Appendix 1: Rapid Review Methods and Limitations

This rapid review was undertaken to complement the Essex Armed Forces Needs Assessment (AFNA) by bringing together relevant UK evidence. It addressed two questions:

1) What are the experiences and needs of serving personnel, veterans and their families?
2) What evidence exists on interventions, services and policies intended to improve outcomes, and what does it suggest?

The review used Senior (2018) as its baseline evidence synthesis. Searches were conducted in July 2026 and focused on publications from September 2017 to the search date. Earlier material was included where it provided relevant context, including Clifford's (2017) evaluation of a supported-housing scheme for veterans. Senior's (2018) systematic review provided a starting point for this rapid review. We used a broader, pragmatic search approach to identify subsequent evidence relevant to the AFNA, rather than repeating Senior's methods or undertaking a systematic update.

Search Approach

A pragmatic rapid review approach was used. Searches covered PubMed, Scopus and Google Scholar, supplemented by Google searches and targeted searches of military and veterans' organisations, charities, professional bodies and research institutes.

The search strategy followed the categories in the wider AFNA: health, housing, education, employment, transition, military families and criminal justice. Searches combined concepts relating to the Armed Forces community, such as veterans, service leavers, serving personnel and military families, with these topic areas. Additional searches focused on interventions, services, policies and evaluations, including housing and support models. Provider webpages from Royal British Veterans Enterprise and Erskine Veterans Charity were checked in September 2026 to verify descriptions of veterans' villages. These were used as background information about provision, not as evidence of effectiveness. This check supplemented the main searches conducted in July 2026.

Eligibility and Selection

Eligible publications concerned UK populations, services or policies and addressed at least one review question. Both peer-reviewed and grey literature were considered, including quantitative and qualitative research, evidence syntheses, service evaluations and policy analyses. Grey literature was eligible where it reported a clear purpose, identifiable evidence sources and methods that could be understood. Organisational reputation alone was not treated as evidence of quality. Opinion pieces and advocacy material without a clear evidence base or methodology were excluded.

One reviewer carried out screening, selection and data extraction. Key information was recorded from 93 publications. These formed the evidence pool from which sources were selected for the final narrative. The full extraction table is available on request. Complete counts of records identified, screened and assessed in full were not recorded.

The final report presents a focused selection rather than a summary of every extracted publication. Selection considered relevance to the review questions and local service planning, coverage of the AFNA categories, and whether a publication added findings not already represented. Where publications reported substantially overlapping findings, preference was given to the source providing the most comprehensive account. This reduced repetition within the report; omission from the narrative should not be interpreted as a judgement that a publication was of poor quality.

Synthesis and limitations

Findings were summarised by AFNA category and compared with the baseline review. Evidence about needs and experiences was considered separately from evidence about interventions. Population studies, qualitative research, service evaluations and trials answer different questions and were not treated as equivalent evidence of effectiveness. Where evaluations lacked comparison groups, reported improvements were interpreted cautiously.

No formal quality appraisal was undertaken. The review therefore does not provide quality ratings for individual studies or a formal assessment of confidence in the overall evidence. Screening and interpretation by one reviewer, together with selective presentation, may have introduced bias or led to relevant evidence being missed.

The databases and supplementary searches provided a practical way to cover a broad topic, but coverage may have been less complete for education, housing and social policy. Google and organisational website searches are also less reproducible than database searches. These limitations mean that the review should not be regarded as exhaustive.

The evidence identified was more extensive for veterans than for serving personnel, reservists or families. Findings should not be assumed to apply equally across these groups. National evidence can inform service planning in Essex, but decisions about local provision also require local data and the views of the Armed Forces community.