

## Thorncross vs Altcourse

This year, as members of the Cheshire Youth Commission, we were offered the opportunity to visit to two prisons in and around the Cheshire Area. We first visited Thorncross prison, an open prison that houses category D prisoners that have two years or less remaining on their sentence; this prison focuses on preparing prisoners for their return into society through programmes centred around gaining new skills and re-entering the workplace. We later visited Altcourse prison, housing category B prisoners; Altcourse is a much larger facility with much higher levels of security and much lower levels of personal freedom. The purpose of our visits was to evaluate the pros and cons of the prison systems regarding the punishment and rehabilitation of young people.

Thorncross gives inmates a much higher level of personal freedom, each inmate has the key to their room and can come and go as they please; many individuals have jobs during their time in Thorncross, some within the prison and some within the local community. This facility uses these job opportunities as a method of rehabilitation and a source of income for inmates in order to better prepare them for their release, both financially and socially. The prison guards that accompanied us stated that inmates that have worked during their time at Thorncross, and especially those with guaranteed work post-release, are much less likely to reoffend; these inmates also find the transition back into society much easier, with a stable income and a stable work life. Altcourse, in comparison, also offers job opportunities to inmates in order for them to learn new skills and gain experience that is valuable to them post-release (though the focus of these opportunities seemed to be a financial benefit for inmates during their time at Altcourse). Being enrolled in educational courses is an expectation of prisoners that are seeking to gain work within the prison; these courses are structured in the same way as a college and the qualifications are the same as those offered within schools and colleges, with no clear indications that said qualifications were achieved within a prison. Both prison systems use their educations and vocational opportunities to better prepare inmates for their lives once they have been released and encourage prisoners to better their lives and reducing the likelihood of reoffending.

Extracurricular activities are an important part of individual welfare within prisons; both Thorncross and Altcourse provide various opportunities for inmates to maintain productivity and mental stimulation, examples include: gym and sporting facilities, prison radio stations (which were run by prisoners), prison newsletter (The Altcourse Bugle), religious classes and worship spaces, and animal caretaking positions. These activities and opportunities were given as a reward to inmates making progress with their own rehabilitation, and to those in need of mental stimulation (including those suffering with mental health issues).

Prisons that promote rehabilitation rather than punishment are a valuable asset to the criminal justice system in the UK by reducing rates of reoffending and helping to prepare inmates for their future, giving them an opportunity to change. However, these prisons do act as a punishment, with very limited contact with the outside world and very limited personal freedoms. Young people must be aware that life in prison isn't as easy as the

wealth of opportunities may suggest, some inmates never choose to better themselves and gain new skills, violence remains ever-present within these prisons and many inmates involve themselves in activities that can lengthen their sentence. It shouldn't be somewhere that is ever considered an option by young people, as, despite the opportunities presented, having a criminal record will severely limit your options in later life regardless of your educational and workplace experience.

This was highlighted to us during a conversation with a prisoner at Altcourse prison, who pointed to the top of a group of trees barely visible over the prison walls that surround the facility and remarked that those trees were all he saw of the outside world.

Charlotte Collins Jones & Harry Hughes