

# Ex-service personnel in the criminal justice system: **Barriers to identification and uptake of support**



## Summary report

## Authors:

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SCAN TO VIEW  
THE MAIN REPORT

At **Nacro** we see people's future whatever the past. That's why our housing, education, justice, and health and wellbeing services work alongside people to give them the support and skills they need to succeed. It's also why we fight for their voices to be heard and campaign together to create lasting change.

We work across the criminal justice system and our justice services aim to break the cycle of crime and disadvantage. We believe that rehabilitation must be at the heart of an effective justice system. And that for people who enter the criminal justice system it should be the start of building something better, not a road to nowhere. We've been working in this field for more than 50 years - we know that with the right support, people can and do turn their lives around.

**The Institute for Public Safety, Crime and Justice (IPSCJ)** at the University of Northampton is a premier research, evaluation and consultancy organisation that's core mission is to support positive evidence-based policy and practice change for the benefit of society. Being situated at the interface between practice, policy and academia, the IPSCJ has delivered insight and innovation to enhance public service delivery models, organisational strategy and service user outcomes. The IPSCJ has five key portfolios: Health and Justice in which we explore the intersections between health and justice working with partners and agencies in community and prison settings; Children and Young People taking a child-centred and participatory approach to research and evaluation; Citizens in Policing in which we investigate the roles and contributions of volunteers within policing; Organisational Development in which we support organisations to understand practices, structures, and cultures to improve efficiency and lead change; and Equality, Vulnerability and Inclusion in which we empower individuals and communities whose voices are not often heard to take part in research and evaluation.

**The Institute for Social Innovation and Impact (ISII)** at the University of Northampton evaluates and measures the social impact of social innovations in the UK and around the world, as well as exploring the financing of, and policy support for, social innovation. We support social innovators to develop their ideas and organisations through the delivery of cutting-edge academic research and consultancy services, and evaluate social impact through the use of our bespoke 'Social Impact Matrix®'. We also engage in international collaborations centred on sustainable development with other universities, NGOs and international funders around the globe. The ISII is fully self-sustaining and sources its income entirely from external contracts/grants, with no core University funding provided. In this way it operates in the same manner as a socially innovative, entrepreneurial organisation.

# Foreword by Forces in Mind Trust

Whilst the majority of ex-service personnel make a successful transition back into civilian life, we know that unfortunately some come into contact with the criminal justice system. However, given a lack of comprehensive data about this cohort, this can create challenges in providing tailored support to them. Forces in Mind Trust therefore funded this important research to understand how we can more effectively identify ex-service personnel within the system to better understand their needs and ensure that they have access to appropriate support.

This key report highlights the barriers to this identification, which includes a lack of clarity about who constitutes a veteran, and also of the benefit of disclosing their service history, given there may be potential concerns about the implications of doing so.

It also allows us to better understand the complexity of the support landscape, as well as the lack of awareness of available support both within prison and the community, and how these challenges can be overcome.

But we also need to recognise that being involved in the criminal justice system is a journey and therefore the research recognises the need for an improvement in data throughout the whole journey and across the entire justice system – through police, probation and prison service – to see meaningful improvement.

By addressing these barriers and challenges to identification, we can achieve a step towards ensuring that ex-service personnel in the criminal justice system and their families can access targeted support, resulting in a prevention of future offending – benefitting both the individual and society. We know that ex-service personnel have a lot to offer the nation and we need to support them in doing so.

## **Michelle Alston**

Chief Executive, Forces in Mind Trust

# Foreword by Nacro and the University of Northampton

We at Nacro and the University of Northampton are proud to present this final report which aims to contribute significantly to the limited field of knowledge around the barriers to identification and uptake of support for ex-service personnel and their families in the criminal justice system.

Ex-service personnel who offend make up a small but significant proportion of people in prison and under supervision in the community in England, Scotland and Wales. Through interviews with over 100 ex-service personnel and a wide range of stakeholders, this report sheds light on important barriers to support, as well as factors shaping engagement with services. Identifying that someone has served in the Armed Forces is key to being able to access available support and the report outlines barriers we found to identification. We put forward a set of recommendations we believe will help improve both identification and take up of support for ex-service personnel and their families.

We would like to reiterate our thanks to the ex-service personnel who contributed to this research and allowed for a meaningful understanding of their experiences and also our thanks to all participants who shared their time and expertise.

We hope this report does justice to these important contributions and will ultimately help ensure ex-service personnel and their families can access the support they need.

**Campbell Robb,**  
Chief Executive, Nacro

**Professor Matthew Callender**  
Director of the Institute for Public Safety, Crime and Justice, University of Northampton



# Acknowledgements

We would like to express our appreciation to all the ex-service personnel who participated in this research. Their openness has allowed for a rich and detailed report. We hope it makes a meaningful contribution to the experiences of those ex-service personnel who have been in contact with the criminal justice system.

We are grateful to Forces in Mind Trust for funding this research, and our thanks to Clare Crookenden for her support throughout the course of the project.

We would like to extend our thanks to all stakeholders who participated in this research, including Police, Probation, and third sector staff. Our particular thanks to the HMPPS and Scottish Prison Service staff who facilitated the interviews in prison, especially all veterans in custody support officers (ViCSOs) without whose contribution this report would be incomplete.

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Special thanks to this project's advisory group: Krissie Stephens, (Military Corrective Training Centre), Simon Denny (ISII), John Sherriff (Goodwill Solutions), and Rachel Brunt (Ministry of Defence).





# 1. Background to the research

**In August 2021 Nacro, in partnership with the University of Northampton (UON), was commissioned by Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) to conduct research into the barriers to identification and uptake of support for ex-service personnel and their families in the criminal justice systems of England, Wales and Scotland.**

This briefing provides a summary of the research findings, which are fully set out in the main report. To access the main report, please click visit [nacro.org.uk/exservicepersonnel](https://nacro.org.uk/exservicepersonnel) or contact [policy@nacro.org.uk](mailto:policy@nacro.org.uk).

Previous academic research as well as research produced by FiMT has attempted to establish the number of ex-service personnel in the criminal justice system (CJS), as well as the reasons they offend. Most estimates have suggested that ex-service personnel make the most significant, and potentially the largest, occupational subset in prison. As of October 2023, the Ministry of Justice estimated that, in England and Wales, approximately 3.6% of the prison population that was asked the identifying question at reception had disclosed that they had previously served in the Armed Forces. In 2019, the Directory of Social Change estimated that 3.1% of Scotland's prison population had previously served in the Armed Forces.

There is less recent data available on the estimates of ex-service personnel under the supervision of the Probation Service in England and Wales and justice social work (JSW) in Scotland. There is also little information on how many ex-service personnel are processed by the police in England, Wales and Scotland.

The available data therefore provides a limited picture, only considering ex-service personnel who choose to disclose their service status. The current research was therefore commissioned to understand the barriers to identification of ex-service personnel and their families through the different stages of the CJS, as well as any barriers to uptake of support.

The research was conducted in two phases:

**Phase 1**, from August 2021 to April 2022, consisted of substantive interviews with 29 key national stakeholders who work with or are involved in policymaking related to ex-service personnel in the CJS. **Phase 2** of the research consisted of in-depth primary research across eight local sites which included interviews with 104 ex-service personnel in prison and in the community under supervision, as well as 71 professionals working in different parts of the justice system and other local stakeholders. These sites were:

- › County Durham, Hull, Plymouth, and Staffordshire in England
- › Bridgend and Swansea in Wales
- › Edinburgh and Perth and Kinross in Scotland, with a supplementary prison visit in Stirling

This summary report is structured to first present common themes in terms of barriers to identification and support. The rest of the report will present barriers to identification and uptake of support within the context of ex-service personnel's contact with the police and court proceedings; their experiences in prison; and their experiences in the community under supervision. The briefing also looks into support provision by third sector organisations, as well as barriers faced by families of ex-service personnel to access support. Finally, the briefing will conclude with recommendations to improve identification of ex-service personnel in the CJS, as well as ways to effectively address barriers to support.

## Cross-cutting themes

There are several cross-cutting themes across the different parts of the CJS journey which are worth highlighting. These are:

**Reluctance to seek help:** Stakeholders and ex-service personnel interviewed reported a reluctance of ex-service personnel to seek help before, during, and after contact with the justice system. Pride and a sense of self-reliance were often cited as reasons why ex-service personnel were reluctant to ask for help.

**Lack of understanding about why they were being asked to identify as having served in the Armed Forces:** Those interviewed often stated that the purpose of identification at different stages of the justice process was not clear. This influences the decision to identify as having served in the Armed Forces, as they were not sure why the question was asked, and what implications it may have on their journey through the justice system.

**Complex landscape and lack of awareness of available support in the community:** The current support landscape is complex, with a considerable number of support pathways in prison and the community. However, many of the ex-service personnel who participated in this research were not aware of available support, often stating that they were only aware of ex-service personnel specific services after they had contact with the justice system.

**Capacity and knowledge of professionals:** Capacity issues were raised by prison staff in England, Scotland and Wales, and probation staff in England and Wales, impacting their ability to routinely identify and support ex-service personnel. This was exacerbated by limited knowledge of the most appropriate services for ex-service personnel in the justice system.

**Use of language when asking about service history:** During our research, it emerged that the term 'veteran' was not commonly understood to include ex-service personnel with shorter services and/or no combat experience. Many ex-service personnel were not aware that their service history made them eligible to identify as a 'veteran' and seek ex-service personnel-specific support services.

**Shame influencing decisions to identify/ take up support:** Many stakeholders expressed that ex-service personnel may feel shame concerning their offence and may be reluctant to identify themselves as a former member of the Armed Forces. However, it is important to note that very few ex-service personnel expressed shame in this way, or that it prevented them from self-identifying or taking up support.





## 2. Initial contact with the CJS: police and courts

Interaction with the police is likely to be the first instance of involvement with the CJS. Although arrest could result in no further action or an out of court disposal, it can often lead to a judicial process. If convicted at court, an individual could receive a community sentence or be sentenced to time in prison. This section provides a summary of identification procedures in place and the support available during contact with the police, and barriers. It also briefly touches upon the experiences of ex-service personnel through the courts, in terms of identification and support.

### Identification and support mechanisms

Police stakeholders across England, Wales and Scotland reported that when people come into police custody they are asked if they have previously served in the Armed Forces either as regular or reservist.

In England and Wales, a further potential point of identification at this stage are Liaison and Diversion (L&D) services who identify vulnerable people, helping divert them to the support they need, and try to prevent them from progressing further through the CJS in appropriate cases. If not already identified as ex-service personnel, L&D seek to find out more about each individual and offer another identification opportunity.

In addition to the formal identification questions, we heard of different practices across forces such as having an explicit ‘think veteran’ approach which includes training and looking out for visual signs of Armed Forces experience. These include wearing visual signs such as badges by police officers who had Armed Forces experience; displaying posters and information about support to help start conversations and encourage identification; and training new police recruits to increase awareness of their specific needs and support available. Additionally, some police forces were actively working to attract people coming out of the Armed Forces into employment with the police.



## Barriers to identification in police custody

- › **Nature of police custody and the timing of the question:** The busy nature of police custody suites and the difficult environment for ex-service personnel were identified as potential barriers to identification. The importance of having further opportunities to ask the question and identify beyond being initially asked upon arrival was highlighted.
- › **Distrust of and perceived motivations of the police:** Although not uniform across all areas, some ex-service personnel expressed distrust of the police and their perceived motivations in asking if they had served. Some others felt the question was just a ‘tick-box’ exercise.
- › **Unclear purpose of asking the question:** Lack of clarity on why people were being asked was highlighted as a potential barrier with particular concerns that disclosure could be used against them in their criminal case or that the reason for their contact with police would be reported back to the military.
- › **Difficulty in identifying ex-service personnel outside of police custody:** Police custody was identified as a key existing point for identification. However, other opportunities, such as when police attended incidents which didn’t lead to arrest, were reported to be less likely to be used for identification. In addition, some ex-service personnel shared that they had not been through police custody so hadn’t formally been asked the identification question. In these cases, the police may have known that they had a service history due to their investigations, but this may have impacted on referrals for support.

## Support provision in police custody

Stakeholders across all three nations identified the importance of referring ex-service personnel to dedicated services. The main areas of support we identified at this stage were through voluntary sector support services. One of the main organisations was Project Nova (now known as Op NOVA), which operated across several police forces in England providing dedicated support to ex-service personnel.

In England and Wales, for those who are identified by L&D services, L&D teams are also able to construct a veterans pathway identifying if there are local services to refer to. In Scotland, we heard that suitability to be diverted from prosecution is assessed by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) after receiving a standard police report, and that those who are identified by the police as ex-service personnel may also be referred to third sector organisations such as the Armed Services Advice Project (ASAP) or Poppyscotland. The information on these services came directly from professional stakeholders as none of the ex-service personnel we interviewed had been through these routes.





## Barriers to provision and uptake of support

The barriers to identification set out above have obvious repercussions for the uptake of support. In addition, the following barriers to support were also identified:

- › **Connections and communication with support services:** Whilst most of the feedback about support services was positive, we heard from some ex-service personnel and stakeholders about communication difficulties with support services or feeling let down when support services did not meet when planned, impacting on future engagement.
- › **Reluctance to take up support:** Some police stakeholders identified that ex-service personnel were reluctant to take up support which was offered. This is a common theme throughout this research across the different stages of the justice system.
- › **Nature of police custody:** As with identification, the nature of police custody and the stressful environment were identified as a potential barrier to ex-service personnel taking up offers of support.
- › **Insufficient information about support:** We heard examples of ex-service personnel having limited time or opportunity to assess support options whilst in police custody.

## Identification during court proceedings

The main examples we identified for identification during the court stage were through the preparing of pre-sentence reports by probation, justice social work reports by justice social work (JSW) in Scotland, and engagement with legal professionals.

Many ex-service personnel interviewed could not recall if they were asked whether they had served in the Armed Forces as part of preparation for a pre-sentence report/ JSW report or during wider court proceedings. For those who did remember, some mentioned that their service did not come up at all in the court hearing, while others recalled that it was in their pre-sentence report and was used as part of their mitigating circumstances. Probation practitioners in England and Wales

were clear that if someone had served in the Armed Forces this should be picked up as part of pre-sentence reports, however there was a mixed response as to whether this is asked as a standard question and whether it was asked consistently. In Scotland, it was reported that during an interview for a court report ex-service personnel status would come up during the interview, although again it was not clear if this was asked consistently.

## Support during court proceedings

There were several examples of third sector organisations providing support for ex-service personnel through the court process. This included advocacy such as writing letters to the judiciary setting out the progress the individual had made since charge, as well as support navigating court processes. Further, there were direct examples of this support impacting on sentencing decisions including deferred sentencing. As previously mentioned, L&D also operate out of courts in England and Wales and although this was not something raised by ex-service personnel, we are aware that L&D also provide support through the court hearing itself as well as referrals into services.

## Barriers to identification and support during court proceedings

- › **Advice from legal professionals and perceptions:** While some ex-service personnel recalled their service history being part of their pre-sentence report and/or being used by legal professionals as mitigating circumstances, it was commonly reported that ex-service personnel were advised to not disclose their service history. We heard that in these cases their legal representatives had told them that it would negatively affect sentencing. In addition, it was highlighted by both ex-service personnel and stakeholders that ex-service personnel's demeanour influenced by their service could be used against them in court, as they could appear to be stoic and curt.
- › **Use of service history as an 'excuse':** Some ex-service personnel reported that they did not like mentioning their service history in court as they felt it was being used as an excuse for the offence committed or was not relevant.

## 3. Ex-service personnel in prison

**By the very nature of the closed environments of prisons, there were more opportunities for identification of ex-service personnel in prison. Nearly all prisons we visited have a multi-faceted approach to identification. This starts with a question as part of the initial reception process on first arrival in prison, asking ‘Have you ever served in the Armed Forces?’. This is followed up with other approaches and specific support offered to varying degrees depending on each prison.**

All prison establishments visited for this research had a veterans in custody support officer (ViCSO) in post who drove the ex-service personnel identification and support efforts. In two prisons, this was a full-time paid post, whereas in nine other establishments this role was conducted voluntarily in addition to the officers’ full-time role within the establishment.

The impact of Covid-19 was seen as a disruptor for both identification of, and support for, ex-service personnel. While identification efforts were re-invigorated after Covid regulations eased, support services had not been restored to pre-Covid levels.

### Identification of ex-service personnel in prison: Current provision and barriers

While all prisons attempt to identify ex-service personnel through the initial reception period, ViCSOs also create additional opportunities for identification. Most commonly observed opportunities included slots during induction to discuss the veterans-in-custody support programme; asking the question in initial custody screening forms; ensuring the question is asked when individuals visit health and chaplaincy during their induction; promoting coffee mornings for ex-service personnel; and appointing ‘peer support mentors’ within the identified ex-service population who could identify other ex-service personnel for the ViCSO. While not all these efforts were observed in all prisons during our fieldwork, all ViCSOs interviewed detailed using a combination of such efforts to promote identification.

### Institutional Barriers

- › **Time and capacity of ViCSOs:** It was clear across the prisons visited during the project that ViCSOs drove much of the identification and provision of support. However, only in two prisons were these full-time roles and it was clear that capacity impacted on the level of additional support for identification in prisons as well as what support was provided within each prison.
- › **Staff constraints and working relationships:** ViCSOs reported that understaffing in prisons impacted their ViCSO role, and that high turnover led to them not knowing who to approach to make things happen.
- › **Information sharing about benefits of identification:** Ex-service personnel expressed that they did not know why they should identify themselves or what the benefits were, with some sharing that they felt there was no benefit.

### Individual Barriers

- › **Timing and overwhelming environment:** Whilst it was commonly felt that asking an identification question as soon as possible was the right approach, it was also recognised that ex-service personnel may be too overwhelmed during their initial custody period and may not identify then, and that there should be other opportunities to identify when they may feel more comfortable or settled.



- › **Concerns of legitimacy:** Many ex-service personnel we interviewed did not see themselves as part of a wider ex-service personnel community for a variety of reasons, including the length of time they served; time passed since they served; a lack of deployment or direct combat experience during their time in the Armed Forces; and the circumstances of their discharge.
- › **Reluctance to answer questions about combat experience:** Some ex-service personnel shared that once people knew they had served they were commonly asked questions such as ‘how many people have you killed?’ which they found intrusive and may put them off from identifying.
- › **Feelings toward the Armed Forces:** Some ex-service personnel cited different feelings toward and perceptions of the Armed Forces affecting their decision to identify. Some chose not to identify so as to not bring the military into disrepute, while others expressed bitterness and disappointment toward the Armed Forces, which led them to disassociate themselves from their military background.
- › **Protection from anti-military sentiments:** Many ex-service personnel and staff identified that perceptions of anti-military sentiment within prisons, both directly experienced and also reported through peers, likely impacted identification.

## Barriers to uptake and provision of support

Available support varies greatly from prison to prison. Most prison staff interviewed attempted to organise regular social events for ex-service personnel, with coffee mornings being the most popular. ViCSOs can also bring third sector staff to join these social events, with an intent to connect ex-service personnel with services which can assist them with resettlement needs.

## Institutional Barriers

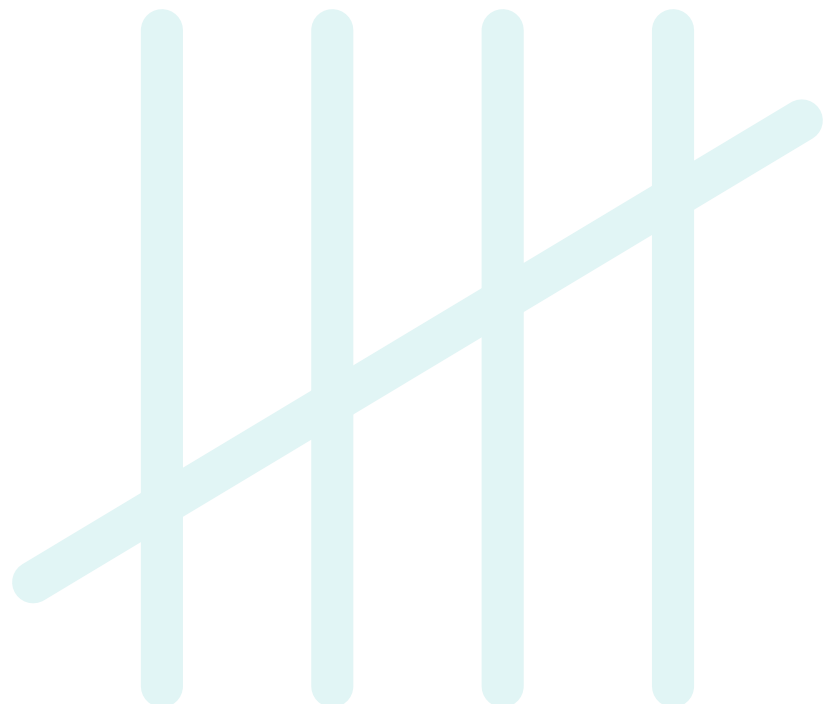
- › **Time and capacity of ViCSOs:** As identified in the barriers to identification, the time and capacity of ViCSOs clearly impacted on the level of support available in prisons. In those prisons with full-time dedicated ViCSOs the provision of diverse support options was much better established.
- › **Connections with the third sector:** Many support programmes specific to ex-service personnel are delivered by third sector organisations, and having connections with these organisations was identified as an important factor. The challenges prison staff faced included providing third sector organisations access to prisons, with some prisons struggling to recruit and retain their services. Prison staff expressed confusion or lack of awareness about what individual organisations can provide. In cases where relationships were established with such organisations, Covid-19 had often adversely impacted the delivery of support. It was notable that there was a different view in interviews in Scotland where it was stated that relationships with the voluntary sector were more stable.
- › **Shortage of appropriate health support:** Lack of appropriate provision of health support was commonly reported in interviews, predominantly focused on mental health support. Mental health support in prisons received largely negative feedback aside from some prisons where specific holistic mental health support was being delivered by a voluntary sector organisation, including PTSD support. Many interviewees stated that their mental health needs emerged before joining the military, and for some their mental health was significantly impacted by their experiences in the military. Linked to this, there was a common view that there was a need for mental health support beyond PTSD such as for anxiety or depression which was delivered with an understanding of the experiences of ex-service personnel.



- › **Separation of the general population in prisons and Vulnerable Prisoners' (VP) wings (England and Wales) and protection halls (Scotland):** VP wings/protection halls house those who are at risk from harm from other people in prison, often due to the nature of their offending, gang affiliations, previous employment with law enforcement agencies, or getting into debt whilst in prison. Nearly 40% of the ex-service personnel we interviewed in prison were serving prison sentences for sexual offences and as a result were housed in VP wings or protection halls. Not being able to mix those from VP wings and those in the general prison population was identified as a barrier to delivering seamless support.
- › **Joint working within prisons:** ViCSOs reported difficulties identifying the correct people within the prison environment to work with due to what they perceive as complicated organisational structures, changing staff or responsibilities, or lack of knowledge. We were also advised of issues concerning the movement of ex-service personnel within prisons due to staff shortages, impacting engagement with support services and organisation of activities.
- › **Communication and technological barriers:** The move to more services requiring online access was highlighted as a barrier to support due to the lack of internet access within prisons.

## Individual Barriers

- › **Awareness of support and eligibility:** Some ex-service personnel reported that in addition to being unaware of services before they entered the CJS, they had not been aware of them earlier in their journey through the prison system. In addition, misunderstanding and lack of awareness of eligibility due to their length of service and lack of combat experience were also highlighted.
- › **Reluctance to seek support:** There was a common view from prison staff and ex-service personnel that due to ex-service personnel's experience and training in the Armed Forces, they were reluctant to ask for support. Pride was cited as a factor in this.
- › **Dissatisfaction with remote or inconsistent support options:** Many ex-service personnel spoke about the importance of strong and trusting relationships for them to open up. Where experiences of support had been inconsistent, offers of support not followed up, or remote-only options available, we heard ex-service personnel became reluctant to engage with the service again.





## 4. Ex-service personnel in the community

The research considered the identification and support for ex-service personnel who have been sentenced to community orders and those who are under the supervision of probation in England and Wales, or JSW in Scotland following time in custody.

### Identification mechanisms in the community: Current provision and barriers

The report set out in Chapter 2 how identification could happen during the preparation of pre-sentence reports. In addition, in England and Wales, if someone has been sentenced to a community order, probation practitioners use the diversity and inclusion form to ask if someone has served in the Armed Forces as part of the induction process.

In England, Probation Delivery Units (PDUs) have begun assigning single points of contact (SPOCs) who specialise in supporting ex-service personnel and in Wales a team of Armed Forces champions is in place across the PDUs.

### Institutional barriers

- › **Staffing challenges and constraints:** Probation staff in England and Wales highlighted the impact of staff shortages on what staff were able to do.
- › **Recording and dissemination of information:** Potential gaps were highlighted regarding the consistency of recording of identification information and subsequent use of it.
- › **Perceptions of and rapport with probation practitioners and justice social workers:** Some ex-service personnel spoke of negative perceptions of probation practitioners and justice social workers, as some felt that practitioners did not care if they were ex-military, were unsupportive, and/or dismissive. This sentiment was especially strong in Scotland.

- › **Timing of the question:** Some practitioners and ex-service personnel in England and Wales reported that even though the question may be asked during the induction process, it may take more time to develop rapport and service history might be disclosed at a later point.

### Individual barriers

- › **Shame:** Some stakeholders cited shame and embarrassment as a barrier to identification which is reflected in other research. However, only a very small number of the ex-service personnel interviewed for this project echoed this.
- › **Legitimacy as ‘veteran’ and who qualifies:** As previously highlighted, beliefs about what kind of service qualifies someone to be deemed a ‘veteran’ or to receive support were highlighted as a potential barrier.

### Support in the community and through the gate after prison: Current provision and barriers

Information about referral and take up of available support varied greatly across local sites, with some ex-service personnel speaking positively about support referrals from probation and others much less so. Some practitioners reported having found dedicated services for ex-service personnel, with others using more generic services. Dedicated services ranged from essentials such as housing and health to more general support groups. Some of these were national organisations or programmes and others were very local.



## Institutional barriers

- › **Complex landscape and awareness amongst practitioners of support available:** Practitioners in probation and JSW described the landscape of support as complex and changing, leading some of them to not be fully aware of the support services available to ex-service personnel.
- › **Staffing challenges within the Probation Service (England and Wales):** Staff shortages and capacity were highlighted as impacting on support as well as identification.
- › **Other concerns of higher priority:** Some practitioners highlighted to us that they perceived ex-service personnel status as secondary to the priority risk areas and needs such as accommodation, mental health or substance misuse. By not considering these factors together this could exclude support options which are ex-service personnel specific in these areas.
- › **Need for appropriate and specialist support for mental health and substance misuse issues:** Due to their specific experiences, the importance of specialist support for ex-service personnel with mental health and substance misuse issues was highlighted.
- › **Limited responsiveness to requests for support:** Some ex-service personnel reported that they experienced delays in receiving support as probation and justice social work took time to respond to or address their requests.
- › **Restricted support for people convicted of sexual offences:** Several ex-service personnel interviewed had been convicted of sexual offences. Some stakeholders reported that as well as the restrictions imposed through their licence conditions, ex-service personnel convicted of sexual offences also faced additional restrictions due to some support services being reluctant to work with them due to their offence. There was a lack of clarity about whether services would work with this group, and to what extent.

## Individual barriers

Individual barriers to support identified in the community were similar to those identified in previous chapters.

- › **Reluctance to ask for help:** As previously noted, reluctance to ask for help was highlighted.
- › **Lack of awareness of services:** Due to the varied landscape of support, a lack of awareness of what support was available was also identified.
- › **Need to engage independently with services:** Whilst probation and JSW can refer ex-service personnel to services and recommend they attend, it was highlighted that the individual still had to take the step to attend by themselves, although practitioners could play an important role in encouraging them.
- › **Trust:** Stakeholders reported that it can take time for ex-service personnel to trust practitioners and that continuity was important. It was also highlighted that probation practitioners who had served in the Armed Forces were beneficial to this.







## 5. Third sector organisations

**It was clear during the research that third sector support networks are crucial to deliver much needed services to ex-service personnel, especially those who have unique needs as a result of their contact with the CJS. The research has also highlighted the importance of joint working for effective service delivery.**

Some ex-service personnel spoke highly of the support that they had received, whereas others described feeling disappointed by the support offered, and some had concluded that they were 'on their own'. Those who were interviewed for this research reported that usually ex-service personnel are already identified by the time they work with third sector organisations, as many of these services are ex-service personnel-specific or have ex-service personnel-specific programmes. Therefore, this section will largely discuss the barriers to uptake of support from third sector organisations.

### Institutional barriers to support by third sector organisations

Stakeholders spoke of a number of institutional barriers to identification, namely:

- › **Promotion of services:** As in other parts of the research, ex-service personnel often do not know where to go to seek appropriate help and reported that these services are not adequately advertised in prisons or police custody suites.
- › **Bureaucracy causing delays and inconsistencies of support:** Delays in receiving support due to bureaucratic processes can lead to ex-service personnel feeling unsupported. In addition, ex-service personnel may not always have documentation to prove their service history, and obtaining verification of this can result in delay of support provision.
- › **Challenges working with those convicted of sexual offences:** Although all charities interviewed for this project affirmed that they extend their services to people convicted of sexual offences, both stakeholders and ex-service personnel reported refusals of some charities to work with people convicted of sexual offences. We were advised that some organisations are unable to work with those convicted of sexual offences due to safeguarding concerns, or sometimes due to the location of services. We were told by stakeholders that it was difficult for them to establish which organisations are able and willing to support those convicted of sexual offences.
- › **Challenges emerging from changing delivery models and processes:** Statutory stakeholders, specifically those based in prisons, as well as ex-service personnel who were interviewed for this project spoke of a sense of inaccessibility and inflexibility of some of the main charities in the field, with some charities withdrawing from prisons for multiple reasons including Covid-19, experiencing staffing constraints, reducing services, and some charities were seen to have bureaucratic referral pathways.
- › **Constraints due to funding and staffing:** Funding constraints were highlighted, particularly in Scotland, where funding for some organisations appears to now be available for shorter periods than previously. During the course of our research, stakeholders advised of the pressures on volunteer staff and case workers, and that recruiting for vacant posts has been a challenge.



› **Impact of Covid-19:** Covid-19 was raised by stakeholders as significantly impacting their ability to identify and support ex-service personnel. In some cases, support was halted altogether. Retaining and recruiting volunteers had been cited as being more difficult, and others talked of how they had to adapt their approach to maintain support during the pandemic.

› **Volume of services affecting collaboration:** Participants described robust collaboration between third sector organisations, highlighting such collaboration was crucial to deliver holistic support. It is worth noting, however, that it appears the pool of organisations that our respondents partnered with was relatively small, despite a wide-range of charities working with ex-service personnel. Some stakeholders explained this happened due to reduced capacity as well as high levels of trust in the smaller pool of partners. However, in England and Wales, some stakeholders suggested that there were too many service providers, and suggestions of centralised services were made.

› **Access to prisons:** Several participants from third-sector organisations spoke of the challenges in establishing or re-invigorating relationships with prisons, especially in the wake of Covid-19. We were told that the bureaucratic nature of prison environments was a key reason as to why they struggled to have staff visit prisons. We were told that this has created a limited support landscape in prison, as highlighted in Chapter 3.

### Individual barriers to support

At this stage of their justice journey, ex-service personnel were already in contact with third sector organisations, implying they had self-directed or been referred toward help. Therefore, while the individual barriers to support are similar to ones observed at other stages of the justice system, at this stage, reluctance to ask for help was the most commonly cited barrier. This barrier is common to other areas in the research project, and we were told that the reluctance to ask for help is influenced by the belief that ex-service personnel are trained to be self-sufficient and therefore should be able to address their needs on their own.





## 6. Families

**The research team aimed to interview families from each research site, aiming for a cross-section of familial relationships to enable an examination of the barriers to identification and uptake of support for the families of ex-service personnel who were in contact with the CJS. Unfortunately, few family members were identified, and those who were identified were reluctant to participate in the research.**

One of the key barriers in recruiting families was the high incidence of familial relationship breakdown by the time ex-service personnel came into contact with the CJS. Ex-service personnel interviewed were very rarely supported by or in contact with their families, which made it challenging for the research team to identify families for interview. Although many voluntary organisations were willing to help to try and recruit families it proved difficult for them to facilitate interviews, and other avenues that were explored were also unsuccessful.

It is worth noting that very few of the ex-service personnel interviewed had sought support for their family. In the absence of direct consultation with family members, we have therefore explored the potential barriers to identification and support for families through the perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders and ex-service personnel.

### Provision for families

Stakeholders and ex-service personnel discussed the existing provision of support for families in the community, and that a range of support was available, but it was felt that families may not know about the services and/or support available to them. In addition, support for families may not directly be delivered by the organisations supporting the ex-service personnel, leading to onward referrals.

### Barriers to support for families

From the interviews it was clear that the barriers to family accessing support are diverse, mirroring the barriers to accessing services for ex-service personnel.

The barriers referenced included:

- › **Pride:** Family members may not seek support as they do not want to appear like they are failing as a parent or as a family unit.
- › **Eligibility and lack of awareness of entitlement to support:** It was highlighted in interviews that family members may be unaware of entitlement to support in their role as family members of ex-service personnel. There was also a lack of clarity about which family members might be entitled to support, particularly where families have broken down.
- › **Dissatisfaction with inconsistent support:** Similar to the experiences of some ex-service personnel, where experiences of support were inconsistent or slow to respond then these experiences were seen as creating further challenges and/or barriers to seeking support.
- › **Changing family dynamics impacting on the availability of support:** Support for families by various statutory as well as voluntary organisations may cease in situations where the family dynamic changes, for example, divorce or separation. In addition, families may not wish to seek support if it is seen as a potential route for ex-service personnel to get back in touch with their family following a breakdown in that relationship.



- › **Practical barriers:** Practical barriers such as proof of service were cited as a challenge in accessing support for families.
- › **Ex-service personnel as conduits to families:** Some organisations rely on ex-service personnel to be the link with family members and do not always have direct contact with the family. This may prevent families from receiving information regarding the support that is available to them, especially in cases where familial relationships have broken down.

The lack of direct engagement with families of ex-service personnel in contact with the CJS is a limitation of this research. While this is an area where further research would be beneficial, the early findings from this research indicate that there needs to be a focus on creating awareness of entitlement to and availability of support amongst family members of ex-service personnel, with a review of who counts as family. We observed that family breakdowns are not uncommon, and in those circumstances providing support to such fragmented relationships becomes all the more challenging.





# 7. Conclusions and recommendations

The following recommendations are informed by the analysis of the evidence collected through this project. The recommendations each confirm the key agencies and stages of the justice process to which the recommendations are applicable– police, probation/JSW, prisons, courts, MoD and the governments of England, Scotland and Wales.

The recommendations are grouped in line with the two key questions posed in the research question:

1. Recommendations to improve identification of ex-service personnel who come into contact with the CJS - Recommendations 1-7
2. Recommendations to address or mitigate barriers to support experienced by ex-service personnel in the CJS and their families - Recommendations 8-19

## Recommendations to improve identification of ex-service personnel who come into contact with the CJS

### Recommendation 1:

**Ensure the rationale for asking about ex-service personnel status is communicated when the question is asked.**

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

### Recommendation 2:

**Expand the identification mechanisms in policing beyond police custody: this includes increasing staff awareness regarding ex-service personnel, and the signs to look out for whilst in the community. This would allow police offers to have more opportunities to refer ex-service personnel into appropriate services.**

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |





### Recommendation 3:

Justice social work should embed the question, “Have you served for a day or more in the Armed Forces or reserves?” in the list of questions asked during induction and writing justice social work reports. Both justice social work and probation should consistently ask the question and record and share this information appropriately.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

### Recommendation 4:

Further research into the perceptions of ex-service personnel amongst the judiciary and legal professionals is recommended.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

### Recommendation 5:

Consider if/how identification status could be shared between different IT systems and therefore shared more easily between different agencies working within the CJS.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

### Recommendation 6:

Standardise the identification question to clearly convey broad eligibility and the meaning of ‘ex-service personnel’ and/or ‘veteran’. Ex-service personnel organisations can help promote the expanded, inclusive meaning of the term ‘veteran’.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

### Recommendation 7:

Build multiple opportunities for ex-service personnel to share their service status into each part of the criminal justice pathway.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |



## Recommendations to address or mitigate barriers to support experienced by ex-service personnel in the CJS and their families

### Recommendation 8:

Establish automatic processes of referral following identification in police custody.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

### Recommendation 9:

Develop engagement strategies to maintain contact with ex-service personnel who may be at risk of offending or require additional support following transition from the Armed Forces into the community.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

### Recommendation 10:

Improve communications to ex-service personnel and their families regarding eligibility to access support, including development of specialist marketing materials and advertising campaigns.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

### Recommendation 11:

Develop varied ‘veteran-informed’ provisions of mental health support pathways that address a range of needs. In Wales and Scotland this could be achieved by developing joined up pathways similar to Op NOVA and Op COURAGE.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |



**Recommendation 12:**

Provide ‘veteran-informed’ training to all staff who work with ex-service personnel: including awareness of who is eligible to access support; indicators that can help identify ex-service personnel; the additional support needs they may have, and the additional support options available for them.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

**Recommendation 13:**

Continue work already underway to ensure representation of ex-service personnel in the different parts of the justice system, by assigning Armed Forces champions/SPOCs.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

**Recommendation 14:**

Expand and ringfence resources available for the ViCSO role. Make ViCSO a full-time paid position in prisons, particularly those with significant numbers of identified ex-service personnel.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

**Recommendation 15:**

Establish longer-term commissioning of services to improve continuity of service provision.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

**Recommendation 16:**

Increase face-to-face engagement with services for ex-service personnel in prison to break down barriers and develop trust.

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |





**Recommendation 17:**

**Develop accessible visual/written materials available at touch points across the CJS.**

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

**Recommendation 18:**

**Support for ex-service personnel as they are released from prison should account for their service history, mental health needs, disabilities, and offending history.**

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |

**Recommendation 19:**

**Develop a database for stakeholders with information about third sector and other organisations that provide services to ex-service personnel in the justice system. The database could be secure so that organisations can detail if they work with those convicted of sexual and other violent offences.**

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| Police                                     |
| Probation/JSW                              |
| Prison                                     |
| Third Sector                               |
| Courts                                     |
| MoD  |
| Governments of England, Scotland and Wales |





# Conclusion

Overall, this research has provided a detailed insight into the experiences of ex-service personnel who encounter the CJS. Ex-service personnel who come into contact with the CJS often have complex needs and this research has attempted to give voice to the issues, concerns and experiences of this group. Importantly, there are many areas in which improvements can be made to both reduce the risk of offending and reoffending, as well as provide more tailored and stronger support during and following contact with the CJS. We believe that a focused, evidence-based approach to addressing the needs outlined in this research may divert some away from the justice system, and help ensure that others are more likely to be able to access the support they need.

Identifying and supporting ex-service personnel through each stage of the justice system can equip them with the tools they need to move away from criminal behaviour and live fulfilling lives not only as someone who has been in contact with the justice system, but also as former members of the Armed Forces.

We hope the findings encourage more research and policy interventions for the benefit of ex-service personnel in contact with the justice system and those at risk of contact.

This brief summarises the findings of the full report, which can be found [nacro.org.uk/exservicepersonnel](https://nacro.org.uk/exservicepersonnel).





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