



HM Inspectorate
of Probation

Identification and support for ex-service personnel in the community

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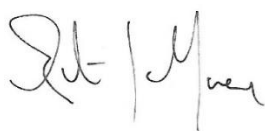
Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Claire Paterson-Young, Mallika Singh, Matthew Callender, Richard Hazenberg and Kathryn Cahalin, highlighting the unique challenges regarding the identification and support for ex-service personnel within the criminal justice system, especially those in the community. As is set out, a combination of institutional/systemic and individual-level barriers can hinder the rehabilitation, reintegration and desistance of ex-service personnel. Based upon an understanding of these barriers and current gaps/inconsistencies, various recommendations are outlined to support both early and accurate identification and the provision of timely, tailored support. These recommendations encompass the need to:

- improve training for probation practitioners
- strengthen partnerships between criminal justice agencies, healthcare providers, community organisations, and ex-service personnel-specific charities
- embed more consistent, coordinated and inclusive approaches which account for service background, mental health, and both immediate and long-term needs.

Through an increased understanding of the barriers and the adoption of the recommendations, the goal is to provide personalised, relational, engaging and collaborative support for ex-service personnel, significantly improving their rehabilitation outcomes and aiding their reintegration into local communities.



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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation

1. Introduction

While most ex-service personnel manage to adapt well to 'civilian life' (The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2011), a small number become involved in the criminal justice system (Haddow et al., 2021):

- **3.6 per cent** of individuals in custody, for whom identification data were available for June 2024, had previously served in the Armed Forces (Ministry of Justice, 2024).
- analysis of the 2021 Census revealed that **4.9 per cent** of incarcerated individuals identified as ex-service personnel (Office for Veterans' Affairs, 2023).

This paper considers the challenges to identification and support for ex-service personnel, especially those in the community, based on research (Singh et al., 2024) conducted by Nacro in collaboration with the University of Northampton, funded by the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT). Ex-service personnel experience elevated rates of mental health issues and substance misuse (Fear, Jones, and Murphy, 2010; Iversen et al., 2007), including anxiety, depression, psychosis, and personality disorders, occurring more frequently than in the general population (Williamson et al., 2022). Ex-service personnel can experience a range of complex and interconnected issues such as higher incidences of alcohol misuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, unstable relationships, financial difficulties, housing insecurity, and lack of consistent or rewarding work, all of which can contribute to their increased risk of contact with the criminal justice system (Elbogen et al., 2012; Macmanus et al., 2013).

Identifying ex-service personnel within the criminal justice system can be complex due to a range of personal and institutional obstacles. Many ex-service personnel are reluctant to disclose their Armed Forces background because of feelings of pride, stigma, or concerns that criminal justice staff may not fully understand their specific challenges (Wainwright et al., 2017). Identification at police custody suites offers a valuable chance to connect ex-service personnel with appropriate support services (Davies and Davies, 2019) at an early opportunity; however, there are regional variations in the availability of dedicated roles to support ex-service personnel, with Wales having a higher proportion of 'veteran police champions' than England (Cooper, Jones and Fossey, 2018). The Meteorite Project emphasises the need to consider 'hidden veterans' – such as those with a dishonourable discharge or who struggle to identify as ex-service personnel – who might otherwise be overlooked (The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, 2019).

Barriers to identifying ex-service personnel within the criminal justice system often mirror the obstacles they face in accessing support, including stigma, lack of disclosure, and the persistence of military cultural norms that discourage individuals to ask for help. Ex-service personnel often face difficulties seeking support due to ingrained values of self-sufficiency and resilience developed during service in the Armed Forces, which can make admitting vulnerability challenging (Grand-Clement et al., 2020). Many are apprehensive about revealing emotional or psychological distress, partly due to fears that their Armed Forces background could negatively influence legal outcomes, including sentencing (Davies and Davies, 2019). Concerns over mental health stigma persist beyond service, with research showing that personnel frequently avoid seeking help during active duty due to fears about the impact on their careers (Williamson, Greenberg and Stevelink, 2019). Ex-service personnel also report feelings of shame and embarrassment linked to asking for help which can be perceived as a sign of weakness (Mellotte et al., 2017). Consequently, many delay accessing support until reaching crisis points such as suicidal ideation (Rafferty et al., 2020).

2. Identification and support in the community

Effective identification and tailored support for ex-service personnel within the criminal justice system are critical to improving rehabilitation, reintegration and desistance. Early identification allows practitioners to recognise the specific vulnerabilities faced by this population, such as elevated rates of mental health conditions, substance misuse, and social challenges, including unstable housing and unemployment (Fear, Jones and Murphy, 2010; Iversen et al., 2007; Williamson et al., 2022). Accurate identification then provides the gateway to connecting individuals with specialist support services that understand the cultural context of military life and the barriers to asking for help, such as stigma and ingrained attitudes of stoicism (Mark et al., 2019; Randles and Finnegan, 2022).

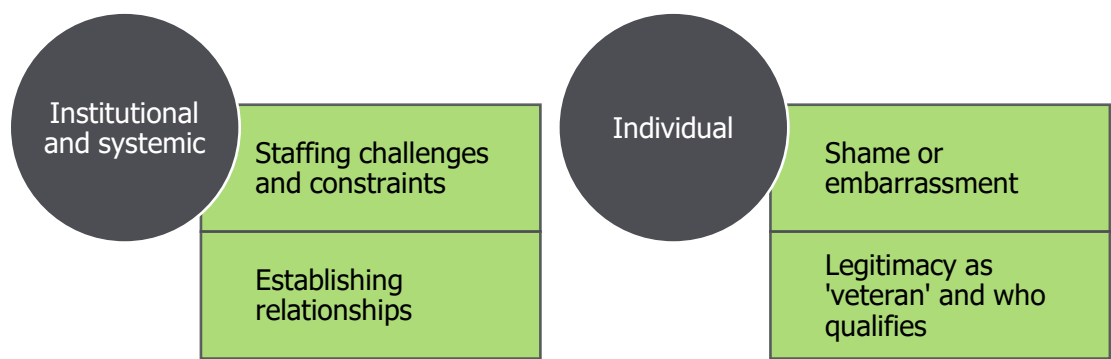
Some local areas in England and Wales have introduced targeted pathways and trained personnel to improve engagement, recognising the importance of trust, and culturally-informed care. However, identification practices remain inconsistent across regions, resulting in missed opportunities for early intervention and support. Strengthening partnerships between criminal justice agencies, healthcare providers, community organisations, and ex-service personnel-specific charities is essential to ensuring consistent identification processes and access to coordinated, specialist support that addresses both immediate and long-term needs.

This paper considers the processes and barriers involved in identifying ex-service personnel within the community as well as the available support services.

2.1 Barriers to identification in the community

Probation practitioners engage with ex-service personnel at various stages, including court appearances, following community sentences, and during supervision before and after release from custody. Prompt recognition enables timely referral to ex-service personnel-specific services, which can significantly improve engagement and rehabilitation outcomes by addressing barriers such as stigma and reluctance to seek help (Mark et al., 2019; Randles and Finnegan, 2022). Challenges to effective identification arise from institutional and systemic barriers such as delivering services in environments with limited resources (as the result of staffing challenges) and establishing strong relationships, coupled with individual barriers such as the individuals' own self-perceptions.

Figure 1: Barriers to identification



Institutional and systemic barriers

Staffing challenges and constraints

Probation staff in England and Wales frequently face challenges due to understaffing and heavy workloads, which impact their ability to prioritise identifying ex-service personnel and delivering tailored support. This issue was highlighted by the Chief Inspector of Probation in England and Wales in 2025, with concerns associated with 'high' staff vacancies resulting in increasing pressures (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025a).

"We are incredibly stretched...So, yes, in best practice, six months before you'd meet with your case, you would get all that information [about ex-service personnel status]. In reality you are firefighting." (Interview 10, Probation, England)

These challenges, coupled with variability in how information about ex-service status is recorded and communicated within probation services, results in barriers to identification. While some areas have introduced formal processes to flag ex-service status on case management systems, this practice is not yet fully embedded everywhere.

In environments with limited resources, identifying individuals who are ex-service personnel can help to ensure the right support is offered from experienced practitioners. Practitioners noted that there were often gaps between identification and recording which creates challenges in identifying ex-service personnel early in the process.

"Where it maybe does fall down a little bit – and it's maybe an internal recording issue – is when we do identify the veteran it's what do we do with that information?... The only difficulty I'm finding... is we ask the question really, really well, people forget to put it into their area." (Interview 39, Probation, England)

Early identification of ex-service personnel within the criminal justice system is essential for recognising their distinct needs, including higher rates of mental health conditions and substance misuse compared to the general population (Fear, Jones and Murphy, 2010; Williamson et al., 2022). The inconsistencies in identification processes creates challenges in ensuring ex-service personnel receive the right support but also impact on the development of positive relationships.

Establishing relationships

Developing strong, trust-based relationships between probation practitioners and service users has been shown to significantly enhance engagement, motivation, and compliance, forming the bedrock of effective rehabilitation (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025b). For ex-service personnel, building trust-based relationships can be a precursor to sharing information, with ex-service personnel requiring time and understanding.

"Yes, potentially it's not going to be at the forefront of that probation officer or probation services officer's mind at the current stage. I guess you are also then getting into the grounds of how quickly to develop rapport for that veteran to be able to disclose it in quite a short space of time, there's lots of information to be shared. So, I guess that's one of the barriers, both at court...their induction appointment as well. Sometimes it can be that it comes out later." (Interview 37, Probation, England)

Building relationships that foster collaboration, respect, and continuity in supervision creates space for ex-service personnel to feel comfortable sharing experiences. In conjunction with building relationships, probation practitioners should consider the timing of when the question about service in the Armed Forces is asked. Although this information may be shared early, some ex-service personnel may only disclose their status later, once they feel stable and have built trust with practitioners.

“When they are stable enough to say, when they are in the right position. Because [when veterans] enter the justice system obviously their head is a bit all over the place. But when they start to settle down, that’s the best time to do an interview, to say what’s gone on, what happened, whatever.” (Interview 61, Ex-service personnel, Wales, Community)

Revisiting the question at a later stage can enhance identification rates and ensure that ex-service personnel receive appropriate support (Singh et al., 2024). There is a balance to strike in the timing of this question, with research showing that asking too early, such as during initial meetings, may deter disclosure due to stigma or lack of trust, whereas waiting until later stages may miss opportunities for timely intervention (Butler Trust, 2015).

Individual barriers

Shame or embarrassment

Barriers associated with shame and embarrassment can hinder the identification of ex-service personnel (The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2011; Grand-Clement et al., 2020). Some probation practitioners reflected on how ex-service personnel often struggle with going from being viewed as ‘heroes’ to involvement in the criminal justice system.

“There’s a level of embarrassment from the veteran as well, that they’ve had – I saw something the other day about ‘hero to zero’, that when they are in the armed forces they are seen as hero and now they are appearing in court, and that’s difficult.” (Interview 37, Probation, England)

Contrary to these concerns, probation practitioners acknowledged that most individuals are willing to discuss their ex-service status when the opportunity to discuss it was presented.

“I have never had anyone that’s been reluctant to tell me if they’ve been in the Army or other forces. I think it’s more after that that they give you their opinion on their personal experience, but they’ve never really been reluctant telling us.” (Interview 40, Probation, England)

Similarly, ex-service personnel engaged in the research rarely mentioned shame or embarrassment which could relate to the fact those engaged in the research had already disclosed their service. Issues associated with shame or embarrassment may not reflect directly in the ex-service person’s desire to identify service history but may impact on the individual’s desire to seek help. For example, research by Mellotte et al. (2017) found that among 17 ex-service personnel in the United Kingdom, many associated asking for help with feelings of shame and personal failure, often viewing it as a reflection of weakness or inadequacy.

Legitimacy as 'veteran' and who qualifies

Identification of ex-service personnel requires an understanding of the term 'veteran' and who qualifies to use the term. Many associate 'veteran' with older generations or lengthy service which means those who are younger and/or with shorter service lengths do not identify with this term. Ex-service personnel reflected on the limited awareness, for some, that even very short service gives someone ex-service personnel status.

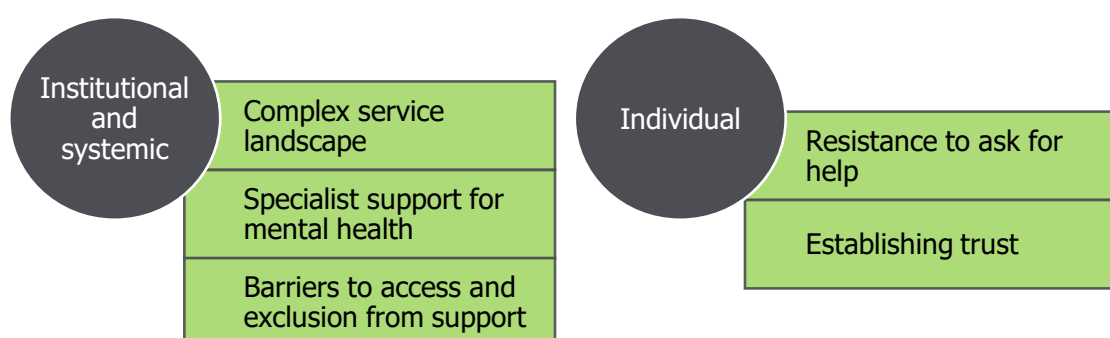
"Some [don't identify] because they hadn't been in long enough. They'd maybe just done the basic training but that doesn't make any difference because from the day you take the queen's shilling you can do one day in the forces and you are entitled to every benefit that I get as a [22-year] soldier. I can't understand it [why they would not identify]." (Interview 34, Ex-service personnel, England)

This lack of self-identification can affect whether they seek or accept support, a topic addressed in the following section. Processes to ensure ex-service personnel can verify status currently exist, with the Office for Veterans' Affairs, in 2022, having announced plans to introduce systems enabling the digital verification of ex-service status. Nevertheless, our study revealed how some, when asked about their ex-service personnel status, though formally qualifying, will not self-identify as ex-service personnel.

2.2 Barriers to support in the community

Ex-service personnel have diverse experiences, with some receiving limited assistance and others reporting effective signposting by practitioners to organisations dedicated to supporting ex-service personnel. Understanding barriers to identification and support enables timely referral to ex-service personnel-specific services, which can significantly improve engagement and rehabilitation outcomes by addressing barriers such as stigma and reluctance to seek help (Mark et al., 2019; Randles and Finnegan, 2022). Challenges to effective support arise from institutional and systemic barriers, including a fragmented and overly complex service landscape that hinders effective referral and coordination, limited specialist support for mental health, and exclusion from support for specific groups. These issues are compounded by individual-level barriers that influence how ex-service personnel interact with the support landscape, including reluctance to seek help and the importance of continuity and trust in professional relationships.

Figure 2: Barriers to support



Institutional and systemic barriers

Complex service landscape

A barrier to support for ex-service personnel was associated with the limited awareness among practitioners regarding the availability and scope of support services. This knowledge gap hindered appropriate referrals and collaborative work with agencies supporting ex-service personnel.

“Ideally we need a lot more awareness and knowledge of what is out there... Let us know what support you can provide; it shouldn’t be just a one-way avenue of communication.” (Interview 37, Probation, England)

The landscape of ex-service personnel services was perceived as overwhelming and fragmented (*“It’s quite a muddled picture” Interview 19, Police, England, Phase 1*) which creates challenges for practitioners in identifying the right service for ex-service personnel. This issue is compounded by resource strain and caseload pressures within probation which can impact negatively on ex-service personnel.

“[Probation Officer met] me in prison the first time and said, ‘We are going to do this, we’re going to do that, we are going to do this for your mental health’, and then he just - He might have had his own problems; he sounded stressed out and had a massive caseload but if you want people to be rehabilitated then someone has to take responsibility and follow that person and be a point of contact.” (Interview 64, Ex-service personnel, England, Community)

Delays in fulfilling support requirements can have a negative impact on outcomes, with ex-service personnel at risk of disengagement from the process.

Specialist support for mental health

The unique mental health needs of ex-service personnel were highlighted as a significant concern by both practitioners and ex-service personnel. While not all ex-service personnel experience combat or trauma, those who have encountered hostile environments may present with complex psychological challenges, such as PTSD, which are not always adequately addressed by mainstream services. This cohort’s needs, particularly those linked to experiences in the Armed Forces, can differ from the general population, necessitating specialist interventions (Fitzpatrick, McArdle and Gall, 2020). Probation practitioners described feeling under-equipped to support ex-service personnel experiencing combat-related mental health issues. The fear of exacerbating trauma was evident, with practitioners expressing the limits of their training and experience in this area.

“I’m not qualified to undo that kind of trauma and I wouldn’t touch it with a barge pole because I could potentially make it worse. So, it’s really difficult.” (Interview 10, Probation, England)

These concerns are compounded by challenges in accessing adequate support from the NHS, with practitioners and ex-service personnel reflecting on the limited availability of specialist mental health support for ex-service personnel.

Probation practitioners also highlighted the lack of dedicated provision within their own services and voiced a need for specialised pathways tailored to supporting the unique needs of ex-

service personnel. There was a particular call for dedicated Single Points of Contact (SPOCs) within mental health teams who understood the distinct experiences of ex-service personnel.

“Potentially specific substance misuse and mental health support that’s designed just for veterans and their experiences... And the mental health team as well, having a special veteran SPOC in the mental health team [would be helpful].” (Interview 37, Probation, England)

Without properly resourced and targeted mental health pathways, practitioners are left with limited tools to engage meaningfully with this group, while ex-service personnel risk being underserved by a system that does not fully recognise or address their arising needs from their experiences in the Armed Forces (Fitzpatrick, McArdle and Gall, 2020).

Barriers to access and exclusion from support

Ex-service personnel frequently reported that available support was poorly timed, with help only becoming accessible post-custody. Many participants noted that while lists of organisations that could provide support were provided, these were often intended for use after release, leaving needs unmet during critical periods of custody. Some individuals described trying repeatedly to access support from probation services but were met with delays, perceived indifference, or a lack of follow-up.

“I was asking the probation and I was asking my solicitor and no-one was helping me at all. It’s only now when you get in trouble they want to help you.” (Interview 58, Ex-service personnel, Wales)

The perceived lack of responsiveness created a sense of abandonment for ex-service personnel – contrary to the development of relational practice as outlined on the HM Inspectorate of Probation (2025b) *Evidence base: Relational practice* webpage.

In parallel, a particularly marginalised group within the ex-service personnel population – those convicted of sexual offences – faced significant exclusion from ex-service personnel-specific services. Although larger national charities were viewed as supportive of ex-service personnel regardless of offence, smaller or local organisations were sometimes unable to engage with individuals based on their offence due to safeguarding concerns.

“They will be very subjective about them and will refuse to help people that have committed sexual offences and that’s wrong, really.” (Interview 23, Police, England)

Employment and housing also prove challenging for this subgroup, particularly due to licence conditions and public protection requirements. Delays in housing approval for individuals convicted of sexual offences that are associated with multi-agency coordination requirements – such as liaising with public protection officers – further hinder access to support in the community. Without systematic efforts to ensure prompt and coordinated support, many ex-service personnel – particularly those already facing the greatest barriers – remain underserved by existing structures.

Individual barriers

Resistance to ask for help

A prominent individual barrier is the reluctance of some ex-service personnel to seek support (Randles and Finnegan, 2022), often stemming from cultural norms within the Armed Forces that equate strength with self-reliance. This internalised view can manifest as a belief that needing help is a sign of weakness or failure that, for men, can be linked to masculine ideals around stoicism and control (Randles and Finnegan, 2022).

“It’s the lack of knowledge, I guess, it’s lack of knowledge of what support there is. You’ve got that pride getting in the way of them accessing help, thinking that they should be able to do this themselves. I think they’re the two biggest ones that I can think of.” (Interview 37, Probation, England)

“I never told anyone I’d got PTSD before because I didn’t think it’s a macho thing to have so I’ve never really spoken about it.” (Interview 54, Ex-service personnel, Community, England)

The structure of many probation and community support processes relies on individuals to take initiative following a referral, which can unintentionally place a burden on ex-service personnel – particularly those who are socially isolated or experiencing anxiety or trauma-related symptoms. As a result, valuable opportunities for early intervention may be lost, especially for individuals who find initiating or accepting contact with unfamiliar services overwhelming.

“It’s something that we would say to a service user, ‘Maybe you could link in with the Royal British Legion’, but then we don’t technically get involved with that side of things, it’s just left between the two.” (Interview 40, Probation, England, Phase 2)

When practitioners actively engage and maintain regular conversations about available support, some ex-service personnel eventually begin to respond positively and engage with other services. This shows that while internal barriers exist, they are not insurmountable – especially when met with empathetic and consistent support or guidance.

Establishing trust

The reluctance of ex-service personnel to seek support can be reduced when they receive support from individuals who share their military experience (Iverson and Greenberg, 2009). Research has shown that when practitioners had served in the Armed Forces, this shared experience enhanced relationships with ex-service personnel (Iverson and Greenberg, 2009; Turner and Moran, 2021). Such commonality helped ex-service personnel to overcome typical social barriers within the criminal justice system and establish trust with practitioners. This common ground appears to reduce feelings of being misunderstood or judged, and instead allows individuals to feel seen and validated in their experiences.

“I’ve got that understanding... I do it myself, you can’t really understand if you haven’t been there... so I think there is still that barrier of, ‘Well I’m a veteran and you are not so how would you know?’” (Interview 39, Probation, England)

Practitioners with military experience are often viewed as more credible and better able to understand the nuances of life during and after service, which can accelerate engagement and promote more open dialogue. Trust is rarely immediate and often takes time to build –

particularly among ex-service personnel who may have experienced multiple disruptions or inconsistencies post-service.

"I think working with veterans though, they take a bit longer. I don't know whether it's for them to trust you or whether it's to let their guard down a bit, but it does take a bit longer before you seem to get a bit more out of them, before they do start asking for help. One of my cases I've had for two years, since I started, and it's only really recently that he'll come in and ask for help." (Interview 40, Probation, England)

The continuity of the practitioner-service user relationship emerged as particularly important in this regard. Ex-service personnel value routine, structure, and familiar faces, thus consistent and dedicated support can help create spaces that promote positive change.

2.3 Recommendations to overcome barriers

Probation services are particularly well-placed to recognise and address the needs of ex-service personnel in contact with the criminal justice system. The following recommendations were based on the findings of the research study, and it is acknowledged that there have been a range of ongoing developments to enhance the identification of and support provided to ex-service personnel.

The recommendations seek to enhance probation practice by improving the identification of ex-service personnel, embedding consistent and inclusive approaches to identification, and strengthening support pathways that account for service background, mental health, and reintegration needs. The recommendations cover improvements to communication and information, staff training, the commissioning of services, and multi-agency information sharing. It is recognised that while with some could be taken forward relatively quickly, others will require longer-term development.

Recommendations to enhance identification

1. Clearly communicate the purpose and importance of asking about Armed Forces service status at the point of enquiry.
2. Standardise the identification question to clearly define eligibility criteria and clarify the terms 'ex-service personnel' and 'veteran'. Consistently ask and record the answer to the question, "Have you served in the Armed Forces or reserves for one day or more?"
3. Integrate multiple opportunities for identification in an individual's journey engaging with probation to provide opportunities ex-service personnel to disclose their Armed Forces' service.
4. Explore options for sharing identification data across different IT systems to enable smoother information exchange between agencies within the criminal justice system.

Recommendations to overcome barriers to support

1. Enhance communication strategies targeted at ex-service personnel and their families regarding eligibility for support services, including the creation of specialised marketing materials and awareness campaigns. Develop accessible visual and written information materials to be made available at key touchpoints in individuals' engagement with probation.

2. Deliver comprehensive 'veteran-informed' training for all professionals working with this group, covering eligibility criteria, identification indicators, specific support needs, and available assistance options.
3. Continue to strengthen the representation of ex-service personnel across the criminal justice system by appointing Armed Forces champions or designated points of contact (SPOCs).
4. Secure longer-term commissioning arrangements to promote sustained continuity in service provision for ex-service personnel.
5. Enhance the range of 'veteran-informed' mental health pathways tailored to diverse needs. Ensure that through-the-gate support recognises the full spectrum of ex-service personnel's needs, including their Armed Forces background, mental health, disabilities, and offending history.

3. Conclusion

Ex-service personnel in contact with the criminal justice system often face unique challenges that complicate their access to appropriate support and rehabilitation. Across probation services in England and Wales, identification of ex-service status remains inconsistent, limiting the ability to provide tailored support. Variations in how ex-service status is recorded and uncertainty about eligibility criteria create additional barriers to accessing tailored support for ex-service personnel.

Awareness of and access to services for ex-service personnel supported by probation are also uneven across England and Wales. While Wales has made some progress through the appointment of Armed Forces Champions, knowledge of tailored and/or bespoke ex-service support services among probation staff varies considerably, and the overall service landscape remains fragmented.

This lack of clarity hampers effective referrals and reduces the potential for targeted assistance, especially for groups that are challenging to support due to the nature of their offence, such as ex-service personnel convicted of sexual offences. Addressing these gaps requires improved training for probation practitioners, clearer identification processes, and more coordinated service pathways to better support ex-service personnel within the probation system. Through an increased understanding of the current barriers and the adoption of the recommendations in this paper, there is the potential to significantly improve the rehabilitation outcomes of ex-service personnel and aid their reintegration into local communities.

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