

MEAM

Year 3 thematic report: MEAM partnerships

August 2020



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Executive summary

About this report

This report presents the findings of thematic research into MEAM Approach partnerships, which formed part of the year 3 evaluation of the MEAM Approach. It aims to provide a clearer understanding of the types of partnership structures being used in local areas in the MEAM Approach network, including what makes partnerships more effective and common challenges they encounter.

This report is based on data gathered through a number of research methods; 21¹ semi-structured interviews with local area programme leads, in-depth deep-dive fieldwork in five local areas (consisting of interviews with four further stakeholders in each area in addition to the local lead interview above, and observation of both a strategic and an operational partnership meeting), consultation with 12 MEAM staff members, and an e-survey which received 213 responses across 22 local areas.

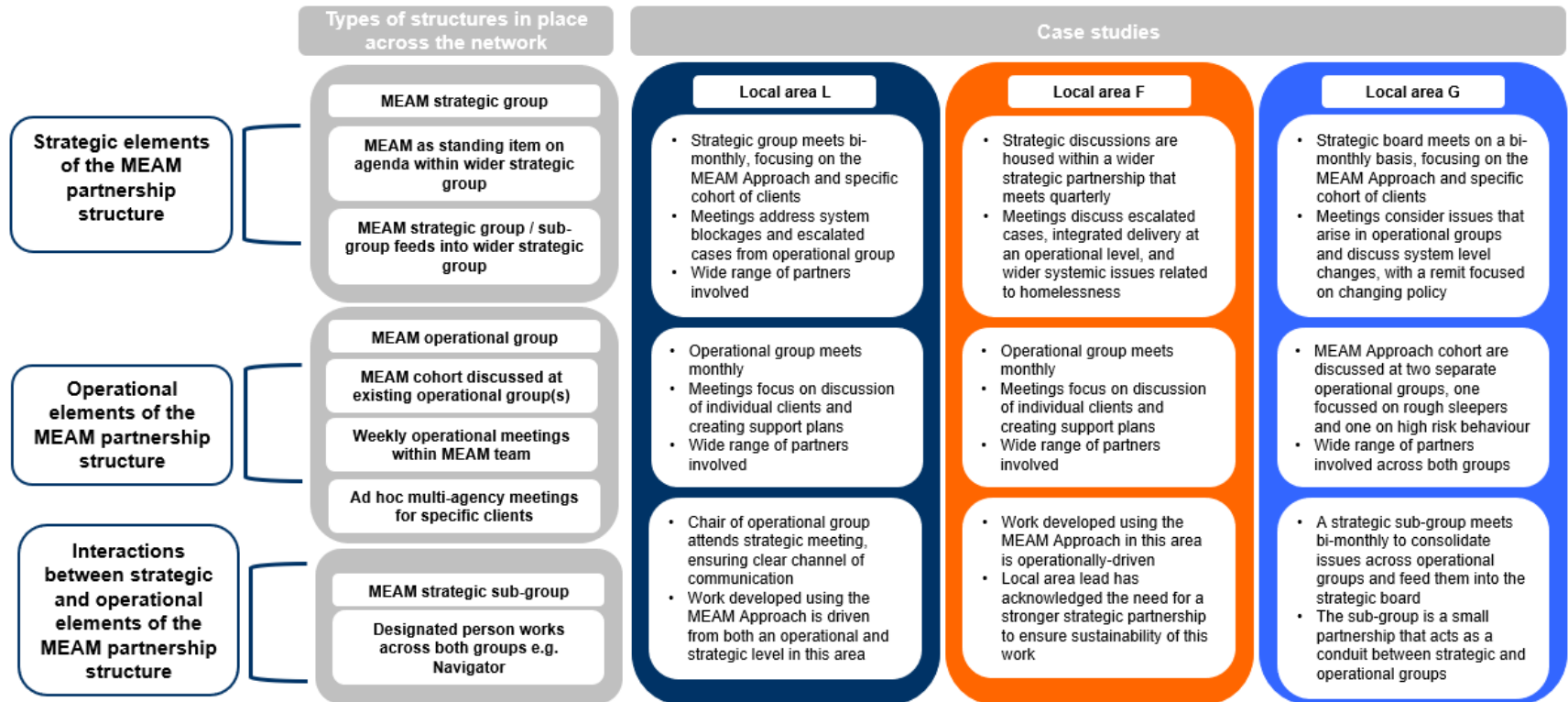
Local programme leads are encouraged to use this report to consider the strengths and weaknesses of their partnership structures and identify areas for development. They may wish to speak to their MEAM partnerships manager for support and advice around this process.

Partnership structures

MEAM Approach partnerships differ in structure and function across the MEAM Approach network, based on local contexts and relationships with other partnership structures that exist in the local area. However, the partnerships tend to be based around two key types of structure, one at an operational level and one at a strategic level. Figure 1 illustrates the different types of structures in place across the MEAM Approach network and outlines examples of the structures found in three local areas.

¹ The year 3 evaluation included 26 areas which were active in the MEAM Approach network in year 3, but programme leads from 5 of these areas did not participate in an evaluation interview, although they were invited to do so. Please see the year 3 technical appendix for further information.

Figure 1: Overview of MEAM partnership structures



Key features of effective partnerships

During the research, 11 key features of effective MEAM Approach partnerships were identified through stakeholder consultation or observation of partnership meetings. Figure 2 summarises the features, several of which are key elements of the first principle of the MEAM Approach (partnership, co-production and vision). Partnerships which do not currently possess these features might benefit from finding ways to introduce them.

Figure 2: Overview of key features of effective MEAM Approach partnerships

Key feature
Shared purpose
1. Shared understanding of multiple disadvantage
Strategic leadership and buy-in
2. Strong strategic leadership
3. Strategic cross-sector buy-in
Partner representation and attendance
4. Representation and consistent attendance from a wide range of partners
5. Meaningful involvement of experts by experience
6. Appropriate level of seniority and authority among partners
Working culture and practices
7. Strong relationships between individuals in the partnership
8. A spirit of constructive challenge
9. A learning culture that supports continuous improvement
Integration of strategic and operational partnership structures
10. Close connection between strategic and operational groups
11. Operational groups addressing system issues

Key challenges for effective partnerships

Alongside identifying key features for effective MEAM Approach partnerships, the thematic research also found evidence of five common challenges in setting up the partnerships and ensuring that they continue to run effectively. Figure 3

summarises the challenges. Partnerships which can pre-empt or resolve these challenges are more likely to be sustainable and effective.

Figure 3: Overview of key challenges for MEAM Approach partnerships

Key challenge
1. Engaging specific partner organisations
2. Capacity of senior stakeholders
3. 'Winding down' of the strategic group
4. Expertise/motivation held in individuals not systems
5. Turnover of frontline staff

1 Introduction

Cordis Bright would like to thank everyone involved in shaping and delivering this thematic report. Particular thanks go to the expert by experience research group for their help in designing research tools and conducting and analysing the qualitative research, and for providing critique and challenge to an early draft of this report. Thank you also to local staff across the MEAM Approach network who have facilitated and participated in this year's research.

1.1 About this report

This report presents the findings of thematic research into MEAM Approach partnerships, which formed part of the year 3 evaluation of the MEAM Approach. The evaluation is being delivered by Cordis Bright, an independent and specialist research and consultancy organisation. It takes place over five years between 2017 and 2022.

The thematic research aimed to provide a clearer understanding of the partnership structures in local areas in the MEAM Approach network, addressing five specific research questions. These were:

1. What structures exist to make the frontline work possible (e.g. strategic and operational groups)? What are the features of the strategic and operational groups (membership, organisational structure, remit, resourcing, governance, responsibilities etc.)?
2. How impactful are different strategic and operational groups (or other MEAM Approach partnership structures)?
3. If there are differences in the efficacy and/or impact of operational and strategic groups (or other MEAM Approach partnership structures) in different local areas, what might explain these differences?
4. What are the key features for effective MEAM partnerships?
5. What are the main challenges in setting up and running strategic and operational groups (or other MEAM Approach partnership structures)?

Local programme leads are encouraged to use this report to consider the strengths and weaknesses of their partnership structures and identify areas for development. They may wish to speak to their MEAM partnerships manager for support and advice around this process.

This report should be read in conjunction with the main report for year 3 of the evaluation, and the technical appendix.

1.2 Methodology

This report is based on data gathered through the following methods:

- Semi-structured interviews conducted with MEAM Approach leads from 21 local areas delivering work developed using the MEAM Approach.
- In-depth research in five of these local areas, which involved interviews with four further stakeholders (in addition to the local lead interview above) and observation of both a strategic and an operational partnership meeting.
- A focus group and semi-structured interviews with 12 members of MEAM staff.
- An e-survey of stakeholders in local areas, which received a total of 213 respondents across 22 local areas.

More detailed information on these research methods is available in the technical appendix for year 3 of the evaluation.

Case study evidence included in this report

The five areas which were the focus of in-depth research serve as useful case studies to illustrate key features and challenges that were identified by stakeholders across the network more generally. They are identified throughout the remainder of this report as local areas F, G, I, L and W².

² During the year 2 evaluation, all areas were allocated a letter to allow for anonymised reporting about them. For consistency, the same letters have been used in the year 3 evaluation. Areas which joined the evaluation in year 3 have been allocated a letter which does not already designate another area.

2 Partnership structures

2.1 Common partnership structures

MEAM Approach partnerships differ in structure and function across the MEAM Approach network, based on local contexts and relationships with other partnership structures that exist in the local area. However, the partnerships tend to be based around two key types of structure, one at an operational level and one at a strategic level.

2.1.1 Operational groups

Purpose: Local partner agencies discuss and plan support relating to individual clients being supported by work developed using the MEAM Approach.

Prevalence: All but one of the MEAM Approach network areas we consulted (20 of 21 areas) have an operational group in place. Operational groups are also often more well-established than strategic groups.

Most common structure: In most MEAM Approach network areas, the operational group is a stand-alone structure which meets to discuss an established cohort of clients being supported by local work developed using the MEAM Approach. However, in some areas clients are discussed as part of wider multi-agency meetings or across several different operational meetings.

Key functions: The main functions of operational groups are:

- Discussing individual clients, and identifying solutions and action plans for supporting them.
- Discussing newly-referred clients and whether to accept them onto the cohort or signpost them elsewhere.
- Opportunity for coordination between services in offering support to individual clients.
- Identifying system blockages and escalating to strategic groups.

Attendees: Operational meetings are generally attended by multiple disadvantage coordinators, frontline practitioners and service managers from a range of partner organisations and agencies.

Frequency of meetings: Most operational groups meet monthly but frequency ranges from weekly to quarterly meetings³.

³ In those areas where operational groups were held bi-monthly or quarterly, there were generally smaller, more frequent meetings between multiple disadvantage coordinators and their line managers to discuss the cohort or specific clients, or multidisciplinary meetings regarding specific clients on an ad hoc basis.

2.1.2 Strategic groups

Purpose: Partner agencies plan, develop and monitor the local work developed using the MEAM Approach, and resolve systemic barriers by implementing changes across the local system.

Prevalence: Strategic groups are less prevalent than operational groups, though they are still in place in the majority of local areas with which we consulted (16 of 21 areas). Four local areas reported that they previously had strategic meetings in place that no longer ran, and one local area reported that they have yet to set up a strategic partnership.

Most common structure: Strategic groups most commonly take the form of a group established to focus specifically on multiple disadvantage and the MEAM Approach. However, some areas use a model where discussions around system issues and the MEAM Approach take place within a wider strategic meeting. The relationship of the MEAM strategic group to other local strategic partnerships also varies across the network – in some areas it is a stand-alone body, in other areas it feeds into wider strategic partnership structures.

Key functions: The main functions of strategic groups are:

- Monitoring the outputs and outcomes of local work developed using the MEAM Approach.
- Developing structures, processes and pathways for support – e.g. considering service re-structure, integration, commissioning and funding.
- Identifying and addressing system blockages and examples of good practice.
- Discussing support for individual clients, where their case has been escalated from operational groups.
- Providing updates relating to MEAM Approach work and the local system to encourage and maintain strategic buy-in to the work.
- Promoting the work to wider partners outside of the strategic group.

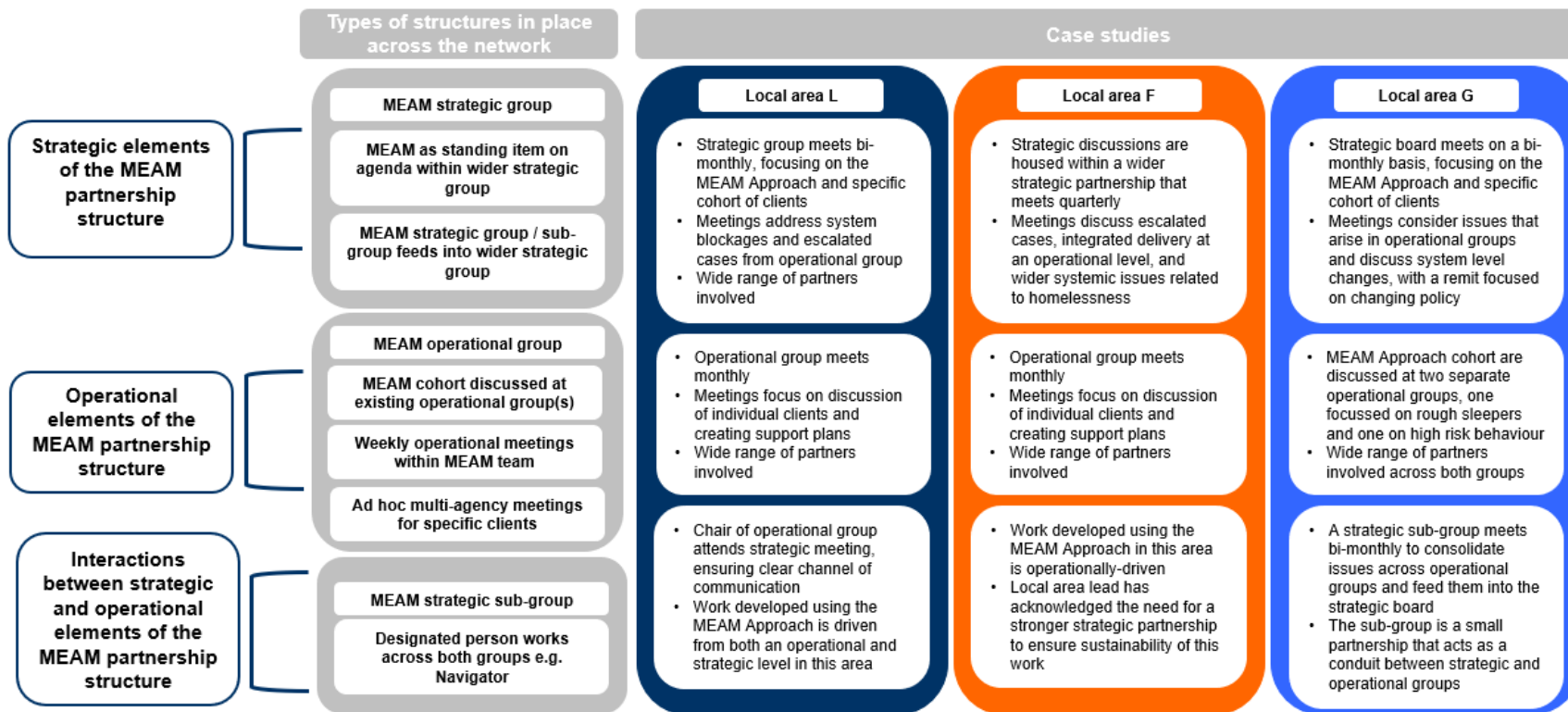
Attendees: Strategic meetings are usually attended by service leads, commissioners and other stakeholders with strategic oversight across a range of partner organisations and agencies.

Frequency of meetings: Most strategic groups meet bi-monthly but this ranges from weekly to quarterly.

2.1.3 Examples of partnership structures

Figure 4 illustrates the different types of structures in place across the MEAM Approach network. It also outlines the partnership structures in place in three local areas where we conducted in-depth research, as an example of the variety of ways that local MEAM partnerships are structured.

Figure 4: Overview of MEAM partnership structures



2.2 Efficacy of partnership structures

The MEAM Approach theory of change outlines the ultimate goals of the MEAM Approach – and local work developed using it – as:

- Services/systems and the people involved in them work better for and with people facing multiple disadvantage.
- People facing multiple disadvantage achieve their goals and improve their lives.
- Systems and people supporting people facing multiple disadvantage use available resources efficiently and avoid unnecessary costs.

It is unclear at this stage whether any specific forms of operational and strategic structure are more effective at facilitating progress towards these goals. Most local areas report that the structures they have chosen work best in their specific local contexts. This means that it is important for partners involved in developing local partnership structures to have a good understanding of the local context in which they are working. For example, leads from areas with stand-alone MEAM strategic groups tend to argue that this is the most impactful form because all members are on the same page with a shared vision and understanding of issues related to multiple disadvantage, whereas leads from areas where the strategic group is embedded as part of a wider strategic structure argue that this form is the most impactful because it facilitates the embedding of the MEAM Approach across a wider range of agencies.

Ultimately it is likely that the most effective type of structure is different for each area, and will depend on many locally varying factors such as pre-existing local structures and meetings, the lead organisation, local levels of strategic buy-in and resource available to support the MEAM Approach structures and work. There are, however, key features which are evident within effective partnerships, irrespective of their overarching structure. These are discussed in chapter 3.

3 Key features of effective MEAM Approach partnerships

3.1 Summary of key features

During the research, 11 key features of effective MEAM Approach partnerships were identified through stakeholder consultation or observation of partnership meetings. Several of the features are key elements of the first principle of the MEAM Approach, which is partnership, co-production and vision. Figure 5 summarises the features, which are discussed in detail in sections 3.2 to 3.12. Partnerships which do not currently possess these features might benefit from finding ways to introduce them.

Figure 5: Overview of key features of effective MEAM Approach partnerships

Key feature
Shared purpose
1. Shared understanding of multiple disadvantage
Strategic leadership and buy-in
2. Strong strategic leadership
3. Strategic cross-sector buy-in
Partner representation and attendance
4. Representation and consistent attendance from a wide range of partners
5. Meaningful involvement of experts by experience
6. Appropriate level of seniority and authority among partners
Working culture and practices
7. Strong relationships between individuals in the partnership
8. A spirit of constructive challenge
9. A learning culture that supports continuous improvement
Integration of strategic and operational partnership structures
10. Close connection between strategic and operational groups
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3.2 Key feature 1: Shared understanding of multiple disadvantage

Stakeholders deemed that a **shared understanding among partners of multiple disadvantage and the issues encountered by people who face it** is intrinsic to any effective MEAM partnership.

Figure 6: Key feature 1: Shared understanding of multiple disadvantage

Element	Finding
Importance for efficacy and impact	A shared understanding among partners of multiple disadvantage leads to a more coordinated response across services and more positive experiences of support for clients. This may be of particular importance in the early stages of the partnership. Stakeholders suggested that partners tend to become familiar with the concepts and develop a shared understanding “ <i>organically</i> ” through their involvement and attendance at partnership meetings.
Good practice example from local area	A local area lead reported that in setting up work using the MEAM Approach in their area, partners recognised that different agencies had different definitions or understandings of multiple disadvantage. All partners involved had a discussion around complexity, need and multiple disadvantage, which enabled them to move forward with a common understanding.
Prevalence across the network	Most local areas reported that partners had a common understanding of multiple disadvantage and the needs of clients facing multiple disadvantage.
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local area lead interviews • E-survey responses

3.3 Key feature 2: Strong strategic leadership

A strategic lead (or leads) who possesses a vision for the area, established relationships across partners and strong values aligned with those of the MEAM Approach is crucial to the effectiveness of any strategic group and, by extension, the partnership as a whole.

Figure 7: Key feature 2: Strong strategic leadership

Element	Finding
Importance for efficacy and impact	Strong strategic leads can use their influence to bring others on board and to further embed local work using the MEAM Approach. While operational work is central to the effectiveness of partnerships, it requires a strategic-led drive to become sustainable and to embed systemic change.
Prevalence across the network	A majority of local area leads identified their areas as having strong strategic leadership.
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local area lead interviews MEAM staff consultation

Case study example of feature: local area W

The MEAM partnership in local area W has a strategic lead who uses their connections at a strategic level to drive work using the MEAM Approach as a priority for the local area, which in turn has led to greater strategic buy-in to the MEAM Approach across partners:

“There’s been a lot of strategic support, and because I’m involved in lots of different strategic areas, I’ve been able to sort of garner leadership. I know that this is in contrast to some other areas where they’ve had difficulties.”

This is corroborated by colleagues involved with the MEAM partnership in local area W, who attribute the effective and efficient embedding of the partnership structure during the development phase of the local MEAM work to the strategic lead:

“What worked well in the development phase – it was [strategic lead] who was really driving it, and was a coordinator at the time. It was set up quickly, quite passionately. It went through the Cabinet Committee, Health & Wellbeing Board [...] It had a stamp of authority behind it.”

3.4 Key feature 3: Strategic cross-sector buy-in

Strategic cross-sector buy-in means there are senior leaders in strategic roles from different services and sectors across the local area who value, support and advocate for the MEAM Approach work. This was reported as a valuable aspect of an effective MEAM Approach partnership, both by those areas that had strong strategic buy-in to local work and those areas where this required development.

Figure 8: Key feature 3: Strategic cross-sector buy-in

Element	Finding
Importance for efficacy and impact	<p>Strategic cross-sector buy-in is key both to the initial development and ongoing delivery of work using the MEAM Approach. It:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enables the engagement of a wide range of partners. • Raises the profile of multiple disadvantage, and the extent to which it is a priority issue in the local area. • Increases the likelihood that system blockages can be dealt with effectively at a strategic level.
Good practice example from local area	<p>A local area lead noted a lack of strategic buy-in in their local area, and approached the Director of Adult Social Care (ASC) to head up the strategic board. The Director of ASC and Chief of Police also visited another local area in the MEAM Approach network to enable them to see the work in action and better understand its relevance locally. This local area now has a well-attended strategic group, due in part to the contacts of the chair of the board. The police have also undertaken to provide additional funding for work developed using the MEAM Approach next year.</p>
Prevalence across the network	<p>Most local area leads interviewed reported high levels of strategic buy-in in their area.</p>
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local area lead interviews • Deep-dive interviews • MEAM staff consultation • E-survey responses

3.5 Key feature 4: Wide representation and consistent attendance

Representation of a wide range of partner organisations was emphasised by stakeholders as a feature of stronger MEAM Approach partnerships and effective partnership working. Stakeholders also flagged that **consistent attendance by these partners** is a critical element of effective partnerships.

Figure 9: Key feature 4: Wide representation and consistent attendance

Element	Finding
Importance for efficacy and impact	<p>Representation from a wide range of partners is crucial at both strategic and operational levels. It enables:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A stronger multi-agency approach. • Insight into systemic issues within all sectors. • Agile and coordinated responses to clients requiring support. • Shared responsibility among partners, both for the MEAM Approach work overall and for support for specific clients. <p>The consistent attendance of these partners builds a greater shared understanding of the roles and remits of attendees, leading to more collaborative and swift action planning, as well as fostering stronger relationships between partners.</p>
Good practice example from local area	<p>An operational group in one local area had a wide range of partners represented at their meeting. In discussing a specific client whom they were unable to locate following their eviction from a hostel the previous evening, partners were able to consult their databases in real time during the meeting, with the client then being located by a police colleague. The wide range of partners in attendance at the meeting resulted in a coordinated and efficient response to the client's needs, which ensured they would receive holistic support in a timely manner.</p>
Prevalence across the network	<p>The majority of local areas engaged a wide range of partners, at both an operational and a strategic level. However, not all partnerships included all relevant partners. This is discussed further in section 4.2.</p>
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MEAM partnership meeting observations • Local area lead interviews

3.6 Key feature 5: Meaningful involvement of experts by experience

The meaningful involvement of experts by experience across all levels of the partnership, both operational and strategic, is important to their efficacy. Stakeholders recognised the value of this involvement, but it remains an area for development in most local areas.

Figure 10: Key feature 5: Meaningful involvement of experts by experience

Element	Finding
Importance for efficacy and impact	The meaningful involvement of experts by experience supports the efficacy of work developed using the MEAM Approach by bringing the insight of lived experience to operational discussions about support for clients and also to strategic discussions about changes to services and systems.
Prevalence across the network	While all local areas acknowledged the value of input from experts by experience, just under half of local area leads reported that current levels of expert involvement were adequate. In particular, meaningful involvement at a strategic level was limited in most local areas and there was evidence that partners in some local areas believed that expert involvement did not necessarily need to span both strategic and operational work, and that it was best introduced at a later date once partnerships were up and running.
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local area lead interviews Deep-dive interviews

Case study example of feature: local area F

Local area F has representatives from a local peer mentoring group attend its strategic meetings, and this involvement of people with lived experience is now a priority for the area across all levels of the partnership:

“There will rarely be a meeting now at any level where there’s not anyone with lived experience.”

People with lived experience are also involved in the commissioning of services in local area F. A community activities network was recently commissioned in the area, and it was co-designed with people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage and other members of the community. Key stakeholders noted this commissioning process highlighted the importance of co-production in service design, and influenced their future approach as a result:

“When we got to the point where we had to make decisions, everyone had different views. It was a real learning curve about how to do real co-

production. We had a panel including people with lived experience, and it felt really different to stuffy old procurement processes, but still within regulations. I think that going forward, our approach is to base things as much on feedback and lived experience as possible.”

3.7 Key feature 6: Appropriate level of seniority and authority among partners

For MEAM partnerships to be effective, **an appropriate level of seniority and authority among partners at operational and strategic meetings** is required in order to make and follow-through on decisions and effect sustainable change.

Figure 11: Key feature 6: Appropriate level of seniority and authority among partners

Element	Finding
How this supports efficacy and impact	Having partners with an appropriate level of seniority and authority involved in partnerships ensures that they can make decisions and commit to actions on behalf of their organisations. At a strategic level, this means that partnerships are more likely to be able to influence local policy, strategy and commissioning. At an operational level, it means that partnerships are more able to deliver flexibility and make changes to processes, pathways and support.
Good practice example from local area	One local area reported that their operational meetings were initially attended primarily by case workers, who were restricted in their capacity to make service-level decisions and implement service changes. In response to this, they invited more service managers to attend operational meetings, who were able to make decisions that allowed for greater systems flex.
Prevalence of this feature across the network	The majority of local areas reported an appropriate level of authority in attendance at partnership meetings. Nevertheless, this was highlighted as an area for development by a small number of local areas. One challenge relates to the capacity of senior stakeholders to commit time to MEAM Approach partnerships. This is discussed in section 4.3.
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local area lead interviews • Deep-dive interviews

3.8 Key feature 7: Strong relationships between individuals in the partnership

As well as the representation of a wide range of partners at partnership meetings, stakeholders from local areas also noted that **strong interpersonal relationships within the local MEAM partnership** are central to its effectiveness.

Figure 12: Overview of key feature 7: Strong relationships between individuals in the partnership

Element	Finding
Importance for efficacy and impact	Relationships between individuals within partnerships are crucial at both an operational and strategic level. This applies especially at the development stage but also in relation to the ongoing delivery of the MEAM Approach work. Often there are only one or two regular representatives from each partner organisation who attend the meetings. Any coordination between organisations therefore relies quite considerably on these individual relationships.
Good practice example from local area	In local area L, the partnership built on the chair's long-held relationships with individuals from prospective partner organisations to help drive membership and engagement with the strategic board when it was being developed.
Prevalence across the network	The majority of local areas reported good relationships between individuals at an operational level; there was less connectedness reported at a strategic level (perhaps due to the varying levels of maturity of strategic partnerships across the network).
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local area lead interviews • E-survey responses

3.9 Key feature 8: A spirit of constructive challenge

MEAM Approach partnerships where partners are **willing to challenge and critique each other, on both an operational and a strategic level**, seem to result in more transparent partnerships and greater flexibility from services.

Figure 13: Key feature 8: A spirit of constructive challenge

Element	Finding
Importance for efficacy and impact	Partnerships where members are willing to challenge other partner agencies tend to generate greater flexibility of support. This results in better support and outcomes for clients, as well as a more transparent and honest approach to partnership working. There are many factors that influence partners' willingness and ability to challenge, including the multiple disadvantage coordinators' host organisation and strength of interpersonal relationships.
Good practice example from local area	In one local area, the multiple disadvantage coordinators had previously been located within a voluntary and community sector organisation, but had recently been moved to within the council. They reported that working in the council allowed them greater capacity to challenge other partners, as it was deemed difficult to do so when they were working for a voluntary sector provider.
Prevalence across the network	The extent of partners' willingness to challenge and critique within partnerships varies across the network, with some areas challenging freely and other areas less so. There is also evidence that this may vary between partnership structures, with more challenge in operational meetings (where challenge relates to specific issues and decisions relating to clients) and less so in strategic meetings (where discussion more often relates to systemic issues).
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MEAM staff consultation • MEAM partnership meeting observations

3.10 Key feature 9: Culture of continuous learning and improvement

The working culture fostered by a partnership has an impact on its effectiveness. **A culture that supports partners to build on their successes, share learning and continuously improve their ways of working** tends to result in more impactful operational and strategic work.

Figure 14: Key feature 9: Culture of continuous learning and improvement

Element	Finding
Importance for efficacy and impact	A culture of continuous learning and improvement promotes attitudes and behaviours that allow partnerships to reflect and remain focused on improvement or on maintaining progress. It ensures that partners do not “ <i>rest on their laurels</i> ” when they have experienced early successes and helps to maintain motivation and engagement. Partnerships with this culture are also receptive to learning and incorporating good practice from other local areas in the MEAM Approach network.
Prevalence across the network	Most areas are focussed on continuous improvement, but also a small number of local areas may have become “ <i>stuck</i> ” and are no longer providing themselves sufficient challenge.
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local area lead interviews • MEAM staff consultation • E-survey responses

Case study example of feature: local area L

In local area L, the partnership fostered a learning environment by seeking to promote reflective attitudes and behaviours among its own partners and by learning from good practice elsewhere in the network. For example, a local learning review was conducted and the results were shared with strategic partners, and training in trauma-informed practice was provided for representatives across all organisations in the partnership. Equally, representatives from local area L have travelled to other MEAM Approach areas to learn more about their local ways of working, and adjusted their approach as a result. This shared learning has tangible impacts on local ways of working in local area L; for example, they are now discussing how to adapt their approach to court fines to a more flexible model allowing for greater consideration of the circumstances of individual cases, which they had witnessed in another MEAM Approach area.

As operational work in local area L is running efficiently, key stakeholders reported that it was crucial for the strategic group to foster a learning culture and continue to improve on this work:

“It’s an iterative process. This is the issue with the MEAM cohort – it becomes so deeply focussed on people’s personal experiences. We need to make sure we constantly refresh our approach and our learning, not to sit on our laurels. Partners can get a bit smug. That’s just my word of caution – you’ve got to keep it fresh and self-analytical, or reflective.”

3.11 Key feature 10: Close connection between strategic and operational groups

While local areas have different models of operational and strategic groups in place, stakeholders consistently pointed to the importance of **linking operational work to strategic work and maintaining good connection and communication between the various partnership structures.**

Figure 15: Key feature 10: Close connection between strategic and operational groups

Element	Finding
Importance for efficacy and impact	<p>Clear and consistent communication channels and feedback loops between operational and strategic groups lead to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less siloed working practices. • More efficient pathways for escalation of cases. • Strategic and commissioning decisions being made with more insight into frontline issues. • Operational staff having a greater sense of the strategic context for their work, and more confidence that challenges are being addressed at a strategic level.
Good practice example from local area	<p>One area reported appointing a coordinator to attend both the operational group and the strategic board, as they had found that barriers identified by the operational group were not being effectively escalated to the strategic board.</p>
Prevalence across the network	<p>The majority of areas appeared to have structures in place to allow for close connection between strategic and operational groups. However, a significant minority of local areas did not have close connections between the two, meaning that information and decisions were not effectively communicated between the two levels. In particular there was evidence that those participating in strategic groups were not being made aware of challenges identified at an operational level. Equally, in some areas, those involved in operational groups reported that they were not aware of the purpose of the strategic group or how it related to local work using the MEAM Approach.</p>
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local area lead interviews • Deep-dive interviews • E-survey responses

3.12 Key feature 11: Operational groups addressing system issues

An operational group which includes **a focus on gathering insight into system issues facing clients and practitioners at an operational level** is a sign of an effective operational partnership.

Figure 16: Key feature 11: Operational groups addressing system issues

Element	Finding
Importance for efficacy and impact	In areas where operational work is established and working well, operational groups have begun broadening their focus from case management to include discussions around system issues and flexing the system as well. This insight into the system issues facing operational practitioners is valuable and can be shared with strategic groups for discussion. The focus on systemic issues at an operational level can also lead to greater connectivity between different levels of the partnership.
Good practice example from local area	One local area's workstreams for systems change in 2020 include issues that were raised by partners in the operational group; promoting more trauma-informed approaches across mental health services, and focusing on issues related to assessments for temporary accommodation for disabled people and people with physical health issues.
Prevalence across the network	This feature is not widespread and is found largely in local areas where operational work is established and working well.
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local area lead interviews • MEAM staff consultation

Case study example of feature: local area W

The operational group in local area W has a distinct focus on systemic issues. While its meetings discuss individual clients and their support, operational partners also take time to discuss and collate information on system blockages experienced by frontline staff. Examples of such systems blockages identified by operational workers include partners having received inconsistent advice in how best to report incidents to police colleagues (such as via an online portal or over the phone), differential use of language across services and the need for sensitivity in the language used to refer to clients, and a need for more guidance around mental health referrals and thresholds for clients.

The systems navigator then builds a strategic priorities document, based on issues that have arisen from these group discussions, and shares this with the strategic group to lend insight into the conversations being had at an operational level and the priorities of frontline practitioners. The navigator also provides feedback to the operational group on discussions taking place at the strategic group.

Key stakeholders recognise the importance of conversations around system issues and blockages happening at an operational level as well as a strategic level, and the value of these conversations being had among frontline practitioners. Attendees are also encouraged to continue to “*think systemically*” outside of the meeting, as they continue their work with clients or services.

4 Key challenges for effective MEAM Approach partnerships

4.1 Summary of key challenges

Alongside identifying key features for effective MEAM Approach partnerships, the thematic research also found evidence of five common challenges in setting up the partnerships and ensuring that they continue to run effectively. These challenges are found frequently across the network, but they are not experienced by all local areas. Local areas will likely find that some of the identified challenges resonate with their local experience, while others feel less applicable.

Figure 17 summarises the challenges, which are discussed further in sections 4.2 to 0. The potential solutions reported are drawn from solutions referenced by stakeholders and from our observation of what appears to be working effectively in one or more local areas in the network. Partnerships which can pre-empt or resolve these challenges are more likely to be sustainable and effective.

Figure 17: Overview of key challenges for MEAM Approach partnerships

Key challenge
1. Engaging specific partner organisations
2. Capacity of senior stakeholders
3. 'Winding down' of the strategic group
4. Expertise/motivation held in individuals not systems
5. Turnover of frontline staff

4.2 Key challenge 1: Engaging specific partner organisations

A challenge in setting up and expanding partnerships involves **engaging all relevant partners**. Partners which most commonly prove more challenging to engage are mental health services and drug and alcohol services. There is also some evidence that it may be harder to engage larger organisations with wide remits or agencies in sectors where there are multiple relevant partners (e.g. health).

Figure 18: Key challenge 1: Engaging specific partners

Element	Finding
Impact on partnership efficiency	Partnerships not having sufficient engagement from all relevant partners results in less efficient meetings due to non-attendance of certain partners (where updates and information would have to be sought outside of the meeting), more limited expertise on issues related to specific services (such as mental health), and potential gaps in providing holistic support for clients as a result. It also likely leads to a lower level of flexibility for clients from non-partner organisations and reduces opportunities for system-wide discussion of changes which might be needed.
Potential solutions	Engaging mental health services was reported as an ongoing challenge for MEAM Approach partnerships, which appears to be a national issue. Steps for identifying solutions include partners first gaining a deeper understanding of a) the barriers to mental health partners joining the partnership and/or offering flexibility, b) what support they are able to provide and to whom, and c) the language used by mental health services.
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local area lead interviews • Deep-dive interviews • MEAM staff consultation • E-survey responses

Case study example of challenge: local area I

Local area I boasts a wide range of partners in its operational group, which leads to more effective and collaborative partnership working and action planning. However, despite this widespread engagement from local agencies, partners expressed that they found it difficult to engage mental health agencies in this operational work.

Attendees at the operational group recognise that this reduces their ability to provide holistic and appropriate support for some clients; the absence of mental health agencies limits the mental health expertise available within the group and also makes it more difficult to coordinate support with these agencies or to advocate for flexible mental health support for clients. For example, in the discussion of support for a particular client in the operational meeting, it was raised that they had been experiencing auditory hallucinations and suicidal thoughts. However, there was no discussion of the client's mental health support needs or service use. Attendance from a mental health partner would have likely led to greater insight into this client's past mental health service use and contributed expertise to planning support for them.

This indicates that partnerships in local areas may have wide representation and strong attendance at meetings but still struggle to engage specific

partners whose participation could help to make local work using the MEAM Approach more effective.

4.3 Key challenge 2: Capacity of senior stakeholders

As noted in chapter 3, partnerships tend to be more effective when they involve a strong and influential strategic lead and stakeholders with adequate levels of seniority and authority. However, **strategic leads or partners at a higher level of seniority are more likely to have a wide range of responsibilities and are therefore often less able to commit time to the partnership.**

Figure 19: Key challenge 2: Capacity of senior stakeholders

Element	Finding
Impact on partnership efficiency	When senior stakeholders are unable to commit time to the partnership, this can result in inconsistent attendance, weaker inter-agency relationships and a more limited sense of shared responsibility and motivation to effect change. It also reduces the partnership's ability to plan and deliver work which requires input from the agencies represented by these senior stakeholders, which negatively affects its ability to implement improved coordination, systems flex or systems change.
Potential solutions	One local area's formation of a strategic sub-group could serve as a possible solution to this challenge, as explored in the case study below.
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local area lead interviews • Deep-dive interviews • E-survey responses

Case study example of potential solution: strategic sub-group in local area G

Local area G established a strategic sub-group. Its primary purpose was to consolidate learning about systemic issues from operational groups and ensure that relevant information was escalated to the wider strategic group:

“Lots of little operational groups were already ongoing, but no one was pulling them together. We are starting to understand that there is lots of information in these groups, either about individuals or about trends. What we need to be doing is having more joined up thinking for these operational groups.”

However, the sub-group also serves the purpose of requiring less time from the most senior colleagues in the partnership on the strategic board, and

allowing them to engage with those issues on which they can have the most impact, as determined by the sub-group:

“The strategic partnership is about what we can do to change to policy among partners. The sub-group is where we decide what to focus on and is the place where we pull all the stuff together based on intelligence from navigators and the operational groups. This is the stuff we need to feed back to strategic partners.”

Partners decided to keep this strategic sub-group to a maximum of ten members, to allow for a more compact and agile group. This sub-group serves as an effective solution to the tension between seniority and capacity of partners at a strategic level, while also ensuring greater connectivity between operational and strategic groups.

4.4 Key challenge 3: ‘Winding down’ of the strategic group

In some local areas in the MEAM Approach network, **strategic groups were de-prioritised or appeared to lose purpose** once operational groups were running efficiently. In four local areas, this resulted in meetings of the strategic group being discontinued.

Figure 20: Key challenge 3: ‘Winding down’ of the strategic group

Element	Finding
Impact on partnership efficiency	The absence of, or low engagement by, a strategic group reduces the potential for a local area to flex or change local systems or working practices. It creates challenges for the sustainability of the partnerships, and may limit the work to responding to individual cases rather than wider systemic issues.
Potential solutions	There is a need to establish a clear function for strategic groups beyond the initial development of the work and to provide a clear definition of the ongoing relationship between strategic and operational work – e.g. escalation pathways for systemic barriers arising in operational groups. Potential solutions across the network include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Re-)establish the MEAM Approach “strategic home” in a pre-existing strategic group, rather than a stand-alone strategic group. • Strategic group to focus on wider issues (e.g. housing), with MEAM Approach work as a standing item on the agenda. • Ensuring that the terms of reference for the strategic group are clearly articulated and include a focus on tackling

Element	Finding
	systemic barriers and other ongoing functions (beyond just setting up local work using the MEAM Approach).
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local area lead interviews MEAM staff consultation E-survey responses

Case study example of challenge: local area F

Local area F has a well-established and effective multi-agency operational group supporting clients to achieve better outcomes. Despite this, key stakeholders reported it can struggle to effect sustainable, systemic change:

“I know some areas have invested in the strategic group first, but we really focussed on the operational group to build relationships, get around the table, and we didn’t really bring a strategic group with us. Now that we’re looking at systems change, we haven’t got that strategic buy-in. We have lots of strong buy-in from operational level though; now it’s just about elevating that.”

The operational group has led to more effective partnership working at an operational level, but the importance of a stronger strategic partnership and buy-in was acknowledged by the local area lead, in order to impact on local systems and ensure the sustainability of the MEAM Approach.

4.5 Key challenge 4: Expertise/motivation held in individuals not the system

Most local areas reported that the **expertise and motivation to deliver work using the MEAM Approach rested with one or two key people**, rather than being widespread across the partnership.

Figure 21: Key challenge 4: Expertise/motivation held in individuals not the system

Element	Finding
Impact on partnership efficiency	Although motivated individuals can deliver positive outcomes, this also poses a risk to the sustainability of MEAM Approach partnerships and their work. For instance, expertise and momentum behind the MEAM Approach may be reduced if these individuals leave their roles. In some cases, this may even lead to retrenchment into previous ways of working. Equally, if generating flexibility, improved coordination or more person-centred support rests mainly with individuals, this can prevent these approaches from being adopted and embedded

Element	Finding
	across the system, such as in policies, procedures or working cultures.
Potential solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing strong strategic leadership and buy-in and celebrating the successes of the partnership may help to engage and maintain input of a wider range of partners. Ensuring that improvements to support are built into policies, pathways and processes and not just negotiated by individuals on a case-by-case basis helps to ensure that these changes are embedded at a service or system level.
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local area lead interviews

Case study example of challenge: local area L

Stakeholders from local area L identified this issue of expertise and motivation being held in individuals rather than systems as a challenge to the impact of their work. For example, one key stakeholder recognised their own role as integral in ensuring the coordination between services that had led to better outcomes for clients:

“Organisations work well when we’re driving it, but whether they would while we weren’t driving it... I still question if we weren’t doing it, whether those things would still happen. We’re very aware that MEAM does work, we’ve had some great results, but we’re also aware that if we weren’t there it would disintegrate.”

Most local areas reported that it would take time for work developed using the MEAM Approach to be embedded in local systems beyond the individuals driving this work. However, one key stakeholder in local area L reported that a more proactive approach to succession planning could help counter this challenge:

“It’s the challenge around maintaining the types of personalities we have within the partnerships. Organisations change, people change – you’ve got to have people in the right mindset. If there is change, you almost need to groom someone else, that sort of succession planning.”

4.6 Key challenge 5: Turnover of frontline staff

The **relatively high turnover of frontline staff** was reported by stakeholders across the network. It is often related to the short-term nature of funding for the work.

Figure 22: Key challenge 5: Turnover of frontline staff

Element	Finding
Impact on partnership efficiency	High staff turnover poses a challenge to the maintenance of key aspects of partnerships, such as strong inter-personal relationships, consistent working practices and support pathways. It also makes it more difficult to ensure that the MEAM Approach values and learning through implementation are maintained by the partnership.
Potential solutions	This is an ongoing challenge for MEAM Approach partnerships. Other than the provision of longer-term funding, potential solutions may include investment in staff wellbeing, reflective practice and training in trauma-informed care.
Source of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local area lead interviews



CordisBright Limited

23/24 Smithfield Street, London EC1A 9LF

Telephone	020 7330 9170
Email	info@cordisbright.co.uk
Internet	www.cordisbright.co.uk