



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

**For reporting year  
1 July 20 – 30 June 2021**

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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:

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- 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.
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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.

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## **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 much shorter 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. The Group 4 (now G4S) 25 year contract, overseen by a Ministry of Justice controller and her team, expires this year and has gone out to tender.

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 onsite, 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 and education to Novus. The resettlement contract is about to be taken over by Seetec Interventions Alliance. The site is well laid out, maintained, and open in aspect.

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### **3. Executive summary**

#### **3.1 Background to the report**

The Covid-19 outbreak continues to have an impact on the Board's ability to gather information for this annual report. However as restrictions start to relax a more direct monitoring role is resuming. In addition the Board's ability to speak to prisoners has inevitably fluctuated as infection levels rose and fell within the prison and in the wider community, so at times a mix of remote and direct monitoring was adopted. The Board has therefore tried to cover as much ground as it can in these circumstances, but inevitably there is less detail in some areas than usual. Ministers are aware of these constraints. Regular information continues to be 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 the continuing lockdown, by the low levels of self-harm and violence, which have remained stable during this reporting year (see section 4). It is too early to comment on the impact of restrictions starting to relax although there is already some evidence of an increase in the incidence of violence and an apparent self-inflicted death, the only one in this reporting year, in April.

Towards the end of this reporting year, the Board has become aware of a number of out of area prisoners being placed at Altcourse from prisons where conditions may not be as settled. We are concerned about this uneasy mix of prisoners from establishments where different cultures pertain and the potential to impact on stability here.

##### **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 no television rental fees. Prisoners also understand that the slow progress in the return to the normal regime is not always 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. Of particular note is the weekly notice to prisoners (NTP) from the Director, giving information about plans for each lockdown stage, providing some positive news and a degree of hope to prisoners such as the planned resumption of family visits, or reopening of workshops. These communications always include messages of thanks to specific

groups of prisoners whose work in keeping units clean and safe has contributed to prison stability.

Food has assumed an even more important focus of the daily routine, and it is pleasing to be able to report that, since last year, the quality and quantity of the food has continued to improve. This is confirmed by both staff and prisoners on 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. At times waiting lists for GP and dentist consultations have been lengthy and prisoners did not fully appreciate the limitations of the triage system. Additionally 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- 6.4).

Inevitably there will be long term effects on prisoners' mental health and wellbeing as a consequence of enforced isolation, limited contact with family and lack of social interaction and purposeful activity.

However the Board is pleased to note that the 0800 phone line set up at the start of the pandemic to enable prisoners to contact the IMB has been very much championed by the prison. The ability for prisoners to ring IMB members and talk about their concerns has provided a much welcome voice to the outside world during these difficult times.

### **How well are prisoners progressed towards successful resettlement?**

In general terms, prisoners progress well towards release, despite their reduced access to education and vocational courses. However the limited input by the Probation Service has created significant problems in the completion of sentence planning and risk assessment work. Although the percentage of prisoners released with no fixed abode has been pleasingly low due to local authority hotel provision, 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.

The Board is greatly concerned about future resettlement planning following the termination of the Shelter/Purple Futures contract in June. It has become increasingly apparent that the new providers, Seetec Interventions Alliance, have seriously underestimated the scale of the task in hand and the volume of work involved.

### **3.3 Main areas for development**

#### ***TO THE MINISTER***

The transfer of seriously mentally ill prisoners to appropriate healthcare facilities continues to be a problem, with one particular prisoner spending over 300 days in segregation this year. This case was escalated to a national level. In addition we are concerned about the long-term legacy of the pandemic on prisoners' mental health. Altcourse is already seeing more seriously ill men arriving from the community where services have been stretched.

#### ***TO THE PRISON SERVICE***

The use of rigid handcuffs has been partially introduced in Altcourse. As SPEAR training, a necessary prerequisite, has been suspended due to the pandemic, they cannot be widely used but the intention is to roll out their use more widely. The Board was therefore concerned to learn, during the compilation of this report, that the use of such cuffs will no longer be recorded as a use of force but treated as a de-escalation technique and thus will no longer be monitored as such. We would describe the use of rigid cuffs as a physical intervention and thus it should be monitored: in terms of frequency, by particular officers on particular units, and the age, ethnicity profile etc. of those prisoners on whom it is used.

A continuing complaint from prisoners relates to their personal property, which has assumed much greater significance during the pandemic where photographs and personal items maybe the only remaining contact prisoners have with their families. We understand that this remains a persistent problem nationally, and although the subject of much discussion, nothing seems to change. This issue has been reported in previous annual reports.

In the latter stages of this reporting year, the resettlement function at Altcourse has been contracted to the national probation service and Seetec Interventions Alliance. Morale within this department is low: staff are uncertain about their future and only able to deal with emergency referrals. There appears to have been little handover preparation by the new provider and we are concerned that the consequences may be more prisoners being released unsupported and unprepared with a greater risk of reoffending.

It has recently come to our notice that a number of 'out of area' prisoners are starting to be placed at Altcourse with the potential for a clash of cultures which could impact on the relative stability at Altcourse.

#### ***TO THE DIRECTOR***

The quality and quantity of food provided for prisoners has consistently improved over the reporting year with the welcome addition of homemade soup and a bakery

on site producing bread and rolls. Also kitchen equipment is maintained in a more timely matter. However there still remains a problem with the newly installed flooring which floods frequently despite a number of visits and attempts to resolve this by contractors. This must cause difficulties particularly for prisoners working and cleaning there.

The long standing librarian has now retired and a replacement is yet to be recruited. Regular access to books for those prisoners able to read has been an important factor when confined to cells for long periods and is a service much valued by prisoners.

This year has seen a succession of complaints clerks (four in number) and the Board has expressed concern regarding the importance of continuity and consistency in this fundamental role.

### **3.4 Progress since the last report**

In a difficult and challenging year all areas highlighted in last year's report have continued to improve. The excellent staff/prisoner relationships and open and regular communication from the Director have contributed to the effective management of violence and self-harm during lockdown.

Worthy of particular mention is the significant improvement in the quality of the food and the introduction of a more imaginative menu, both of which have been appreciated by prisoners.

It has been pleasing to see the counsellor placed on a permanent contract and the engagement of psychological therapists. It is hoped that these improvements may go some way to addressing the mental health issues experienced by many prisoners in the forthcoming months.

## **Evidence sections 4 – 7**

### **4. Safety**

#### **4.1 Reception and induction**

Whilst the reception process has remained much the same this year, the process has been slowed down due to the need for social distancing. Altcourse, with its role as a local prison, is one of the few prisons in the area that has continued to take in new prisoners throughout lockdown. A consequence of this is that daily admissions have increased from 10-15 to 20 resulting in more pressure in admissions.

No group inductions have taken place this year but the regular classroom presentation, previously delivered by induction staff and mentors, has been delivered via television and Radio Altcourse. All new prisoners receive induction packs which include IMB leaflets. A late development in the reporting year has been that since June 2021, individual sessions with induction staff have taken place. All new prisoners are placed in the reverse cohort unit where they have to isolate from the rest of the prison for the required period.

There is now a system in place for all new prisoners to be PCR tested on day 1 and day 6 following their admission and it would appear that few refuse to be tested. If they do they are treated as positive and must remain on the unit for the statutory 10 days. If negative they can potentially move from the reverse cohort unit after the required period. Officers on this unit feel that it is more difficult to assess and engage with new prisoners compared to pre-lockdown and, with increased numbers, pressures to relocate them are constant.

## **4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody**

During the 12 months of this reporting year there has been one potential self-inflicted death. There is an outstanding inquest into this death of a young prisoner in April 2021. It is worth noting that in July 2020, as a result of outstanding professionalism and prompt action by unit officers and healthcare staff, the life of a prisoner who tried to hang himself was undoubtedly saved, with staff on the scene using CPR. This man remained on life support in critical care for many months but miraculously made a full recovery. He is a foreign national and the Big Word translation service was used by prison escorts whilst he was in hospital. This incident was witnessed by some prisoners through their hatches and was the subject of a number of positive comments about staff to IMB members during rota visits.

Self-harm has shown a downward trend over the year. During the first half of the year total self-harm as a % of the prison population averaged 8.71%, ranging between 11% in November and 5.6% in June 2021. Analysis of the figures shows that the monthly rise or fall in figures is greatly influenced by the number of prolific self-harmers resident within the prison. To counter this, the last six months has seen an increased focus on the location of the prolific self-harmers and the first 30 days in custody. This action does appear to be having a positive impact.

The new ACCT version (the green book) was fully implemented across the prison at the end of June. Of the 63 ACCT books opened in June 2021, 28 of them recorded no self-harm and 24 just a single incident. The new paperwork will take some time to bed in as staff are learning 'on the job'.

In this reporting year there have been nine deaths in custody. All bar one have been from natural causes, which is a similar pattern to that reported last year and reflects the increasing age profile of prisoners, many with serious underlying health problems and, on occasions, a terminal illness. The IMB has received Ombudsman's reports

for five deaths and all nine are awaiting coroner's inquests. Three of the five reports received have concluded that the care of prisoners at Altcourse was not equivalent to that which they would have received in the community. In addition, three prisoners had Covid-19 at the time of death but the investigator was unable to establish whether this was contracted in the prison or in hospital. There has also been a recent death (24 April, see above) which was apparently self-inflicted, the circumstances of which were particularly traumatic for staff and fellow prisoners.

In one Ombudsman's report the double cuffing of the prisoner on route to hospital was raised. The issue of handcuffing severely ill prisoners has previously been identified in Ombudsman and IMB reports nationally but not for several years at Altcourse so it is of concern to see it mentioned again.

The IMB has met with the head of healthcare and discussed the action plans which are put in place after a death in custody, and we are reassured that procedures are robust and recommendations are being addressed systematically and effectively. The IMB will continue to monitor this.

A new initiative has recently been introduced –trauma risk incident management (TRIM), a support facility for any staff involved in a traumatic incident. One of the newly created team will contact the staff member, offer support and the opportunity to talk through how the incident has affected them. This specific intervention was used in the recent self-inflicted death to support staff first on the scene.

### **4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation**

During the reporting year the level of violence in the prison has remained steady with no trends worthy of note. This is undoubtedly due to the lockdown regime which has meant prisoners being locked up for most of the day. These restrictions were surprisingly well received by the majority of prisoners, who appear to have understood the importance of having less time out of cell. However, this isolation from social interaction and activities is likely to have long-term consequences for prisoners' health, wellbeing and reintegration into the community. It is likely that there may have been more verbal violence such as bullying but it is difficult to monitor or measure this.

The prison's local and urban catchment area has led to more conflict which takes place in the community moving inside the walls. To this end one officer spends considerable time trying to unpick the tangled web of Liverpool gangs.

During the reporting period the average prison population was 1113 with the number of assaults averaging 29 per month which represents slightly over 2%. Of these 21 were prisoner on prisoner and 8 on staff. Of the total number of 338 assaults throughout this year, there were 35 incidents of weapon use and 53 police referrals for prosecution with one prisoner receiving an additional 10 months for melting a razor blade into a toothbrush.

In April a new security search team was introduced to search all staff and visitors entering the prison and undertake more cell and area searches. This will inevitably lead to more finds, which may result in more violence as prisoners find alternative ways to feed their habits.

As the regime slowly opens up there has been a slight increase in the number of incidents. This is being closely monitored and the CSU and fast-tracking prisoners to the judge for potential additional days may be used more frequently. However it is considered that the continued employment of sound staff/prisoner communications, additional telephone credit and televisions for all prisoners have contributed to the relatively low levels of violence.

#### **4.4 Vulnerable prisoners, safeguarding**

Over the period of the pandemic, the Board has observed that vulnerable prisoners have felt safer being locked up in their cells for longer. We have also noted that for those in 'protected groups' the Covid-19 episode has left them feeling that they have been treated equally with other prisoners. This is evidenced by a significant and consistent reduction in complaints over the last year from 257 complaints/1,000 prisoners in Q.3 2020 down to 181/1,000 in Q.2 2021 and by the absolute number of discrimination incident reporting forms(DIRFs – 12 received between January and June 2021)

#### **4.5 Use of force**

In last year's annual report we concluded that incidents of use of force had remained stable throughout the year at about 60 a month and this has remained the case in this reporting year until March 2021. Since then we have seen a considerable reduction (44 in April, 50 in May and 53 in June). The considered view of the prison is that this is as a result of the new digital reporting system which may make staff think twice about using minimal force, using more de-escalation methods such as talking and explaining instead. Forty percent of incidents are related to compliance with the regime and returning reluctant prisoners to their cells and are a direct consequence of the pandemic with such limited time for prisoners out of their cells. By far the majority of these incidents involve a firm grip to the arm. It is suggested that such incidents of minimal force might not be reported in other prisons.

Rigid cuffs have now been introduced but are only used by managers as their use is part of a new package that includes SPEAR training. This training has been suspended but the plan is to roll this out to all staff when restrictions allow. Rigid cuffs are seen as safer for both prisoners and staff than the old style cuffs and are seen as a de-escalation technique. The IMB understands that not recording the use of rigid cuffs in planned intervention when no force is used other than cuffing is being

considered nationally, so we have some concerns as to how this will be monitored, if at all, in the future.

Altcourse, like all G4S prisons, has considered the implementation of PAVA spray but at this stage has no plans to bring it in. Unlike public prisons, Altcourse has also never issued batons. This would be considered contrary to the culture of the prison. The IMB feels that the outstanding prisoner-staff relationships that have always characterised Altcourse might suffer if such methods were introduced.

There is now a more cohesive use of force monitoring structure which includes:

a) The co-ordinator who reviews paperwork and undertakes specific training with individuals when required.

b) A weekly multi-disciplinary governance group reviews bodycam footage of all incidents and identifies good practice and lessons to be learned. One incident reviewed was a five-hour incident at height using the external team. The IMB reported in its weekly rota that handling of this by staff showed exemplary professionalism.

c) A monthly committee then looks at trends in use of force in terms of age profile, ethnicity and hotspots. Diversity figures show that the new Liverpool cohort has had no impact in terms of use of force on black and minority ethnic prisoners. As reported last year, use of force is now the remit of safer custody and thus links into the overall safer custody strategy.

The IMB has monitored both of these meetings.

#### **4.6 Substance misuse**

This year has recorded a reduction in the number of prisoners found under the influence of illegal substances but, as they have been spending long periods in their cells unobserved by staff, it is possible that such activity has become hidden. The volume of illicit substances entering the prison has stayed much the same, despite the absence of social visits and limited access to exercise yards. Some work was undertaken on the monetary value of drugs that routinely come into the prison and the amounts were quite staggering.

Drugs of choice continue to be tobacco, cannabis and psychoactive substances (PS) but the latter has had less of a dramatic impact on prisoners' violent behaviour and hospital admissions, possibly due to an increased tolerance. In addition, at the beginning of lockdown, communications were sent out to all prisoners about the impact of their use of PS which could add to NHS pressures and they might not be treated as promptly. Mandatory drug testing has not taken place all year due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Enhanced security searches (see paragraph 4.3) on entrance and exit are already producing results and should make the prison a safer place for both prisoners and staff.

GPs no longer see prisoners on admission but later in the day on the Furlong detoxification unit where they are interviewed and assessed by two dedicated staff who prioritise cases based on risk. More prisoners being admitted from the new Liverpool catchment area are in receipt of methadone maintenance, and it is thought that this may be due to greater community engagement with services during the pandemic. This new Liverpool cohort appears surprised at the levels of intervention that were offered pre-covid which they have not experienced in other prisons. Although it is too early to draw firm conclusions, there appear to be differences from those prisoners previously drawn from more rural communities. This inner city cohort have higher levels of alcohol dependence and methadone maintenance, and many more are short sentenced prisoners; there is little time to work with the prisoner and no staff currently to undertake interventions due to their redeployment throughout the prison.

One prisoner, who died on 24 November 2020 on the detoxification unit, had serious health problems related to his substance abuse and an Ombudsman report has been received in this case.

## **5. Fair and humane treatment**

### **5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food**

The last Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) report described Altcourse accommodation units as "clean and tidy but bland". Since this report, units have had their foyers painted in bright colours and an ongoing programme of redecoration is underway across the estate. New signage has gone up with basic information on unit rules. A "decency action plan" established before the pandemic has now been reinstated, meaning that cell accommodation is regularly audited and any necessary improvements made.

Prior to the reinstatement of the prisoner engagement council (PEC) meetings, a door drop enabling prisoners to "have your say" resulted in 99 responses. This led to the replacement of old wooden furniture with modern plastic seating.

Overall during the time of the pandemic the accommodation units have been kept clean and tidy. IMB rota reports have commented on more than one occasion that a console on one unit is broken but this has yet to be repaired.

Many comments regarding the less than satisfactory quality and standard of food made in previous annual reports have been addressed over the course of the last year. Twelve new trolleys were bought in January 2021 and officers now accompany trolleys from the kitchen to the accommodation units, thus ensuring each unit gets

what it ordered and allaying fears often expressed by vulnerable prisoners that their food has been contaminated en route. As a consequence, calls to the kitchen regarding insufficient or incorrect meals have reduced dramatically. Equipment has been replaced with four new ovens, one tilting kettle and one solid top oven commissioned during the year.

A major new initiative has been the start-up of an in-house bakery which has been providing rolls since September 2020. These have been well received by prisoners and staff alike. There are plans to produce baguettes and wholemeal rolls in the near future. Soup was provided through the winter months after successful trials. Special meals were provided during Ramadan in April 2021 and for a Sikh festival in June.

The kitchen maintained its 5-star hygiene rating with a 92% score in the latest food hygiene inspection (86% in 2020). An internal G4S audit confirmed that the problems with food waste and rodents have been addressed and the pest control concern has been resolved.

Whereas rota reports in previous years regularly commented negatively on the quality or quantity of food provided, the last year has seen a significant improvement. Food complaints to the IMB have also reduced and anecdotally prisoners seem more content with the food provision than in previous years. This is evidenced in the number of positive comments received by kitchen staff.

The one area which has not yet been tackled successfully is the kitchen floor which, despite remedial work carried out in August 2020, still floods.

## **5.2 Segregation, special accommodation**

The CSU has the capacity to hold 22 prisoners with a small number of special accommodation cells. During the year our rota reports noted that occupancy ranged from a high of 14 prisoners to three prisoners on two occasions. These figures are broadly similar to the previous year.

The Board made a decision midway through the reporting year not to attend review boards as there were inherent difficulties with social distancing. Instead review boards were monitored by reviewing paperwork and discussions with the CSU manager either directly or remotely. IMB attendance at review boards is now resuming.

Overall, the CSU has remained calm with the main aim of returning prisoners to normal locations as soon as possible. More worrying is the delay in transferring prisoners who have severe mental health problems to more appropriate facilities. One prisoner spent over nine months in CSU, another over 84 days and a further one over 42 days. This remains a concern for the IMB and will continue to be monitored closely.

### **5.3 Staff/prisoner relationships, key workers**

The relationship between staff and prisoners has been monitored directly when IMB members have visited the prison and indirectly via telephone during the lockdown. Relationships can be said to be generally good for this period and, given the unique situation, may be considered to be very good in some cases. For example, the measuring the quality of prison life (MQPL) report was largely positive for the prison. Staff assaults reduced and this may be due to the change of regime giving far less contact between prisoners and staff.

Changes to the regime were well managed with communication to staff via meetings and e-mail. This in turn was communicated to prisoners and whilst there is plenty of evidence to show that many prisoners were frustrated by the short time they were allowed out of their cells, there was also acceptance that circumstances were very different in the local community and staff used every opportunity to talk to prisoners as frequently as their limited time out of cell allowed. The Director continues to send a weekly notice to all prisoners keeping them informed of any regime changes and gives credit to groups of prisoners such as unit cleaners, servery workers and mentors for their extra hard work during the pandemic.

There were examples of good interaction (particularly on the CSU) during the year where staff took time to talk with prisoners, and this was appreciated by the prisoners. The prison took steps to ensure that 'distraction' packs were improved, telephone calls were longer and although this does not replace the freedom to interact with staff and other prisoners, it was appreciated by prisoners. Officers understood the frustrations and generally did all they could within reason to make the regime as comfortable as possible. A number of new staff started work during the past year and will have had little experience of staff-prisoner relationships, one of the positive features that the IMB believes unique to Altcourse, borne out by our previous annual reports and in recent HMIP reports.

Prisoners transferred into Altcourse from other prisons stated that the relationship and support from staff was good at Altcourse.

### **5.4 Equality and diversity**

There is an active equality team, chaired by the equalities manager, and with wide representation. Bi-monthly meetings have taken place virtually, thus preventing prisoner representatives participating but it is hoped to reinstate this as soon as restrictions allow. Only two meetings have taken place this reporting year in April and June 2021 respectively. Sub-groups have been established for each protected characteristic group, and were reconvened in June 2021, each group being led by an equalities officer.

Prisoners reporting as transgender and non-binary have reduced slightly from 29 last year to 25 and 'transitioning' prisoners also reduced from 25 to 10. No prisoners identified as 'gender fluid' or 'genderless'. Under the 'sexual orientation' category, those identifying as heterosexual increased from 866 to 980 this year. Those identifying as gay reduced from 24 to 13, bi-sexual from 18 to nine and 'other' from five to four. Non-disclosures reduced from 185 to 139. In the light of taboos surrounding the revelation of sexual identity in prison, it is nevertheless interesting to see that prisoners feel sufficiently safe to reveal this information.

The numbers of foreign national prisoners have increased significantly this year— from 66 to 92, the largest increase being amongst Albanians – 31 in June this year as opposed to eight last year. The prison is in the process of analysing why this might be so.

In June 2020, prisoners with a disability comprised 35% of the population – this June it was 27% with the highest category being mental illness followed by learning difficulties/disabilities. This resonates with increased mental health issues in the wider community.

The population remains predominantly White British, with those identifying as - Black/Other increasing from 13 to 30, and as Asian from 20 to 34. This may be a consequence of the change in catchment from a large rural area to Liverpool. DIRFs are available readily on units and demonstrate no increase in the relatively small numbers over the last three years which may be due to reluctance on the part of prisoners to report such issues. However, of those reported, a substantial number were upheld. Of a total of eight relating to staff and 15 to prisoners, 16 of these were upheld –six against staff and 10 against other prisoners. Analysis of DIRFs reveals no clear patterns. At present no outside organisation or independent group examines or monitors the incidents reported in DIRFs.

The prison has received a growing population of foreign national prisoners, many of them being considered 'high risk'. In 2021 the number reached 10% (110 prisoners with 61 on remand, 36 sentenced and 13 detained under IS91). Now that education is running, the provision of English as a foreign language is heavily oversubscribed.

Considerable work has been undertaken with older prisoners during the reporting year. These prisoners have raised their concerns over healthcare provision and purposeful in-cell activity during the periods of lockdown. Dementia will become a growing concern amongst this group even if over 60-year-olds have reduced over the last year as the prison moved from three to two vulnerable prisoner units to accommodate the admission/reverse cohort unit. Programmes to facilitate movement of disabled prisoners around the prison were put on hold but restarted in June 2021. Just short of 300 prisoners are deemed to have a disability, representing approximately 30% of all active prisoners. Of these about 20 have a personal emergency evacuation plan.

All staff have been offered training on equality matters and over 60% have completed the online course. All new staff recruited must complete a four-hour training session on equalities as part of their training.

## **5.5 Faith and pastoral support**

A member of the prison senior management team manages the chaplaincy. There are now three full time chaplains, Church of England, Roman Catholic and Muslim. Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist and Free Church ministers work on a part-time basis and other faith leaders can be accessed if required. The Church of England vicar retired and was replaced during the year.

Whilst a large number of prisoners profess to have no faith, the majority do declare a religion and all prisoners are seen as part of the induction process. Faith packs are available and are distributed around the prison.

Services have been limited throughout the year, for example just 15 prisoners were allowed at a Christmas service and there was no 'live' carol service, an important part of the prison's Christmas celebrations. Other services, including at Eid, were broadcast on Radio Altcourse.

Despite the pandemic, pastoral care has been crucial, with staff providing regular visits to the CSU, healthcare and residential units to offer one-to-one support. Prisoners who have suffered bereavement were also allowed to visit the chapel. Although physical attendance at funerals of close relatives could not take place this was facilitated using 'zoom'.

The chaplaincy retains good links with external organisations that can offer prisoners support on release. Courses such as restorative justice and living with loss have been temporarily suspended but it is hoped that they will resume once restrictions allow.

## **5.6 Incentives and earned privileges**

In 2020 the incentives and earned privileges (IEP) scheme became the incentives policy framework (IPF), these changes being seen as a fairer way of rewarding good, as opposed to the punishment of bad, behaviour.

During lockdown most features of IPF were suspended with no prisoners being placed on basic regime. All except those on the CSU kept their televisions and had the same access to association and exercise out of cell.

## **5.7 Complaints**

The number of monthly internal complaints submitted during the last year has varied considerably. The prison has set targets of 95% of complaints being replied to within scheduled parameters. This was achieved in 11 out of the last 12 months with only June at 94.8% being below target.

The monthly complaints audit meetings, which the IMB attended regularly, have been interrupted by the pandemic and most took place on a virtual basis. With the easing of restrictions normal audit meetings are to recommence in August. These meetings looked at whether the prisoners' queries were fully answered, whether the response was polite, within the timescale, and the handwriting legible. The IMB has become concerned over recent months about the uncertainties associated with the crucial role of the complaints clerk. During the last year there have been no less than three postholders, and a fourth is once again to be replaced. This matter has been raised with the Director. The IMB undertook some useful joint work with the manager responsible for complaints, drawing up a written procedure for the handling of confidential access matters and ensuring confidentiality for prisoners.

## **5.8 Property**

Yet again the issue of property remains at the top of the list for prisoner complaints and IMB applications. This difficulty is made worse for Altcourse by its role as a local prison with its constant churn and transfer of prisoners. However, there have been fewer reports of missing property than in previous years as movements between prisons have reduced during the pandemic.

As mentioned in previous annual reports, this issue of missing property needs a national focus and we understand that this work is ongoing. This particularly challenging year has brought into sharp focus the importance of prisoners' personal possessions, particularly photographs and documentation, at a time when contact with family members has been severely curtailed.

# **6. Health and wellbeing**

## **6.1 Healthcare: general**

Healthcare provision has, not surprisingly, been stretched over the past 12 months as a direct consequence of the pandemic. Staffing levels have however remained at safe levels with the use of bank and agency staff. The healthcare team has also been able to maintain their attendance at segregation and ACCT reviews boards. In addition they have had to covid-test all prisoners on admission since December 2020.

In the Ombudsman's reports following deaths in custody this year, three have concluded that healthcare provision to prisoners has not been equivalent to that which they would have received in the community. The Board has discussed these issues with the healthcare manager and appropriate action plans have been drawn up and are regularly reviewed (see paragraph 4.2).

Healthcare has received 228 complaints during this year (healthcare complaints are dealt with quite separately to comp 1s and IMB applications). Many of these complaints are around medication due to the differing prescribing practices of prison GPs compared to the community. Other concerns raised include what prisoners perceive as lack of access to GPs (see paragraph 6.2).

More in-cell possession of medication has been introduced and the potential abuse of medication has not transpired. It is hoped that this practice will continue post pandemic allowing prisoners, who have been appropriately risk assessed, to have more control over their own health.

In the absence of the healthcare forum the healthcare manager has circulated a patient satisfaction survey in order to obtain some feedback. The Board will be interested to see the results of this survey.

At one point the IMB learnt, via an 0800 phone application, that a prisoner had been wrongly given an injection meant for another prisoner. This was investigated and reported to the Director and the appropriate authorities, and remedial action was taken.

In last year's annual report, the Board indicated concerns about the increasing age profile of prisoners with complex health problems, including those receiving palliative care and the need for a national strategy. As a direct response to this issue a complex care meeting is held weekly which reviews all patients with long term conditions, many of whom are elderly.

## **6.2 Primary Health**

Staffing levels for GP, dentist and other clinics remained stable across the year. Waiting lists were monitored and a triage system ensured that prisoners were seen on the basis of priority. This worked well for most of the year, but, particularly later in the year, waiting lists for some services got longer. The waiting list for GP appointments reached three weeks (but emergency appointments were always kept available). The dental waiting list was, at one point, four months but with emergency appointments available, and the optician list four weeks, but with prescriptions available in four days. Healthcare was subjected to an increased number of complaints as prisoners got frustrated and had to wait longer for services. GPs, at points in the year, switched from face-to-face consultations to phone consultations and inevitably this service, although necessary, was not as well received by prisoners.

Referrals and transfers to specialists generally worked well, however in one notable case this was not done quickly enough, as reported by the Prison and Probation Ombudsman on a death in custody in July 2020.

### **6.3 Mental healthcare**

Initial plans, referenced in last year's report, to recruit a psychologist have now been replaced by the engagement of five psychological therapists who will work closely with the full-time counsellor; this latter post being made permanent this year. The intention is that this broader base will have a bigger impact on the psychological health of prisoners and provide trauma based work. This input should support the work of the prison in addressing the undoubted impact the pandemic has had upon prisoners' mental health.

The transfer of prisoners with serious mental health needs to secure facilities continues to be a problem. An extreme example this year was the prisoner held in the CSU for approximately 300 days before transferring to a more appropriate facility. The IMB had escalated this nationally. On the positive side, at the end of the reporting year, only six prisoners were awaiting transfer against a previous average of 12. It is too early to see if this trend continues.

The multi-disciplinary mental health team have expressed the anecdotal view that the pandemic has resulted in more seriously mentally ill men being in prison due to less contact available in the community

### **6.4 Social care**

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Prisoners subject to social care plans are discussed at the regular multi-disciplinary safety intervention meetings. The prison has a social care manager who is a member of the Merseyside safeguarding board and whose role is to liaise with a social services link to facilitate needs assessments. A dedicated social worker visits the prison weekly to complete assessments.

During the reporting year two different care providers have been under contract to work within the prison. However, although the care provided was generally of a good standard, there were issues regarding the vetting process and contract oversight of the companies involved resulting in termination of the contracts leaving healthcare staff to continue to provide social care. There has been an increase in the number of prisoners requiring social care in line with the changing age profile of the prison population and at times this has stretched the resources of the healthcare team to deliver the appropriate level of social care.

Discussions are taking place as to the feasibility of the healthcare team having oversight of delivery on social care plans. It is hoped that this would maximise the

use of available resources and strengthen continuity of care, thereby resulting in better outcomes for prisoners with social care needs. We will continue to closely monitor this emerging development.

### **6.5 Exercise, time out of cell, gym**

In July 2020, the prison was at stage 4, meaning that prisoners had just 45 minutes out of cell in which they had to fit in exercise, showering, ordering their canteen and interacting with staff and other prisoners. This was particularly challenging for staff on the vulnerable prisoner wing where some prisoners were 'shielding', others were isolating and some were in work, all this taking place in socially distanced 'bubbles' of 12. Not surprisingly prisoners found the limited regime frustrating and were on occasions reluctant to return to their cells, all of which had to be managed, causing a knock-on effect for the timing of unlocking for the next group of prisoners.

For much of this period the gym was closed, so gym staff moved equipment to exercise yards and set up circuits and structured exercise programs for prisoners in situ. This opportunity for fresh air was greatly appreciated and the facility was used even when the weather was atrocious.

During this period the gym was refurbished and Radio Altcourse also developed videos of in-cell exercises to be shown on TVs.

In October 2020 the gym opened in a limited capacity, with exercise continuing in parallel on unit yards. Time out of cell started to increase further as the prison moved to stage 3 and at the time of writing it is hoped it can move to stage 2 when the gym can open fully and the majority of prisoners will be out of their cells to attend work or education for much of the day.

In May 2021 a number of prisoners who were in work complained to the IMB about missing out on valued gym time but this issue has now been addressed.

### **6.6 Drug rehabilitation**

This year has been challenging for the drug rehabilitation team who have responded in a positive way and attempted to continue rehabilitative work as far as possible. Caseloads have fallen from 350 to 250, substance misuse staff being redeployed to residential units. With limited resources the focus has been on incoming prisoners with opiate and alcohol misuse in particular. These prisoners are triaged following community services referrals. Thereafter support is provided around overdose management.

Those coming into the prison with addiction issues do get immediate support from the integrated drugs treatment service(IDTS) but do not receive the same level of one-to-one and group work that they did prior to lockdown.

The prison has a 'stabilisation' unit where high-risk prisoners are housed and a member of the team visits any self-referred prisoner. This unit, previously the drug recovery unit, is now a residential unit. When the prison returns to its original regime it is anticipated that the unit will resume its specialised substance misuse focus.

Daily group programmes have been suspended during the year but sessions of in-cell work were designed and implemented to help address some substance misuse issues. These are no substitute for the previous face-to-face programmes. Prisoners have been supplied with information about naloxone, an antidote for opiate overdose, and there has been an overall focus on harm reduction and overdose awareness, which is reinforced pre and post release.

Two-hour audio sessions have been running four days a week on the internal radio station. This intuitive thinking skills programme was accompanied by a distance learning pack leading to a level1 qualification in addictive desire recognition. One hundred prisoners were accredited, with a greater number accessing the video. Pre-release information is now given to prisoners about how and where to access support, arranged by telephone instead of face to face.

Two ex-prisoners from the Well Community, a voluntary organisation involved with prisoners for 13 weeks after release, help prepare in-cell work and are available to discuss issues with prisoners through their cell doors.

## **6.7 Soft skills**

The prison radio station, Radio Altcourse, staffed mostly by prisoners, has been involved in developing in-cell activity videos including how to play chess and the guitar. They have also designed and printed off packs of playing cards with questions on the back of each card designed to stimulate conversation between cell mates.

As restrictions have relaxed, a course in beekeeping, using the prison hives, has been introduced specifically for staff with the intention of providing distraction and to enhance wellbeing. These courses are routinely offered to prisoners. The course has been attended by the deputy director. The first batch of honey has been sold to reinvest in the bees project. Work involving prisoners with the care and training of birds of prey has continued whenever this is possible. Finally the radio station also produces a monthly magazine, the Altcourse Bugle, to which prisoners contribute poems, drawings and articles.

Radio Altcourse is about to start a joint project with the mental health team developing radio and video materials directed at those prisoners who struggle to cope with everyday prison life.

In February 2021, the family intervention unit raised £300 from prisoners' own money which was donated towards a struggling local breast cancer charity, 'Liverpool Mummies'.

## **7. Progression and resettlement**

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### **7.1 Education, library**

At the start of the reporting year, prisoners were still reliant upon education packs tailored to suit individual learning needs. These, together with mental health packs, crosswords and in cell television contributed to the overall calmness demonstrated by prisoners during the period of lockdown.

In August education staff members were back on site although formal delivery of courses did not commence until October, with limited numbers of prisoners able to participate in face to face learning and sit examinations. However, the national lockdown in November once again restricted face to face delivery of education, with a number of education staff working from home but regular phone calls to prisoners in their cells to check on progress with work books was found to be beneficial.

Most education staff had returned to the prison by mid-December and classroom courses in Maths and English resumed with 29 places in each morning and afternoon session. ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) courses recommenced, supplemented by in-cell learning and face to face mentoring. Unfortunately, vocational courses have suffered during lockdown without the availability of practical input. Focus has been directed to theory with the intention of picking up the practical aspects of the courses when present restrictions are sufficiently relaxed. This is something which will be kept under review by the IMB.

It was pleasing to note that all college courses were running again at the end of June with classes of 50. Two new courses have been introduced, in business and barbering, the latter supported by the opening of a barber shop and participants will be able to work towards relevant qualifications. We will be interested to monitor the progress of these initiatives throughout the forthcoming year.

### **Library**

The library has continued to play a pivotal role in supporting the morale of prisoners during sustained lockdown periods despite severely limited resources in terms of staffing. One staff member has been responsible for sourcing and delivering books to residential units as well as photocopying puzzles and crosswords. Books have

been out on loan for longer periods, with true crime and autobiographies proving the most popular genres.

In April the very experienced librarian retired and it is disappointing that no permanent replacement has yet been recruited to the role

## **7.2 Vocational training, work**

For much of the last year, all of the prison's workshops have been either fully closed or open with a limited numbers employed on in-house tasks. Prisoners have continued to work in the laundry, where there was some limited production of 'scrubs' for the NHS. One workshop was converted to produce distraction and comfort packs for prisoners and some minor maintenance building work was also carried out. Unit cleaners and orderlies have worked throughout, the former being commended by the Director in his weekly notice to prisoners (NTP) emphasising the increased importance of maintaining high levels of cleanliness on residential units. Prisoners have also been able to continue to work in the kitchens, on Radio Altcourse, bin collection, and with the bees and birds of prey.

As the prison has started to open up, this has of necessity been with reduced capacity and many external contracts have been suspended due to national restrictions in the wider community. It is hoped that external contractors will return to the prison once businesses in the community reopen. As a consequence workshops have been limited to a maximum of 60% of pre-pandemic numbers. In order to maximise opportunities for prisoners to have time out of their cells and to undertake meaningful work, a half day shift pattern was introduced where practical and it is clear this opportunity is much appreciated by prisoners. Those who have been unable to work due to limitations on numbers still get paid. During this reporting period much work has been undertaken on "skill passports". These include NVQ level 1 & 2 qualifications, industrial cleaning, recycling, skip manufacture and refurbishment.

Since the easing of the lockdown measures in April/May, a number of new contractors have replaced those where businesses closed. The laundry is now working at full capacity, as are the light and office assembly workshops. 'Recycling Lives' has been open for 4 weeks with the potential of full time employment and accommodation for prisoners on release. Multi-skills training has started up, the intention being to equip prisoners for jobs in the building trade, and there is already a waiting list for this. Two new areas have now opened- a barber's shop, which is extremely popular with prisoners, and a bakery section in the kitchen making rolls and ultimately sliced bread for prisoners. Both of these have waiting lists. Moving forward there are plans for some reorganisation of workshops in order to provide more work opportunities for prisoners.

Kitchen management provides training for those prisoners looking to complete their NVQ level 1 and 2 in catering. There is also training being provided for aspiring baristas.

### **7.3 Offender management, progression**

The offender management unit (OMU) has had to face considerable challenges during this reporting year but appears to have adapted well to the increased use of technology and less face-to-face contact. Although this has streamlined much of the work it is accepted that there is no substitute for speaking to prisoners face to face. The Probation Service has worked remotely for much of the year, only recently returning to the prison so the OMU has facilitated telephone interviews for prisoners to speak to offender managers. Now that probation has returned to the prison, good working relationships are being re-established. Despite this resumption of normal working, the IMB has received an increased number of applications concerning prisoners' frustrations and uncertainties regarding contact with probation, their parole and progression towards release.

The OMiC model is now firmly embedded and key workers have managed to maintain some face-to-face contact with prisoners throughout, subject to risk assessment. In-cell phones have also proved their worth in maintaining those vital links with prisoners. At the start of the pandemic some of the OMU team were redeployed to other parts of the prison due to high levels of staff Covid-related sickness and self-isolation. Training was halted so only six out of the 12 staff could complete OASys assessments and inevitably a backlog developed. This has now been rectified.

Parole hearings have been held remotely and are well attended and this may be an element of working that is retained after lockdown as it is more economical and guarantees better attendance.

Morale in the OMU is currently high and it appears to be a committed team. It is therefore disappointing to learn that a number of crucial online courses (including one in risk assessment) provided by an outside agency have been cancelled at short notice. However all staff (12) have now completed their OASys training, the highest proportion of staff to achieve this. It is hoped that some offence-related interventions with prisoners will restart in the coming months and already the thinking skills programme has recommenced with smaller numbers.

Since December 2020, re-categorisation has been digital, making it a much slicker process and transfers have continued smoothly throughout the reporting year.

The unit has always worked closely with resettlement and at the time of writing there is great uncertainty and concern about its replacement by probation and Seetec Interventions Alliance and what form this new service will take (see paragraph 7.5).

### **7.4 Family contact**

During full lockdown there were no family visits. However, when reintroduced, the visits hall was set up to allow for social distancing. Some prisoners found the

limitations frustrating, stating that masks and screens made it difficult to hear their visitors but subsequent modifications improved this.

Purple Visits (video calling) began in November of 2020 and have proved popular despite some teething problems with the technology. The total number of Purple Visits accessed by prisoners during the reporting year was 2,375, consisting of 15 half hour sessions on weekdays with 30 held at the weekends, booths being sanitized by prisoner cleaners after each visit. Prisoners have certainly appreciated the opportunity to spend quality time with family members after such a long period of just telephone contact. One prisoner stated that he much preferred Purple Visits as it meant his family did not have to travel, he could see more family members and it is much quieter than in the visits hall where conversation is more difficult.

When face-to-face visits restarted at the beginning of May, the visits hall was re-organised, and partitions were removed but social distancing retained. The hall has remained bright, welcoming and spotlessly clean throughout.

The role of Radio Altcourse deserves special mention here having created a series of videos of prisoners reading stories to be sent to their children at Christmas.

The Board has recently become concerned about prisoners getting pin numbers put on their in-cell phones promptly. This was a source of frustration for both prisoners and staff and was raised with the Director, the in-cell phone being prisoners' only means of communication with family and legal representatives for long periods. This has been partially resolved by increased clerical support and there are plans for prisoners to request pin numbers on the custodial management system (CMS) machines on residential units rather than making a paper application, which should also help to speed up the process.

## **7.5 Resettlement planning**

At the start of the reporting year, the availability of Homelessness Prevention Team funds through the Probation Service meant that homeless prisoners could be resettled in hotels. Hotel accommodation was plentiful enabling Shelter to find accommodation for all, with the resettlement caseload running at about 250 per month. Prisoners were given a discharge pack containing information on Covid-19 and safety measures they would need to follow in the community. Unfortunately during this period there was little physical contact with prisoners as most probation staff were working from home and resettlement staff were reliant on contacting prisoners on their in-cell phones, access to staff phones on residential units being at a premium.

In recent months, the challenges faced by the resettlement team have been exacerbated by the uncertainties surrounding the Shelter contract which terminated

on 21 June 2021. We understand this contract is to be taken over by Probation and Seetec Interventions Alliance. Consequently the run up to this date has proved stressful to staff concerned about their personal futures and who will have to apply for their own jobs. Little consultation with either the prison or prisoners themselves has taken place and there is scant information about what the service might look like as the June date has approached. As a consequence, the resettlement team have had to resort to dealing with emergencies only and with no sign of a proper handover to the new provider. Inevitably this had led to a fall in staff morale.

In conclusion and at the time of writing, the IMB has become increasingly concerned about those prisoners whose release is imminent. Without adequate resettlement support many prisoners will be homeless and at serious risk of re-offending. Our experience to date leads us to conclude that the new provider has grossly underestimated the volume of prisoners requiring resettlement support. We understand that the new contract has taken no account of the needs of the remand population at Altcourse. This will need to be monitored closely in the forthcoming months.

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## 8. The work of the IMB

### Board statistics

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Recommended complement of Board members	16
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	13
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	11
Total number of visits to the establishment	116
Total number of segregation reviews attended	Unavailable at this time

### Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	Current Reporting Year		
			0800	Paper	Total
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	17	19	4	23
B	Discipline, including adjudications, IEP, sanctions	25	10	1	11
C	Equality	14	4	0	4
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, library, regime, time out of cell	16	1	2	3
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection restrictions	31	12	3	15
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	32	2	2	4
F	Food and kitchens	26	2	2	4
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	59	56	24	81
H1	Property within this establishment	25	9	5	14
H2	Property during transfer or in another establishment or location	29	11	3	14
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogue(s)	16	6	1	7
I	Sentence management, including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, re-categorisation	71	15	4	19
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	23	20	9	29
K	Transfers	29	0	0	0
L	Miscellaneous, including complaints system	63	8	14	22
	Total number of applications	476	175	75	250

\*Two members of IMB team are call handlers and another colleague deals with receiving and allocating calls to be dealt with amongst the team



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