Multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) are well served within the establishment, with members of the OMiC team attending all level 3 (more serious offending) meetings and a large proportion of those at level 2 – an average of 12 meetings per month. There is good liaison with key workers, the mental health team (if appropriate), offender managers and security staff. The team also attends the strategic MAPPA board meetings.

There is a dedicated family unit within the prison, where prisoners can participate in courses designed to demonstrate the impact of their offending on family life. Additionally, they can attain a City & Guilds parenting qualification, following a three-week course. This is particularly well received by prisoners. Two recent initiatives are worthy of special mention: twice a week, prisoners can take it in turns to cook and serve a meal for their families, following which adult visitors can look around their cells. There is a weekly reading and creative play club in the visits hall, when fathers can read to their children and bathe and change their babies and toddlers.

Release on temporary licence (ROTL) is little used as the prison is a category B local prison, but take-up for the home detention curfew (HDC) process is good, with a monthly quality assurance process feeding into the national picture.

Shelter and the integrated through-the-gate team work well together in pre-release preparation. Prisoners can apply to open bank accounts, apply for driving licences (photographic identification) and complete online security qualifications for building site work. The team liaises with housing providers and GP surgeries, to ensure that there is adequate community support available to prisoners upon release.

All prolific and young offenders, and vulnerable prisoners are taken to first appointments with relevant agencies on release. However, despite their best efforts, accessing suitable accommodation for all released prisoners, particularly drug and alcohol users, still proves to be a significant challenge.

Prisoner transfers remain an issue of concern, particularly for those convicted of sexual offences and category B prisoners, due to the shortage of available spaces. The 'knock-on' effect of this is felt particularly keenly by the former category of prisoners, who are unable to access courses relevant to their offending while at Altcourse, which, in turn, can have an adverse impact on their eligibility for parole. This issue was highlighted in last year's report but remains unresolved. The problem is further exacerbated by the stance currently being adopted by the prisoner management unit, which is apparently stepping away from its overarching responsibility to manage inter-prison transfers and instead leaving it up to individual prisons to resolve among themselves – a most unsatisfactory situation.

## C THE 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	12
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	15
Total number of visits to the establishment	557
Total number of segregation reviews attended	117

## C- APPLICATIONS TO THE IMB

<b>Code</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Current reporting year</b>	<b>Previous reporting year</b>
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	25	8
B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives and earned privileges, sanctions	18	5
C	Equality	10	6
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, library, regime, time out of cell	29	15
E 1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection restrictions	34	13
E 2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	39	8
F	Food and kitchens	47	14
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	51	71
H 1	Property within this establishment	34	20
H 2	Property during transfer or in another establishment or location	24	25
H 3	Canteen, facility list, catalogue(s)	6	0
I	Sentence management, including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, recategorisation	60	24
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	16	8
K	Transfers	42	5
L	Miscellaneous	62	21
	<b>Total number of IMB applications</b>	497	243