



REPORT ON

A FULL ANNOUNCED

INSPECTION OF

HM PRISON ALT COURSE

1-10 NOVEMBER 1999

BY

HM CHIEF INSPECTOR OF PRISONS

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HMP ALTCOURSE

PREFACE

HMP ALTCOURSE is, by some way, the best local prison that we have inspected during my time as HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, as is reflected in this full, detailed and complimentary report. My team and I frequently had to pinch ourselves and remember that the prison had only been open for slightly less than two years. I am not alone in my views about the excellence of what is being done at ALTCOURSE. During the period of our inspection the Chief Constable of Liverpool visited the prison, telling the Director, that for the first time in his career, he found himself leaving a prison feeling optimistic. I agree wholeheartedly with him. What we found, and what we report upon, proves that all the outcomes that we look for in terms of the treatment of and conditions for prisoners in local prisons are possible, given the right degree of direction and attitude. I believe that if they can be achieved at ALTCOURSE, a core local, with a most complex range of prisoners, from juvenile remands to high security Category A, all requiring separate and appropriate treatment and conditions, they can be achieved anywhere.

I acknowledge that ALTCOURSE is a brand new and purpose built prison, and not a large, Victorian, inner-city local, which, in its time, was also purpose built. But prisons are living things, containing people including prisoners, the quality of whose treatment does not depend on the building alone. What is important is that everyone working in a prison, from the Governor/Director down to every custody officer on a landing, or every typist in administration, realises the importance of their role in contributing to the successful delivery of what is required of a prison, namely treating prisoners with humanity and helping them to live law abiding lives in prison and on release. This is clearly the ethos in ALTCOURSE, and it tells in the atmosphere, fuelled as it is by the professional pride of all who work there in the delivery of what are, so obviously, quality outcomes for prisoners, who, in turn, appreciate what is being done for them, and the way in which it is being done.

I have called many times for Prison Service management to recognise that, first and foremost, their task is to help Governing Governors govern their prisons. This requires a combination of top down direction, telling Governors – or Directors of contract prisons – what to do, accompanied by suitable monitoring arrangements to ensure that it is done, and localised support to ensure that delivery of needs such as Healthcare, Drug Treatment programmes, work, education, resettlement of offenders and liaison with other Agencies such as, Probation, are appropriate for the part of the country in which the prison is situated. HMP ALTCOURSE, being a contract prison, has a number of advantages over public sector prisons, in terms of its direction. It's contract lays down what is expected of it, and how much that costs. To monitor that contract, there is a contract compliance monitor, or Controller, In the prison, monitoring what is being done, 365 days a year. Being a commercial operation, management response to appeals from the Director for help, or support, is instant, not subject to labyrinthine, public sector, bureaucratic procedures, and it tells. The result has been that a good and experienced Director has been enabled to develop a prison which many other Governors, and indeed Prison Service Headquarters personnel could and should visit with advantage, because there is much that they could learn from the experience.

ALTCOURSE is not the first prison that I have left with a feeling of optimism, but never before have I listed 45 examples of Good Practice in a report. What is so impressive, and will be noted by anyone looking at the list, is that they cover 15 separate aspects of the treatment of and conditions for prisoners, all of which have been instigated by the Director and his staff. No clearer evidence could be given of the value of every prison, and member of its staff, knowing what its and their role is, and being subject both to clear and unequivocal direction and comprehensive support.

But I have to voice my concern that, already, in the shape of overcrowding, the storm clouds are gathering and threatening to undermine much that has been put in place. ALTCOURSE was built to house 600 prisoners. Already this number has gone up to 860, with an option of going up to 900, in other word 50% over certified normal accommodation. Inevitably the impact of overcrowding is felt most by prisoners, for whom less and less can be done. That is the situation from which too many public

sector local prisons currently suffer, and which ALT COURSE appeared, initially, to have been spared. I hope that it goes no further, and that the resulting infrastructure costs are met, so that the quality of what is being delivered is not reduced.

During the course of our inspections over the past eighteen months, we have become increasingly concerned at the evidence we have gathered of the number of times prisoners have been denied access to education, work or evening association, allegedly due to staff shortages. The Director told me proudly that no education class, work session or association period had been cancelled since the prison opened. This is a remarkable record and, to me, demonstrates the commitment of staff, from the Director downwards, to the delivery of appropriate treatment and conditions for prisoners. Some of those who put forward a variety of tortuous reasons for not delivering what is laid down could ponder on this fact with advantage.

The report contains a number of recommendations designed to help the prison improve its operational efficiency yet further. Having debriefed the Director, in detail, at the end of the inspection, I know that he is aware of them, and that they will be examined with that purpose in mind.

It also contains a wealth of information that will, I hope be monitored and considered carefully by Prison Service senior management, because there are a number of ramifications that are of wider import. Let me list just four. 75% of those coming from court are on open 'at risk' suicide forms. It is possible to deliver 40 hours work per week for convicted prisoners, when public sector prisons are only required to provide 23. The youngest prisoners pose by far the worst disciplinary problems. Those responsible for the drug strategy should consider the value of the £42,000 Barringer machine, which is so helpful for searching visitors, and others, for signs of drugs.

In particular, in view of all that we have written about the poor standard of Health Care in far too many prisons, I must draw attention to its delivery in ALT COURSE. The Health Care Centre is run as a hospital, to which prisoners only go for treatment. It is not, as in so many cases, a safe haven – everyone else, including mentally

disordered, are treated, on their wings, with outreach. As a result, there really is equivalence with what can be expected in the community, and I hope that this lesson will be picked up by those responsible for bringing Prison Service HealthCare into the 21st century, and the NHS.

In sum this is a thoroughly good story, and my team and I take considerable pleasure in telling it. Everyone concerned is to be congratulated on what they have achieved, and supported in maintaining and developing what has been put in place. I hope that the learning and dissemination of the lessons of this report will result in HMP ALTCOURSE not being regarded as a 'one off', but the initiator of what will become common practice throughout the local prison estate.

Sir David Ramsbotham
HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

December 1999

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ES1 Altcourse, a contracted out prison run by Group 4, was a very impressive establishment in many respects and a delight to inspect. It was a very strong candidate for being the best prison we have seen and we had to keep reminding ourselves that it had been open for less than two years at the time of our inspection.

ES2 Group 4 had the benefit of opening other prisons in recent years and had clearly learnt lessons from those experiences to ensure that the settling down period for Altcourse was minimised.

ES3 One of the most important lessons was that there should be clear direction, support and guidance to new staff by a group of experienced managers. This team was led by the Director who had encouraged a "hands-on" approach amongst managers in leading by example. As a result, staff at wing level did not feel unsupported and isolated as we have sometimes found in other newly opened contracted out prisons.

ES4 The consistency of approach which had also been a key element was reinforced by the continuity of the Home Office Controller and his deputy, both of whom had been in post prior to the prison being opened and who enjoyed a positive working relationship with the Director.

ES5 We were also pleased to note that control had been established as a matter of priority before the regime developments were introduced. This was clearly an important factor and was reflected in the confidence that prisoners and staff had in their safety within the establishment.

ES6 Additionally, it had contributed to the formation of excellent relationships between prisoners and staff and the confidence to introduce innovative methods of working in many areas.

ES7 This is not to say that everything was a perfect. The Director acknowledged that the prison was still at the developmental stage and that, amongst other things, there was a need for more workspaces for prisoners and programmes designed to help prevent re-offending on release.

ES8 However, there was very little inherently wrong with the prison although we differed from senior management on a number of issues, even after much discussion. Some of these centred on contractual arrangements and commitments between Group 4 and the Prison Service Central Contracts Group. Although we acknowledged these commitments, we did not always agree that they resulted in optimum outcomes for prisoners. Our main concern, and therefore recommended that contracts should be renegotiated in these areas.

ES9 Furthermore we thought that two years into the life of the prison was a good time to review some of the early policies and procedures which had been introduced on opening and which had seemed appropriate at the time, to consider whether or not they were still valid.

ES10 Altcourse had become overcrowded with single cells being used for double occupation. This is a regular feature in local prisons to help cope with a rising prison population but should not happen in a civilised Prison Service. Apart from the obvious disadvantages of two people living in a cell designed for one person, there are always wider implications for other facilities within the prison. We were disappointed, therefore, that the opportunity had not been taken to spare Altcourse, a new local prison, from the effects of overcrowding, particularly to such a high level -almost 50%.

ES11 The following conclusions and recommendations are based upon the four tests of a healthy prison taken from Chapter 7 of the thematic review entitled "Suicide is Everyone's Concern", published by HM Inspectorate of Prisons in May 1999.

Test 1: even the weakest prisoners feel safe

ES12 There was little evidence of bullying by prisoners or by staff. Our survey of prisoners by questionnaire revealed that 81% rarely or never felt unsafe in the prison. This was a very high percentage, particularly in a local prison, and was a clear indication that a safe environment had been created.

ES13 Predictability of time out of cell for prisoners was extremely good with 13 hours for seven days each week being the norm. This made access to telephones, for example, much easier for prisoners, helping them maintain family links.

ES14 There were good relationships and contact between prisoners and staff. Again, the questionnaires revealed that 92% of prisoners said that they got on "well or okay" with staff. Given the nature of the population, which was generally transient, this statistic is remarkable particularly when compared with other establishments carrying out a similar role.

ES15 There was a reasonable Anti-Bullying Strategy but there was an element of moving victims rather than dealing with bullies themselves. There was a good level of awareness amongst staff of the potential for bullying and, indeed, a list of known bullies was kept at the Gate so that staff coming on duty would be aware of them. The tactics of trying to separate victims and bullies were restricted in the Young Offender units by the limited accommodation options.

ES16 The incentives and privileges scheme encouraged participation in activities and individual prisoner development. Record keeping on prisoners by staff on the living units was outstanding.

Test 2: prisoners are treated with respect as individuals

ES17 We were impressed with the courtesy shown by staff towards prisoners who were often referred to as Mr or by first names.

ES18

The admissions area was designed to foster a humane reception procedure, including holding rooms which had neither gates nor doors which gave a more “normalising” atmosphere and where newly received prisoners were offered a cup of tea.

ES19 There was generally good access to services for prisoners although we were surprised that remand prisoners did not have access to probation officers.

ES20 Unusually in the Prison Service, prisoners had access to health care provision equivalent to that of the NHS.

Test 3: prisoners are fully and purposefully occupied and are expected to improve themselves.

ES21 There was not enough purposeful activity for prisoners including work, education and programmes, although more was planned.

ES22 We were impressed with the activities of the P. E. department particularly the participation of P. E. staff in organising activities on the living units.

ES23 There was a good range of programmes but we recommended that they should be evaluated. We were pleased to note that programmes were based on needs derived from prisoners sentence plans.

ES24 There were good educational facilities but we were concerned that sentenced prisoners who may have benefited from full-time education were prevented from doing so.

Test 4 prisoners can strengthen links with their families and prepare themselves for release.

ES25 There were good pre-release courses.

ES26 An excellent visitors centre had been provided and access for visitors, including evenings, was also very good.

ES27 There was a need to increase the employability of prisoners on release. There were only limited opportunities for prisoners to obtain NVQs or other projects leading to employment.

ES28 Altcourse had established an extremely sound base in a remarkably short time. It provided a humane environment where staff and prisoners treated each other with respect as individuals. This had not been at the expense of control or safety; on the contrary, it had contributed to both.

ES29 Senior management were aware of the areas for development and had plans to take the prison forward. There was also a need to review original policies and practices in some areas.

ES30 All at Altcourse deserve to be congratulated on their achievements thus far. We look forward to returning in due course, with optimism that the plans for the future will have transpired, and that Altcourse will be able to confirm our current view that it should be considered as a "jewel in the crown" of the Prison Service.