

# A Needs Assessment of Veterans in Custody, their Families & Children

National  
information  
centre  
on children  
of offenders



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The National Centre for Children of Offenders or NICCO has been established to provide an information service for all professionals who come into contact with the children and families of offenders, as well as academics and those responsible for strategic development and commissioning. The Centre is delivered by Barnardo's in partnership with Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS).

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#### **Acknowledgements**

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## Executive Summary

### **Aims of this research**

There is very limited (and no recent) qualitative research which demonstrates the two-fold impact of veteran status alongside imprisonment on veterans as family members or their families. This needs assessment will build on the research that has already been conducted by providing a platform for the voices of veterans in custody, their families and children. We seek to establish whether the needs of veterans identified in previous studies impacts on family relationships and the needs of their partners and children and explore how those needs can be met effectively.

We acknowledge that since the 'Veterans Transition Review' undertaken by Lord Ashcroft (2014), the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has made significant improvements to the transition experience of those who have left HM Armed Forces in the last 5 years. However our study shines a light on how to build on these improvements and the issues that those veteran and families who left service prior to these improvements are currently experiencing.

### **Key Findings**

- **Family experience is cited by veterans as influential at key points in their military service**

The interconnectivity between military service and family or relationships with significant others within our sample was strong. This arose at various points such as being motivated to join up because they wanted to leave their parental home situation, or conversely because they were inspired by family who were serving or had served. Similarly, our veterans cited a desire to return to the family they had created as a motivator for leaving the forces. The military itself was frequently referred to as another version of 'family', providing the kind of close relationships, loyalty and care that is usually associated with the traditional family unit.

- **Children of veterans in custody are likely to have experienced family breakdown**

Our sample revealed a shocking level of family breakdown. Only 11 of the 43 (26%) of children identified in our sample were living, or expected to live, with both birth parents when their fathers were released from custody. The national rate of children aged 0-14 years living with both parents is 66%. We are aware that our sample size is relatively small and further information would be required to make a general comparison. Breakdown had often occurred before the period of custody and begs the question about family support during and after active service. Incidents of domestic violence, mental health and substance misuse all play a part. Participants reflected on the multiple gaps children experienced in their relationships during active service and the emotional charge associated with these absences, in terms of anxiety. Many men had some awareness of the impact of this, including contrasting pride while in service and shame while in custody. This finding indicated the challenge of maintaining relationships between children and fathers when contact is limited and often reliant on third parties such as grandparents. However, out of the 43 children disclosed in the sample, including step children, 32 had contact during the custodial sentence. It is noted that telephone contact was high and the ambition of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) to improve technological communication is welcome. We would like to see a more holistic early intervention family service being offered for veterans and their families. We would suggest this is funded by the MOD and provided in collaboration between services specialising in family work and veteran support.

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- **Those in greatest difficulty appear to have least support**

A significant number of our sample had been discharged following sanction by the military. It was evident that this compromised any transition planning and in turn, this 'punishment' was also felt by family members. All veterans we consulted expected to complete their full military service and leaving early and/or facing dishonourable discharge was unplanned. Seven veterans were discharged dishonourably, four of these would be classed as Early Service Leavers (ESLs). The immediacy of being discharged compromised transition planning and therefore, potentially increased their vulnerability, both practically and emotionally in civilian life. This inevitably impacted on family members.

- **Recording the family situation of veterans in custody**

It is apparent that neither the prison, who collect numbers of identified veterans, nor the military charities, nor the peer support groups, collect information on dependents or family situation. Whilst many charities told us they believed they gave assistance to families, there was no way to ascertain the nature or scale of this support. Similarly it is very difficult to establish scale or nature of need. Thus this group are likely to remain invisible and a comprehensive assessment of need is unlikely unless the information about family circumstance is routinely collected. It is acknowledged that despite many, repeated, and varied methods to identify family members and seek their engagement with this needs assessment, it proved extremely difficult. While the numbers who did engage are small, their experiences and insights are unique and all the more valuable for that. We would like to see mandatory recording introduced and further work undertaken to establish scale and need.

- **Veterans and their families are unclear who should say what, to whom**

Veterans, partners and children all indicated that they are uncertain about what to say to whom in terms of each other, professionals and/or others outside the immediate family. Fear of causing upset, exacerbating the problems, showing or appearing to show weakness were recurring reasons. There was particular concern for veterans and partners reporting uncertainty around any restrictions from probation and/or social services with regard to contact with children. This meant that some children may not be having contact they were entitled to, and all concerned were dealing with uncertainty and emotion around this topic. It is important that where involved, professionals should make the first move and that families should be encouraged to be open and honest with their children in an age appropriate way.

- **Barriers for families accessing military charities**

(Almost) universally, families are reliant on 'their' veterans to inform them of the support available and to be eligible; the veteran's military service must be verified. We observed that many veterans do not always identify as such and therefore do not see support services as applicable to them. This can be because they are not fully aware of the definition and associate the term with either those who have long service or those who have experienced active service. For those who do recognise themselves as veterans there was an acknowledgement of concern that, should they reveal this to criminal justice agencies, this might have negative repercussions for their relationship with the military. In addition there remains an association of seeking support and admitting weakness, which can be a challenging prospect. Even after all this, there has to be a reasonable relationship between the veteran and the family. Given the high incidence of previous partners with children, where the relationship between the adults' remains strained, this

adds a further potential complication in the families' awareness of potential support and the veteran's willingness to self-identify. The experiences of our participants indicated that any approach tended to be at crisis point and the sense that veterans were more 'comfortable' with requesting financial support, rather than emotional support. There are examples of good practice, with some prisons identifying specific workers with a specific responsibility to support veterans. There is a plethora of military charities, but few specifically support those who have offended. In September 2019, 'Focus On: Armed Forces Charities in the Criminal Justice System', funded by the Forces in Mind Trust<sup>1</sup> shows that just 31 of the UK's 1,888 Armed Forces charities provide criminal justice related support to 3,200 veterans each year. We question the usefulness of the term veteran and consider whether an alternative such as 'ex-Armed Service Personnel' (ex-ASP) or 'former member of the armed forces' would be more accessible to this group. Similarly, would reframing the services offered from support to something more like 'advice and guidance' remove some of the stigma that may be dissuading those in need. We would want to see more recognition from the military charities of this particularly complex group, specific outreach to partners and those caring for children of veterans in custody, and greater collaboration between support services and criminal justice agencies to ensure families are made aware of support available and to ensure robust assessment of their situations.

- **Participants would like to see peer support for both veterans inside prison and families outside in the community**

Peer support groups for veterans within custody have been reported as useful to veterans. We would like to see this specifically include family issues, recognised formally and replicated throughout the prison estate. Family members indicated through our study that no one had approached them to enquire how they were managing and some went on to say how they would appreciate the opportunity to talk with

others in similar circumstances. Peer support was raised by families as a way to offer each other support and guidance throughout their journey before, during and after custody. We would like to see how this model of peer support could be developed and tested for families of veterans in custody.

- **Feedback is positive when services are accessed in custody but family support is largely absent**

When challenges are overcome by individuals to ask for support and by agencies to make support available, the response from veterans was positive but rarely did this include a family dimension. To increase positive outcomes for veterans in custody and their families, consistent and effective support needs to be made available to veterans. This should start with profiled hours for Veteran in Custody Support Officers, providing adequate time, resources and training rather than relying on the passion and good will of individual staff. This support needs to extend to families to check in with their needs and ensure they are made aware of and linked up to appropriate support. One single agency must take the lead in coordinating the support and care of children whose parents are in custody.

- **Greatest challenge at point of release from custody**

After the increased anxiety due to the uncertainty of entering custody, many veterans find familiarity in the structure and stability of the prison environment. This provides an opportunity for services to engage with veterans at a time where they might be more able to respond. This uncertainty then builds up again in the run up to their release, where any support can rapidly fall away and the sudden change in daily routines and impact on family can be immensely stressful. Children and partners reported concern that should the veteran begin to show signs they were not managing, this was interpreted as a failure on their part.

1. Robson, et al. (2018)

# Executive Summary

There are indications that a more planned release from custody with several episodes of Release on Temporary Licence was helpful to all family members. The question is posed to the MOD whether a similar approach is worth also considering and applying to serving Armed Forces personnel as part of a 1-2 year staged transition plan. This should take into account the needs of the whole family as they collectively prepare for civilian life.

- **Mental health was a consistent, often unspoken, need**

The most consistent issue vocalised by families was the financial impact of the imposition of a custodial sentence. Many families struggled to generate enough income and had to balance childcare with multiple jobs. Underneath practical and financial needs, there was an undercurrent of negative emotional impacts, of mothers working to hold the family together on the outside which made it almost impossible for them to reflect on the wider impact it was having on them. Similar to the veteran's attitudes of not wanting to show weakness, it appeared this was mirrored by partners. Even when there was some acknowledgement, there did not appear to be a clear path to take. Professionals in the community, teachers, GPs and charity workers need to be upskilled to identify and feel confident in asking questions to partners or children of parents in custody.

## Recommendations

### 1. Military independence, not dependence

The culture of the military is at odds with civilian culture and this has implications for veterans and their families when they return to civilian society. Military personnel are trained and socialised into a collective mind-set where HM Armed Forces take responsibility for their day-to-day needs. This culture opposes the individual mind-set of civilian society. Due to the young age many people enter the military, they are not able to 'switch' back into a mentality

that they have never developed and this conflicts with the family, increasing the risk of family breakdown and potentially domestic abuse. We recommend that MOD put basic measures in place to facilitate more independent living and budgeting skills such as: paying for monthly rent and bills. We recognise that the Government's Veterans Strategy seeks to address this need, and welcome the work that is already underway ensure it is met.

### 2. Staged Transition

Transition or 'decompression' from and between military and civilian life, needs to encapsulate the psychological transition just as much as the logistical support required. This includes periodical transitions into/out of family life throughout service and the final transition out of the military. Improved communication between military and community services to facilitate this resettlement for both veterans and their families. The MOD should look to fund a specific service for dishonourable discharge due to the additional vulnerabilities the immediacy of this decision can have on veteran, their families and children. This could be delivered in collaboration with partner organisations.

### 3. Family preparation

Education and training to be provided to families of military personnel to understand military life and vice versa for military personnel. Training should start whilst serving and cover the impact of military life and transition into civilian life, including possible needs and support services available. Relationship support should be funded by the military to couples (married or not) throughout their service and years following their return to civilian life.

### 4. Alcohol

Further research into the prevalence, context and support around alcohol misuse within the Forces and the impact this has on families and children. Re-framing and education around the definition of 'problematic alcohol use' in relation to the wider impact alcohol use and ensuing behaviour has on military personnel/veterans and their family and children.

### 5. Training

Public and third sector professionals that come into contact with veterans and/or their families (e.g. schools, GPs, third sector agencies) to receive training (such as 'Military Human' training<sup>2</sup> programme or alternatives), to ensure wide understanding of the specific culture of military life, transition and possible difficulties. This training must include experiences of families and children and details of support available. Due to the identified complexity of need, it is essential that safeguarding training is provided to ensure child protection issues are monitored and reported.

### 6. Language

Changing the language used around 'veterans' to 'ex-Armed Service Personnel' in acknowledgement that many British veterans do not identify as 'veterans' and this may preclude them and their family from receiving support. The use of the word 'support' should also be reviewed by services as it seems to create a barrier due to the ideas of weakness that many 'veterans' and family members attach to the word.

### 7. VICSO Services with profiled hours

Each prison to provide a Veteran in Custody Support Officer with profiled hours dedicated to this role. This could be across several members of staff to ensure consistent support via veteran forums, veteran representatives and external charities. This commitment to profiled hours should include joint and recorded work with Family Engagement Workers (FEWs), outreach to families and standard training, covering family work topics such as safeguarding, domestic abuse and parenting. There is also positive work to be done joining up veteran services within regions and VICSO support across the UK, offering spaces to network, mutual support and share best practice.

### 8. "Familiar but not comfortable environments"

Providing spaces for veterans which offer the opportunity to reconnect with their military past but also prepare them for their return to the community. Separate veteran wings are a positive initiative at larger estates, or a regional wing for several smaller estates. This includes continuing to build on the peer support already available for veterans in custody but also creating opportunities for family peer support, for instance, making use of visitor's centres to provide support groups. Those in formal peer support roles should have access to regular and robust training relevant to their role, including safeguarding/family work.

### 9. Asking questions, recording answers

Family circumstances to form part of standard assessments for veterans in custody, by both prison (VICSO, veteran representatives, and key workers) and charity professionals. Once this data is recorded, it is measurable and a clearer picture of needs and what support is on offer/being accessed can be established.

### 10. Holistic practice

To ensure children and family members' needs and wellbeing are supported and safeguarded, we recommend one organisation takes the lead in coordinating support for the family and/or children with a parent in prison. For veterans' families, there is huge value to specialist support where the nuances of military culture are understood alongside expertise in family work. This whole-family approach to work needs to be assertive and not just sign posting, offering ongoing emotional as well as practical support. This should include taking advantage of existing opportunities/materials<sup>3</sup> and creating new strategies to raise awareness of family support available and services pro-actively engaging with families.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/courses/professional-and-short-courses/military-human/the-military-human-military-culture-transition/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nicco.org.uk/directory-of-resources>

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### 11. Shared Learning

There is a key opportunity for the MOD and HMPPS to share learning and strategies around military and custodial resettlement. Adopting strategies which consider the practical and psychological impact for veterans and their families, with an opportunity for gradual re-integration back into family life and to increase the chances of positive family relationships in the community.

### 12. Joint 'through the gate' practice

This would be reinforced by established VICSO services with profiled hours (Recommendation 7), enabling VICSOs to offer formalised support for veterans between custody and the community. This coordinated support should extend to families by joint working with and between probation, regional Armed Forces Covenant groups, the police, military charities, children's services and/or other community services/specialist support. This multi-agency working ensures clear communication and shared support planning, acknowledging the expertise and role of each agency.

### 13. Paid opportunities for peer support

Military charities offering paid roles for veterans released from custody to provide support/mentoring to veterans in custody. This would increase representation of Service experience in military charities and ensure consistency of services, training and documentation across regions.

### 14. Continued research

In acknowledgement of the limited information we have on the experiences of families post-release, further research should be undertaken to understand the short and long-term impacts of criminal justice on families and family relationships when the veteran parent returns home.



## Glossary of Services

**A list of support services for veterans, offenders and families. These support services were either involved in this research project or were mentioned by those we interviewed. This is not a full list of the support available in the UK.**

### Support for Veterans & their Families

#### Active plus

**Area covered: Devon, Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire**

Active plus use the skills, experience and expertise of injured military veterans, and those suffering from PTSD, to deliver courses and activities for people who are unemployed, older people who are lonely or isolated, people with health conditions, including mental ill-health, and young people at risk of leaving school without qualifications or work.

[www.activeplus.org.uk](http://www.activeplus.org.uk) **01326 567174**

#### Alabaré: Homes for Veterans

**Area: South of England and Wales**

Alabaré's Homes for Veterans provide supported accommodation to British Armed Forces Veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

They provide dedicated support to Veterans across the South of England and Wales - specifically; Wiltshire, Hampshire, Gloucestershire, Devon, Dorset as well as North and South Wales.

[www.alabare.co.uk](http://www.alabare.co.uk) **01722 322 882**

#### Care after Combat

**Area: National**

Care after Combat provides professional assistance for the wellbeing of veterans and their families, with a focus on alcohol misuse and on veterans within the CJS.

They launched project Phoenix in 2015, which offers mentorship to Veterans in Custody during the final 18 months of their sentence and for at least 12 months following release, with the aim of reducing the number of re-offending veterans released from prison.

[www.careaftercombat.org](http://www.careaftercombat.org) **0300 343 0255**

#### Combat Stress

**Area: National**

A charity specialising in veterans' mental health, supporting those with mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and PTSD.

They offer a range of treatment services in the community, at specialist centres, on the phone and online, and develop a personalised programme for each veteran's individual needs with a combination of psychological and psychiatric treatment, and occupational therapy.

[www.combatstress.org.uk](http://www.combatstress.org.uk) **0800 138 1619**

#### Help for Heroes

Help for Heroes offer physical, psychological, career, financial and welfare support to veterans with illnesses and injuries attributed to their service in the Armed Forces, and their families.

They offer a wide range of support including recovery programs, support hubs, grants, career advice, business experience, mental health support and programs for very seriously injured veterans

[www.helpforheroes.org.uk](http://www.helpforheroes.org.uk) **0300 303 9888**

## Glossary of Services

### Military Community Veterans Centres

#### Area: Rotherham & the surrounding area

The aim of the MCVV is to provide an information service to help all serving and ex-service military personnel and their families, with members and volunteers on hand to provide advice on issues such as health care, housing, employment and benefits.

They also run weekly and fortnightly meetings where the veterans of Rotherham and its surrounding areas can get together to share their stories and discuss aspects of their day to day lives.

[www.rotherhammccv.org.uk](http://www.rotherhammccv.org.uk)

### NHS Veterans' Mental Health Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service (TILS)

#### Area: National

This is a dedicated local-community-based service for veterans and those transitioning out of the Armed Forces with a discharge date.

### NHS Veterans' Mental Health Complex Treatment Service (CTS)

#### Area: National

An enhanced local-community-based service for ex-service personnel who have military related complex mental health problems that haven't improved with earlier care and treatment.

[www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/military-healthcare/nhs-mental-health-services-for-veterans/](http://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/military-healthcare/nhs-mental-health-services-for-veterans/)

### Project Nova

#### Area: East of England, North West, North East and South Yorkshire and Humberside.

Project Nova provides support to Veterans who are arrested or are at risk of arrest. It is delivered as a partnership between The Forces Employment Charity (RFEA) and Walking With The Wounded (WWTW).

The organise support for: accommodation; employment, education and training; drugs and alcohol; finances and debt; mental health; children & families; attitudes and thinking.

[www.veteransgateway.org.uk](http://www.veteransgateway.org.uk) 0800 9177299

### PTSD Resolution

#### Area: National

PTSD Resolution is a charity that offers counselling to UK Armed Forces' Veterans, Reservists and families to relieve mental health problems resulting from military service.

PTSD Resolution therapists also work in prisons, and there is an active programme of engagement with the prison service nationally.

They also offer employers Trauma Awareness Training to support the successful integration of Veterans and Reservists in the workplace.

[www.ptsdresolution.org](http://www.ptsdresolution.org) 0300 302 0551

### The Ripple Pond

#### Area: National

A UK wide self-help support network for the adult family members of physically or emotionally injured Service Personnel and Veterans. Offering support in the form of: group meetings; a private online forum; a confidential advice and support from staff members; and a buddy system.

[www.theripplepond.org](http://www.theripplepond.org) 0333 900 1028

### Royal British Legion (RBL)

#### Area: UK & Overseas

RBL provide a wide range of support for those in the Armed forces, veterans, and their families, from providing expert advice and guidance, to recovery and rehabilitation, through to transitioning to civilian life

They offer direct support to veterans in custody, and their families, whilst in prison and on release.

[www.britishlegion.org.uk](http://www.britishlegion.org.uk) 0808 802 8080

### SPACES

#### Area: National

Single Persons Accommodation Centre for the Ex Services, SPACES, is a housing advice and placement service for veterans. They help to secure appropriate accommodation across the UK for those who leave the Armed Forces to reduce the risk of homelessness or rough sleeping.

[www.riverside.org.uk/care-and-support/veterans/spaces/](http://www.riverside.org.uk/care-and-support/veterans/spaces/) 01748 833797

### SSAFA

#### Area: UK & Overseas

SSAFA provide a wide range of support for Armed Forces, veterans, and their families. Their focus is on providing direct support to individuals in need of physical or emotional care.

SSAFA has a prison "in-reach" team that work with veterans serving prison sentences and representatives visit prisons through the UK. SSAFA will also provide on-going support on release. They also provide support for families of veterans in custody and on release.

[www.ssafa.org.uk](http://www.ssafa.org.uk) 0800 731 4880

### Veterans Contact Point

#### Area covered: Coventry and Warwickshire

A service created by, staffed by and ran by veterans for veterans.

They provide a confidential and free service for veterans and their families living and working in Coventry and Warwickshire.

[www.veteranscontactpoint.co.uk](http://www.veteranscontactpoint.co.uk)

### Veterans Change Partnership

#### Area: National

The VCP is specifically intended to provide comprehensive and intensive residential programmes of rehabilitation, intervention and support to those former military personnel and their families, who have entered or are at risk of entering the CJS.

[www.veteranschangepartnership.co.uk](http://www.veteranschangepartnership.co.uk) 07779221162

### The Veterans' Gateway

#### Area covered: National

A partnership between The Royal British Legion, Poppy Scotland, SSAFA, the Armed Forces charity, Combat Stress and service provider Connect Assist. Funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund.

They provide the first point of contact to a network of military and non-military partner organisations.

[www.veteransgateway.org.uk](http://www.veteransgateway.org.uk) 0808 802 1212

## Glossary of Services

### Veterans Outreach Support (VOS)

**Area: Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight**

VOS has been providing a monthly drop-in facility for ex-serviceman and their direct family members since July 2008. The Drop-In is a welcoming and relaxed place for UK veterans and their direct family members to come for confidential welfare or psychological support or simply to meet for a sociable chat. Representatives from numerous agencies attend the drop in sessions to offer a wide range of support.

[www.vosuk.org](http://www.vosuk.org)

**023 9273 1767**

### Warrior Program

**Area: National (Residential Courses based in Wiltshire/North Yorkshire)**

The warrior program works with serving personnel, veterans and adult family members. They provide residential courses to enable individuals to manage their emotions and to develop resilience, focus and motivation, using a specially developed programme to meet the demands and challenges experienced by members of the Armed Forces and their families.

[www.warriorprogramme.org.uk/veterans/](http://www.warriorprogramme.org.uk/veterans/)  
**0808 801 0898**

### Hugh James Solicitors

**Area: National. Offices in Cardiff and London.**

Hugh James Solicitors have a team specialising in military service legal matters and help military service personal who need to bring a claim against the MoD due to a failure to adequately protect from illness or avoidable injury. They offer also offer advice on wills and probate, and independent financial advice.

[www.hughjames.com](http://www.hughjames.com)

**033 3016 2222**

### Support for Fathers / Separated Families

#### Families Need Fathers (FNF)

**Area: National**

FNF is a UK charity supporting dads, mums and grandparents to have personal contact and meaningful relationships with their children following parental separation or for those whose children's relationship with them is under threat. They offer information, advice and support services for parents on how to do the best for their children. They offer support via a national telephone helpline, local branch meetings, counselling support groups and online support.

[www.fnf.org.uk](http://www.fnf.org.uk)

**0300 0300 36**

#### Separated Dads

**Area: National, Web-based**

Separated Dads is a web-based resource supporting separated fathers. This site brings together numerous articles and guides covering support topics such as; emotional; financial; legal; negotiation; practicalities; psychology; separation and court processes. They also offer an online forum.

<http://www.separateddads.co.uk/>

#### Support for Offenders and Families

**Prison Visit Centre Services**

Visit centre services operate at each prison, offering support and advice to families and prisoners. The centres are run by charities such as PACT, Nepacs, Ormiston Families, Barnardo's or Spurgeons. To find out who provides the service at a specific prison visit the Prison Information page at

[www.justice.gov.uk](http://www.justice.gov.uk) or at [www.nicco.org.uk](http://www.nicco.org.uk).

### Storybook Dads

**Prison-based**

Story book dads is run within prisons and facilitates and encourages prisoners to make bedtime story discs and other educational and personalised gifts, such as memory books, calendars and pop-up books, to send home to their children.

[www.storybookdads.org.uk](http://www.storybookdads.org.uk)

### Barnardo's Invisible Lives

**Area: Essex, South East**

This project operates in Essex, providing information, advice and support to children, young people and families affected by parental offending behaviours or the criminal justice system. This involves 1-1 support and group sessions to address the needs and worries of children with a loved one in any stage of the criminal justice system. They also liaise and train relevant agencies, such as schools, to enable them to better support children in their care.

<https://b.barnardos.org.uk/essex-capi-service>  
**01268558448**



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**safer childhoods** and **positive futures** for  
vulnerable children and young people.

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**[www.barnardos.org.uk/get-involved](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/get-involved)**



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