



Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Altcourse

**For reporting year
1 July 2019 – 30 June 2020**

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Introductory sections 1 – 3

1. Statutory role of the IMB

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

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

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

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

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

2. Description of the establishment

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

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

Altcourse was purpose built in 1997 under the Government's private finance initiative, on a design, build and finance contract by Group 4 and key partner, Tarmac. Group 4 (now G4s) holds the 25-year contract to operate and manage the prison, which is overseen by a Ministry of Justice controller and her team.

There are seven residential units, a 12-bedded healthcare unit, a sports hall, a care and separation unit (CSU), workshops, vocational training units and a football pitch on-site, together with a variety of facilities which support the daily routine of the prison, including small areas that house birds of prey and beehives.

A number of services are contracted out to private firms, including catering to Aramark, education to Novus and resettlement to Shelter. The site is well laid out and maintained, and open in aspect. Prisoners were previously allowed to move from unit to unit without escort; however, this changed on 3 March 2020, after which no unsupervised movements have taken place, as part of the drug supply reduction strategy.

3. Executive summary

3.1 Background to the report

The COVID-19 outbreak has had a significant impact on the Board's ability to gather information and discuss the contents of this annual report. The Board has therefore tried to cover as much ground as it can in these difficult circumstances, but inevitably there is less detail and supporting evidence than usual. Ministers are aware of these constraints. Regular information is being collected specifically on the prison's response to the pandemic, and that is being collated nationally.

3.2 Main judgements

How safe is the prison?

In the judgement of the Board, Altcourse remains a safe prison, and this is evidenced, particularly during the challenges of lockdown, by the low levels of self-harm and violence (see section 4). It remains to be seen whether this can be sustained if the lockdown continues and frustrations rise.

How fairly and humanely are prisoners treated?

In the context of the current COVID-19 lockdown, the Board considers that prisoners have been treated as fairly and humanely as is possible, despite the severe constraints upon their movement and access to family visits and activities. Prisoners have appreciated some additional benefits, such as extra telephone credit and televisions, and understand that the slow progress in the return to the normal regime is not within the Director's control. Morale has been enhanced by the very positive attitude of all staff and good channels of communication across the establishment. Food has become an even more important focus of daily life, and it is pleasing to be able to report that, since lockdown, the quality and quantity of the food have significantly improved, as confirmed by staff on the units.

How well are prisoners' health and wellbeing needs met?

Overall, in this reporting year the Board considers that prisoners' health and wellbeing needs are largely being met. However, there are still concerns about the specific needs of older prisoners, those requiring social care and prisoners with serious mental health needs (see sections 6.1 and 6.2).

How well are prisoners progressed towards successful resettlement?

In general terms, prisoner's progress well towards release but the limited provision by the Probation Service has created significant problems, in terms of completion of sentence planning and risk assessment work during the COVID-19 crisis. Although the percentage of prisoners released with no fixed abode has been pleasingly low in the latter part of the reporting year, this is attributable to local authority hotel provision, and this is unlikely to be a permanent arrangement, with an anticipated

return to the pre-lockdown difficulty of housing Merseyside prisoners with complex needs, a number of whom have been excluded from existing placements.

3.3 Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

Altcourse is seeing, as are other prisons, an increase in its age profile. Many older prisoners require more age-appropriate accommodation, enhanced or more specialised healthcare provision, and in some cases end-of-life care and palliative care. The prison developed an excellent older person's strategy, but this could only be partially implemented owing to finite finance and lack of an overarching national strategy.

The inpatient facility has 12 beds, which are used for prisoners with physical and mental health needs. This results in an uneasy mix, as both sets of patients require different approaches and skills. This, together with the length of time taken to transfer mental health patients to secure units, creates an environment which could be detrimental to some patients' recovery. Altcourse has a second healthcare facility that is not commissioned but could be used as a dedicated mental health unit.

Delays in scheduling Coroner inquests have caused anxiety for staff attending as witnesses and families awaiting closure.

TO THE PRISON SERVICE

The most prevalent complaint from prisoners relates to their personal property, much of which is mislaid in the course of inter-prison transfers. This has been a persistent problem nationally, and although it has been the subject of discussion, it appears that little has been done to address this.

As mentioned in last year's report, many men convicted of sexual offences will still be unable to access treatment programmes as a number are considered unfit for transfer to other prisons which run these programmes.

TO THE DIRECTOR

The food provided to prisoners is an area that has concerned the Board for a number of years. Although there have been some improvements, particularly in the latter part of the reporting year, more still needs to be done in terms of consistency in the quality of the food, and the timely maintenance of kitchen equipment.

3.4 Progress since the last report

All areas highlighted in last year's report have continued to improve. These include the rehabilitative culture (as evidenced by excellent staff/prisoner relationships), a decrease in the use of psychoactive substances (PS), improvements in the quality of food and provision of healthcare services, and the relatively low occupancy of the CSU. The management of violence and self-harm during lockdown has been effective, and some useful lessons have been learnt by staff having to work differently and creatively.

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4. Safety

4.1 Reception and induction

Safer custody meetings have continued to take place regularly but since the COVID-19 outbreak they take place via video conference, so it has not been possible for the Board to access these from home.

As HMP Altcourse now takes prisoners from local courts, fewer arrive late and they have not been subjected to long uncomfortable journeys from North Wales. This means that admissions staff are not required to process late arrivals coinciding with finishing shift, which previously caused resentment.

Board members have visited the admissions area since relaxation of 'lockdown', and reviewed recent refurbishments, which are impressive: the flooring has been replaced and the whole area repainted. It was spotlessly clean, bright and welcoming, with COVID-19 information clearly displayed and hand sanitisers available. Soft seating has also been installed in one area. All new prisoners have their temperatures checked, and infection safeguarding arrangements are in place during searching.

Admission mentors perform a useful role answering new prisoners' questions. They are particularly pleased to be out of their cells for longer periods than other prisoners and reported that the quality of the food is good.

A newly arrived prisoner appeared to be relieved to be in Altcourse and stated that it compared favourably to other prisons.

Group inductions were suspended owing to social distancing but each prisoner receives an induction leaflet, which staff members go through with them, with special attention given to first-time prisoners and those with learning difficulties, or whose first language is not English. It is hoped that group sessions, with reduced numbers, will resume in due course.

Until the end of this reporting year, new prisoners have had to reverse cohort for two weeks before integration onto the residential units. These prisoners usually need to share a cell owing to a lack of spaces, with the potential to cause cross-infection.

The Board has abandoned weekly induction slots. Many attending the sessions had been in prison before and did not allow a voice to new prisoners. It was also clear that weekly sessions were capturing only a small proportion of new prisoners. Instead, an IMB information leaflet was developed with the help of prisoners running the prison radio station, Radio Altcourse.

4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody

In the main, deaths in custody over the reporting year have been due to natural causes, with the exception of those noted below. There are a number of Coroner's

inquests outstanding for many months, causing distress to staff attending as well as to witnesses and families awaiting closure.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, two prisoners have died, in a hospital and hospice, respectively. Both were elderly, with serious underlying health problems but diagnosed with the virus while in the hospital/hospice.

There was a further death in September 2019, on the night following the prisoner's admission. Healthcare staff have already anticipated the concerns that will be highlighted in the final Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) report and have put in place an action plan addressing issues surrounding medical recording following an admission assessment.

A further, apparently self-inflicted, death on the healthcare unit is awaiting an inquest.

2019 saw a number of prolific self-harmers causing a large proportion of incidents. There were further spikes in December 2019 (102) and January 2020 (104). Since the COVID-19 outbreak, the safer custody team has developed a range of evidence-based interventions, including distraction strategies and regular welfare checks on all prisoners on an assessment, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT) document.

Training has been targeted at residential staff on how to deal more compassionately and effectively with self-harmers, whose behaviour can become frustrating and could be seen as manipulative. The trend is slowly reducing, with 83 incidents in March 2020, and 76 in April. This reduction coincides with the lockdown and a change in national recording criteria concerning ligatures (the making of a ligature is no longer reported as self-harm).

In the view of the Board, good staff/prisoner relationships and an effective communication strategy also appear to have enhanced morale and the mental health of prisoners generally.

4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation

During the reporting year, the total number of recorded incidents of violence has declined slowly, from 47 in June 2019, of which 36 were prisoner on prisoner, reaching an all-time low of nine in April 2020. Not surprisingly, the current situation is artificial, in that the opportunities for prisoner-on-prisoner assaults are much reduced during the current restrictions. The number of assaults on staff has remained uniformly low, with 11 in June 2019 and 14 in June 2020.

A number of factors may have contributed to low levels of violence more recently, including good staff/prisoner communications, additional telephone credit and televisions for all prisoners. Targeted interventions via challenge, support, and intervention plans (CSIPs), the Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) model and safety intervention meetings have helped to identify and support those most likely to be violent, self-harm or self-isolate.

The anticipated arrival of Liverpool prisoners and increased gang activity has not materialised, although this may change.

There is concern about the impact of the continued lockdown, as prisoners may become frustrated by the perceived lack of progress and levels of violence may increase.

The only serious incidents over the reporting year have been deaths in custody, an escape while on a hospital escort, and two relatively short-lived incidents when prisoners climbed on the bars which were speedily and satisfactorily resolved.

4.4 Vulnerable prisoners, safeguarding

Altcourse is a statutory member of the Merseyside Safeguarding Board. This has proved particularly useful to the prison – for example, in identifying the needs of young prisoners who are care leavers.

The prison has identified a need for more age-appropriate, purpose-built housing with potential use for those with limited mobility and increasing health issues, but a strategy developed for older prisoners could only be partially implemented owing to finite finances and the lack of a national strategy for this prisoner group. A large proportion of these prisoners are vulnerable owing to their convictions for historic sexual offences. However, because of increases in this age group, staff have had to develop skills and experience in dealing with prisoners requiring palliative and end-of-life care.

4.5 Use of force

In September 2019, this area became the responsibility of the safer custody team, rather than security staff, to reflect a change of focus from control to care, with an acceptance that use of force risks prison stability and has a negative impact on staff/prisoner relationships. A review identified poor use of force paperwork, often without a healthcare assessment and with officers not switching on body-worn cameras.

A multidisciplinary governance structure has now been established with a named coordinator, who organises meetings to which the Board receives invitations. These meetings have continued since March via video conferencing.

Patterns of use have varied little over the reporting year (ranging from 36 uses in September 2019 to 65 in March 2020), peaking in January 2020 (70), as often happens, when arguments occur between prisoners over Christmas debts.

The apparent gradual rise in use of force has been interpreted as being a result of better reporting procedures. In addition, many incidents are seen as minimal use of force, resulting from staff confrontations as prisoners are reluctant to return to their cells after short unlock times. The Board will continue to monitor this closely.

4.6 Substance misuse

The body scanner in admissions continues to identify large numbers of prisoners with concealed drugs, despite the offer of an amnesty if drugs are disposed of before they arrive. All prisoners are assessed by a nurse and by drugs workers.

Substance misuse staff report anecdotally that prisoners with substance misuse issues arriving at Altcourse during the epidemic now present in a better state of health generally. Many were previously homeless but are now being housed by the local authority. This has not been evidenced or quantified

In terms of usage, the prison has seen an increase in the use of cannabis but a reduction in the use of PS, which are identified by an itemiser used on prisoners' mail. During the virus outbreak, there have been no social visits, so drugs have not come in via that route, and the number of 'throwovers' has also reduced. No mandatory drug testing has taken place over this period.

There has been limited drone activity, but this has been addressed by the addition of reinforced grills on some cell windows.

The prison also has a gang liaison officer, leading to improved intelligence on this issue.

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food

A number of residential units have been relocated this year, creating an area on the west side of the prison for all new admissions, reducing the need for internal prisoner movements. In addition, a new post was created in May, to monitor cell decency, which has also been a priority for the Ministry of Justice controller, especially for prisoners' early days in custody.

The Brook unit, which housed prisoners on the basic regime, previously commended by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), has not functioned since the advent of COVID-19 as it has been the dedicated reverse cohort unit, but this will be re-established as soon as feasible.

A continuing observation noted on Board rotas during the year has been the unavailability of paper application/complaint forms on the system on accommodation units. Prison managers responded to this in February, by making the availability of forms the duty of a new prisoner incentives policy representative.

A further improvement is the agreement to have a 'handyman' position filled by a prisoner on each wing. This is yet to become active, but the idea is that on each unit there is someone who can fix broken light filters, toilet doors and curtain poles, and undertake other small repairs.

The quality of the food served and the management of the kitchen continue to be concerns for the Board. There has, however, been a significant improvement

towards the end of this reporting year, although a number of issues remain. An audit commissioned by G4S in February of 2020 substantiated the Board view of these improvements, with a score of 86/100.

Food is delivered to the residential units on trolleys, and Board members report that many do not lock or are in a poor state of repair, causing problems with the distribution of food. This became a priority for senior managers in March. The locking problem and lack of supervision of the trolleys have led to a number of vulnerable prisoners complaining that their food has been contaminated.

The issue, highlighted in last year's report, of insufficient or missing food on trolleys causing delays in prisoners receiving their meals has been rectified by the introduction of officers counting and signing for the food as it leaves the kitchen and escorting trolleys to units.

The Board has also focused particularly on the serving of food this year. In the main, 'whites' and gloves are now worn but food temperatures are not always checked. One problem noted was a lack of effective control over food waste from the serveries, which has exacerbated the ongoing rodent problem.

The quality of the food has greatly improved, with many prisoners commenting positively on this, but they remain unhappy about some portion sizes. It is disappointing to note that the homemade soup at lunchtime, promised in November 2019 after a successful trial, has still not materialised.

Although there have been some improvements in the fabric of the kitchen, some issues of concern remain. This kitchen was designed to cater for 750 prisoners and, as the operational capacity of the prison is 1164 working conditions are difficult, compounded by out-of-order cooking equipment. In December 2019, it was recorded that 50% of the kitchen equipment was broken. The issue of defective equipment was reported in the Board's last annual report but, as yet, there does not appear to have been a significant improvement.

Staffing levels in the kitchen are now at 100%, and one prisoner, a trained chef, checks quality, and has assisted in improvements to the food. The appointment of a new training manager for prisoner workers, a kitchen manager and new chefs has made a significant impact on the motivation of those working in the kitchen, and ultimately to the quality of the food.

5.2 Segregation, special accommodation

The CSU has the capacity to hold 22 prisoners, with a small number of special accommodation cells. During the reporting year, occupancy has ranged from a high of 17 to just three prisoners held on two occasions. The special accommodation cell was utilised once. Average quarterly occupancy rates from Board rota reports were as follows:

- Quarter 1 – average 35.1%
- Quarter 2 – average 45.8%

- Quarter 3 – average 42.6%
- Quarter 4 (COVID-19 having a major impact) – average 50.7%, with a ‘spike’ in May/June 2020. This spike was due largely to prisoners refusing to relocate following 45 minutes of limited time out of cell, and the difficulties in transferring prisoners with behavioural and mental health issues to other establishments, including mental health units.

N.B. This compares to an average occupancy of 42% in the previous reporting year.

The unit routinely has two experienced managers, but one has been shielding since the outbreak of COVID-19. The remaining manager has continued to work tirelessly throughout, but with some support from senior managers.

Prior to lockdown, Board members paid a weekly rota visit to all prisoners held on the unit. They also monitored over 75% of the review boards and noted the emphasis on facilitating a return to normal location. Only one prisoner, awaiting transfer to Ashworth high secure hospital has remained on the unit beyond 42 days. Since lockdown, the Board has remotely monitored the unit via weekly calls, with a limited return to normal monitoring in June.

The impact of the lockdown saw daily exercise for prisoners on the unit reduced to 30 minutes. Prisoners have, however, had access to comfort and distraction packs, and education material. Hence, the unit has seen little by way of regime change over this period. As with prisoners on normal location, they have received an additional £5 telephone credit.

Both internal and external adjudications were monitored regularly prior to lockdown but this has not happened since March. External adjudications were put on hold until mid-June, when a pilot session was run via video-link. This had some success but highlighted that not all cases could be dealt with via video-link. This trial of this approach is to continue.

5.3 Staff/prisoner relationships, key workers

Since the COVID-19 lockdown, the Director has delivered a weekly notice to all prisoners. The Board has received copies of these and has found them informative. They explain carefully to prisoners the reasons for the restrictions, and always give positive feedback about progress, giving some hope that things are improving. The Board believes that this good communication with prisoners has contributed to stability.

The Board last attended monthly prisoner engagement council (PEC) meetings in February, prior to which they had attended them regularly. These meetings proved to be valuable to the Board in monitoring the current concerns of prisoners and the actions which managers were taking to address them. The main issue highlighted for discussion until March 2020 had been food. Meetings engaged prisoners in the new incentives and privileges (IEP) provisions (see section 5.6). From November, it was agreed that the Board would have a more formal slot on the agenda, discussing matters of concern that had arisen during monitoring.

Inevitably, the Board has had limited face-to-face contact with prisoners during lockdown. Consequently, it has been difficult to assess the impact of the virus and subsequent restrictions on prisoners. The Board has, however, spoken to unit managers, whose universal view is that prisoners have responded unexpectedly well to their situation, predominantly because of good staff/prisoner relationships and an effective communication strategy. Officers have reported that they spend more time with individual prisoners, explaining restrictions and dealing with problems as they arise. In addition, all prisoners have televisions and in-cell telephones, and can thus see that similar restrictions are in place in the community.

At the end of June, the Board met with five prisoner mentors who came from different residential units. Mentors reported that the absence of family visits was of major concern throughout the prison, and they were anxious to know when these would be reintroduced, albeit on a limited basis. They did, however, appreciate the in-cell telephones as an alternative means of communication. They reinforced the Board impression that morale was generally good, but concerns were expressed at the perceived slow rate of progress and that frustration levels might rise as the lockdown continued. It was acknowledged that the relaxation of restrictions was not in the gift of the Director. The mentors also appreciated the access to gym equipment, which had been moved to exercise yards temporarily while the gym was closed.

This positive view of morale and staff/prisoner relationships during the COVID-19 regime was substantiated by an HMIP scrutiny visit at the start of lockdown.

5.4 Equality and diversity

The COVID-19 lockdown has had an impact upon the two-monthly meetings of the equality team, with the last meeting being held in February. However, the Board has noted that these meetings have sometimes been cancelled at the last minute (although rearranged within the month), questioning the priority given to this area by the prison.

There are 380 prisoners classed as having a disability, which includes those with mental health conditions. Only one prisoner is wheelchair bound, with another two prisoners using wheelchairs to travel any significant distance.

There were 52 foreign national prisoners at the end of June, comprising 4.6% of the prison population. Regular contact for these prisoners has been maintained with Home Office Immigration Enforcement via video link.

The number of transgender prisoners has recently reduced from three to one. The Board is impressed with the level of effort made by staff to accommodate the needs and vulnerabilities of this often-challenging group.

Black History Month was celebrated, with materials and quizzes available to acknowledge this event. Prisoners also submitted artwork to a black history competition, and black cuisine was celebrated with a special menu for a week. It is anticipated that, following the change in catchment area to Liverpool, the prison will

start to see more black, Asian and minority ethnic prisoners; with this in mind, it is the Board's intention to monitor closely the differential impact on these prisoners, in terms of level of use of force, CSU occupancy and submission of discrimination incident report forms.

There have been a number of complaints from prisoners about special diets, the provision of which has, at times, been inconsistent and unimaginative.

5.5 Faith and pastoral support

A member of the prison senior management team manages the chaplaincy. There are three full-time staff, including Church of England, Roman Catholic and Muslim chaplains. Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist and Free Church ministers work on a part-time basis. The prison also has access to ministers of other minority faiths, including Jehovah's Witnesses, if required.

Although chapel services have been suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, prayers have been broadcast on the in-cell televisions, with the chaplaincy continuing to support prisoners. The chaplaincy team reports that prisoners appear to be keener to engage with their team, and feed back to the Board that prisoners are handling the current restrictions well. Halal meals were served during Ramadan, with the Muslim chaplain providing guidance to prisoners throughout this period.

Chaplains see all new prisoners during induction and the segregation and healthcare units regularly. Support is offered to prisoners when dealing with anniversaries such as deaths of family members, and this has continued throughout lockdown.

Previously, the chaplaincy ran a number of courses, including a restorative justice programme, the Sycamore Tree programme (a course about the impact of offending on victims, run by an outside organisation), Living with Loss, and Message in Prisons, all of which were oversubscribed. These are currently suspended but will resume soon.

The chaplaincy also maintains regular contact with a number of external organisations, to support the release and rehabilitation of prisoners.

5.6 Incentives and earned privileges

From January, the IEP scheme changed to the incentives policy framework. This was a national prison wide change. The idea behind the change was that the old IEP scheme was unfair in individual cases and based on punishment rather than rewarding positive behaviour. In Altcourse, prisoners previously had to complete 12 weeks at the establishment before progressing from standard to enhanced status, and this is now reduced to six and is consequently easier to achieve. Although a national change, Altcourse prisoners have been involved in regular discussions via the PEC.

5.7 Complaints

A complaints audit meeting now takes place on a monthly basis, and a sample of complaints and responses are reviewed and discussed. It is attended by the Director, a senior manager and the Board, who look at the tone of responses, and whether prisoners' questions are answered fully, with jargon-free language, and are accessible and legible.

5.8 Property

Property remains the most frequent subject of prisoner applications to the Board, many relating to transfers between prisons. Although accepting that a number of these applications should be viewed with scepticism, the Board has no doubt that a substantial number are genuine. We would suggest that action nationally around this issue is long overdue.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Physical healthcare

Healthcare provision is currently highly regarded in the prison, and the current manager, who has a clinical background, is respected by her staff and prison managers alike.

It is noticeable that the last six PPO reports have had no recommendations for the healthcare department. The Board continues to receive some healthcare complaints, although there is a dedicated healthcare complaints system. Healthcare staff are invariably helpful when providing the Board with information about these complaints, while remaining within confidentiality guidelines.

The department attends the admissions area to assess new prisoners on arrival. Those who admit to heroin, alcohol or benzodiazepine use are referred immediately to the GP and are prescribed maintenance medication until further information is received from community medical services.

Nursing staff attend segregation review boards and multidisciplinary ACCT reviews of prisoners with complex needs and are regular contributors to the PEC. They attend all residential units on a daily basis to offer clinics, triage and to administer medication.

Since lockdown, the maximum number of prisoners released from cells at any one time is 12, so queues for the nurse have been more manageable than previously. In addition, many more prisoners receive their medication in-cell, which has worked well, and the anticipated rise in abuse has not transpired. This practice will continue after lockdown is relaxed.

The prison inpatient unit comprises 12 cells and houses prisoners with both physical and mental health needs. Prisoners complain to the Board that they often have difficulty in sleeping owing to disturbance and noise caused by mental health patients. In the community, mental health patients are housed in specialised units, and are separated from those with physical health problems. The differing needs of these groups require a different skillset, and, in the case of mental health patients, a much more multidisciplinary approach.

Additionally, the increase in the number and duration of stay of older prisoners with serious health problems, some of whom require palliative care, is not a good mix. This is the only area of the prison where the wearing of face coverings is currently mandatory.

The lockdown has precipitated a reduction in the occupancy of the inpatient unit, now housing only about half of the normal number. There is little to occupy prisoners on the unit, other than a pool table and television, which is often not working.

Staffing has remained a challenge throughout the year, owing to constant staff turnover. This became more difficult with the outbreak of the pandemic, with 17 staff self-isolating at one point. Interestingly, there has been an upsurge in the number of nurses applying to work at the prison since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and remote recruitment has worked well, with a bank of nurses now available. The relatively recent introduction of full-time paramedics to deal with emergency codes has also worked very well.

Sadly, the prison has lost its attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder nurse during this reporting year.

Until the COVID-19 lockdown, waiting times for primary care provision have been equivalent to those experienced in the community. GPs now conduct triage with patients by video-link. Dentistry services ran well before COVID-19, but now dentists only see emergencies, although plan to restart routine appointments soon.

The department has continued to run health improvement campaigns with a focus on specific areas of concern. Genitourinary medicine clinics and dry blood tests resumed quickly after a short cessation at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak.

There has been a plentiful supply of personal protective equipment available throughout and the prison has quick access to swab testing.

When talking to residential managers during the COVID-19 epidemic, the Board has noted their positive feedback for the support they have received from the healthcare team, and this has mirrored the Board's own experience of their openness in weekly telephone monitoring. In the same vein, healthcare staff have reported feeling supported by the Director and senior managers throughout the crisis.

6.2 Mental healthcare

The mental health team has continued to work throughout the crisis, and its work with prisoners held on the CSU awaiting admission to hospital has been appreciated by staff on the unit. Morale generally in the prison has been good, as evidenced by low levels of self-harm (see section 4.2), and there appears to have been no noticeable deterioration in the mental health of prisoners, although the long-term effect of the restricted regime has yet to be seen.

The Board is aware of the proposed employment of psychologists to complement the mental health team.

The perennial concern of transferring very unwell mental health prisoners to secure hospitals remains unchanged and is reported on every year in our annual reports.

6.3 Social care

Prisoners subject to social care plans are discussed at the regular multidisciplinary safety intervention meetings. The prison has a social care manager, whose role is to liaise with a social services link to facilitate needs assessments. He is also a member of the Merseyside Safeguarding Board. A new social worker who started at the beginning of March has not been into the prison during the COVID-19 pandemic but hopes to resume as lockdown relaxes. There appears to be an increasing demand for prisoners with social care needs, in line with the changing age profile of the prison population.

6.4 Exercise, time out of cell, gym

During the COVID-19 restrictions, exercise out of cell was strictly limited to 30 minutes a day, 12 prisoners at a time, but was subsequently increased to 45 minutes. During this time, prisoners can use the exercise yard, take a shower and access the CMS console. Clearly, this has been severely restricting and demanding for staff members, who were under pressure to return prisoners to their cells to allow the next group of 12 prisoners out. These situations led to a small number of minimal use of force incidents (see section 4.5).

The gym has been closed throughout the lockdown period, but staff have provided prisoners with in-cell workouts and gym machines have been moved temporarily to unit exercise yards.

Prior to March, older prisoners' gym sessions were moved to weekends, to accommodate those who missed the opportunity because they worked during the week. This is a quieter time and the change was appreciated by these prisoners.

6.5 Drug rehabilitation

On arrival, prisoners are moved to a detoxification unit. Since lockdown, they have been supplied with occupation packs containing substance misuse-related material, for which they are paid on completion. They can also access a radio version of the Intuitive Recovery course. Staff report that the quality of the work packs completed is high, and that prisoners appear more motivated and may see the lockdown as an opportunity to reflect on their futures.

6.6 Soft skills

It is clear that the high morale of staff at this time has had a wider impact on prisoners' morale. With this in mind, the staff support team has been renamed the 'staff care and support team'. A new compact has been introduced, with a greater consistency of approach, greater regard for confidentiality and a rota system. Previously, members of the team were contacted on a random basis. A disused classroom has been refurbished with soft lighting and seating, and is open at lunchtime for staff who need time out. It is staffed by a safer custody manager, in his own time.

7. Progression and resettlement

7.1 Education, library

The education department offers a wide range of educational opportunities to prisoners. Completion success rates in courses such as English (89%), mathematics (85%) and other programmes (94%) have remained stable but the department is working to improve these results, particularly in mathematics.

More comprehensive support for learners with special educational needs and disabilities has been implemented during the year, with a designated SENCo for the site and a new learning support practitioner. A new strategy for careers information and advice has been introduced this year, as have a more comprehensive induction, work plans for every learner, and development of prisoners as mentors.

In August 2019, military style, 'boot camp', activities were introduced as an incentive to come off the basic regime. This is designed to improve fitness, teamwork and problem-solving skills. It is run by mentors and very well received by participants.

Prisoners entering Altcourse during the pandemic, a total of 222 since the beginning of lockdown, were assessed and allocated levels and suitable work booklets. Every prisoner has been paid for participating in education, which has consisted of in-cell work booklets at different levels in English, mathematics, personal and social development, horticulture, manufacturing operations, English for speakers of other languages, creative craft (Art), and information and communications technology. However, disappointingly, many work booklets, although completed and returned by

prisoners, are not being marked. In any event, the benefit to prisoners must be questionable in the absence of face-to-face contact, particularly for those prisoners with literacy issues.

The department has used this time to develop capacity to provide pre-recorded lessons via the in-cell prison television channel, something which may be developed further in the future, to make education accessible to all prisoners.

Library

The library closed physically in March but prisoners could request books through the CMS consoles, and an average of 15 requests a day were received. In addition, library staff delivered 'Inside Time' and 'Jail Mail' to all units during lockdown. Sadly, a significant number of books have been lost during this time, as a result of either overdue loans or prisoners being released without returning them. This will inevitably have an impact on next year's provision.

The Board is disappointed to note that the shelving for displaying 'easy readers' that has been requested frequently by staff has not materialised.

7.2 Vocational training, work

All workshops closed as a result of COVID-19 but it is hoped that these will start to reopen, with limited numbers, within the next few months. Staff reported that prisoners were frustrated about the limited opportunities for both work and education but were aware of the situation, and this was supported by good communication and relationships with staff.

Radio Altcourse, which is staffed largely by prisoners, has been printing leaflets for prisoners, and the radio team is currently relaying broadcasts of religious services and online courses.

External contracts for the laundry were suspended but a limited number of prisoners continued to work in the laundry. An interesting corollary of the pandemic was the creation of a new opportunity for the cutting out and producing of 'scrubs' for the NHS.

Following an Ofsted education improvement framework curriculum review, welding qualifications, a multi-trade workshop (offering roofing, plumbing, heating, DIY, plastering, and painting and decorating skills) and barbering workshops were introduced. There are plans to introduce City and Guilds qualifications in industrial cleaning, with assistance from Tranmere Rovers Football Club, and an engineering workshop will start making flatpack skips. All these work activities will begin once lockdown restrictions have been relaxed.

A careers fair took place in March 2020, with displays covering information and career materials from the following industries: renewable energies; offshore careers, construction, traffic management and apprenticeships. This was well attended by prisoners.

Liverpool Football Club has continued to deliver a sports leadership programme, and a number of prisoners have progressed to be mentors for the project.

Sports College UK has delivered personal training and exercise referral programmes. One prisoner is undertaking his teaching qualification and will be employed by the College when released.

7.3 Offender management, progression

OMiC phase 2 delivery started nationally at the beginning of October, and all newly sentenced prisoners with more than 10 months to serve fell within the scope of the new model. Prison offender managers (POMs) routinely work in teams of 12, although staffing numbers have sometimes dropped by as much as 50% in the latter part of the reporting year, as a result of the pandemic. Notwithstanding this, all new prisoners were seen promptly after arrival, and sentence planning work began. During the first part of the reporting year, offender assessment system (OASys) reports were largely up to date. However, since late March it has been more difficult to hold face-to-face meetings with prisoners, although POMs have utilised activity rooms to comply with social distancing.

A more pressing difficulty is the absence of the National Probation Service within the establishment due to the virus. The task of completing OASys assessments and the resultant offender management work has thus fallen to POMs, who have struggled to pick up this workload in addition to their own. The Thinking Skills Programme remains popular with prisoners but unfortunately was put on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is anticipated that this will soon resume.

Last year's report highlighted some concerns with the timely transfer of prisoners convicted of sexual offences, and category B prisoners. It is pleasing to note some improvement with vulnerable prisoner transfers; however, there remain a significant number of this group who are considered unfit to travel to other prisons owing to age and health-related issues. Unfortunately, the transfer of category B prisoners remains an issue, exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19, which has limited prisoner movement generally.

As noted in previous reports, release on temporary licence (ROTL) is little used, as Altcourse is a local prison, but there is a steady uptake of home detention curfew (HDC) for prisoners who are eligible.

7.4 Family contact

There is a dedicated family unit within the prison which runs courses focusing on the impact of offending on family life. Additionally, prisoners can attain parenting qualifications, and these have continued to prove popular with unit residents. Academic input is combined with practice, whereby prisoners have an opportunity to plan and prepare a meal for their families. Family days were regularly held in the visits hall, and fathers enjoyed the weekly reading and creative play club.

In April, a BSc Psychology student at Liverpool John Moores University carried out research work at the prison on the influences that drive down reoffending. The

resulting dissertation highlighted, in particular, signs of attitude changes exhibited by participants in the family unit courses, with prisoners reporting that the courses had taught them vital parenting skills which they were eager to put into practice upon release.

Unfortunately, from late March, visits have been suspended and this has had a detrimental impact on the morale of all prisoners. However, in-cell telephones have helped to keep up family contact, and fathers have been able to record stories on DVDs to send out to their families. Additionally, the visitors centre has a dedicated telephone line to keep families informed about the COVID-19 regime.

7.5 Resettlement planning

'Through-the-gate' staff held a resettlement event in February and invited a number of local services (Department of Work and Pensions, community rehabilitation companies drug services, veteran support and mentoring services) and companies from across Merseyside to showcase a range of employment opportunities and courses available to prisoners upon release. This was well attended and received by prisoners, and developed the work already being carried out in preparation for release.

Prisoners are given help with applying for bank accounts, housing provision and GP registration in the community. All prolific and young offenders are taken to first appointments with the relevant agencies. For this reporting year, only 17.2% of prisoners were released with no fixed abode, an improvement on recent years.

One positive consequence of COVID-19 is that Shelter has been able to access funds through the NPS to enable discharged prisoners to be accommodated in hotels if necessary. On release, prisoners are given advice on the virus and the safety precautions required in the community.

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	14
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	13
Total number of visits to the establishment	434
Total number of segregation reviews attended	Unavailable at this time

Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	Current reporting year
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	25	17
B	Discipline, including adjudications, IEP, sanctions	18	25
C	Equality	10	14
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, library, regime, time out of cell	29	16
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection restrictions	34	31
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	39	32
F	Food and kitchens	47	26
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	51	59
H1	Property within this establishment	34	25
H2	Property during transfer or in another establishment or location	24	29
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogue(s)	6	16
I	Sentence management, including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, recategorisation	60	71
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	16	23
K	Transfers	42	29
L	Miscellaneous, including complaints system	62	63
	Total number of applications	497	476



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