




REFLECTIONS FROM THE MEAM APPROACH NETWORK

Transforming services and
systems for people facing
multiple disadvantage


 © Making Every Adult Matter
 (MEAM)
 2–6 Tenter Ground
 London
 E1 7NH
www.meam.org.uk
[@MEAMcoalition](https://twitter.com/MEAMcoalition)

INTRODUCTION

Since 2010, MEAM has supported over 50 local authority areas to transform services and systems for people facing multiple disadvantage.


Forty of these local areas have used the MEAM Approach to guide their work, while 12 formed part of the National Lottery Community Fund's Fulfilling Lives programme. Over the last five years, the MEAM Approach network has been generously supported by the National Lottery Community Fund and this funding has recently been extended for a further two years.

MEAM acts as a 'critical friend' to local areas as they work to improve services and systems. We also seek to ensure that learning from local areas can inspire other areas to act, and that it can influence national policy. Most recently this has included work to help shape the Changing Futures programme.

As the landscape on multiple disadvantage changes, we recently took time to reflect with partners across the network on what has been learnt about tackling multiple disadvantage, what has and hasn't been achieved, and how this collective learning can shape practice and policy in the years ahead.

In this report we explore some of the 'key ingredients' that MEAM Approach areas and the MEAM team see as essential to successful work, and consider what is needed next for the future. The content reflects five facilitated conversations held at the MEAM Approach network annual conference in March 2022, which are [available to view](#) on our website.

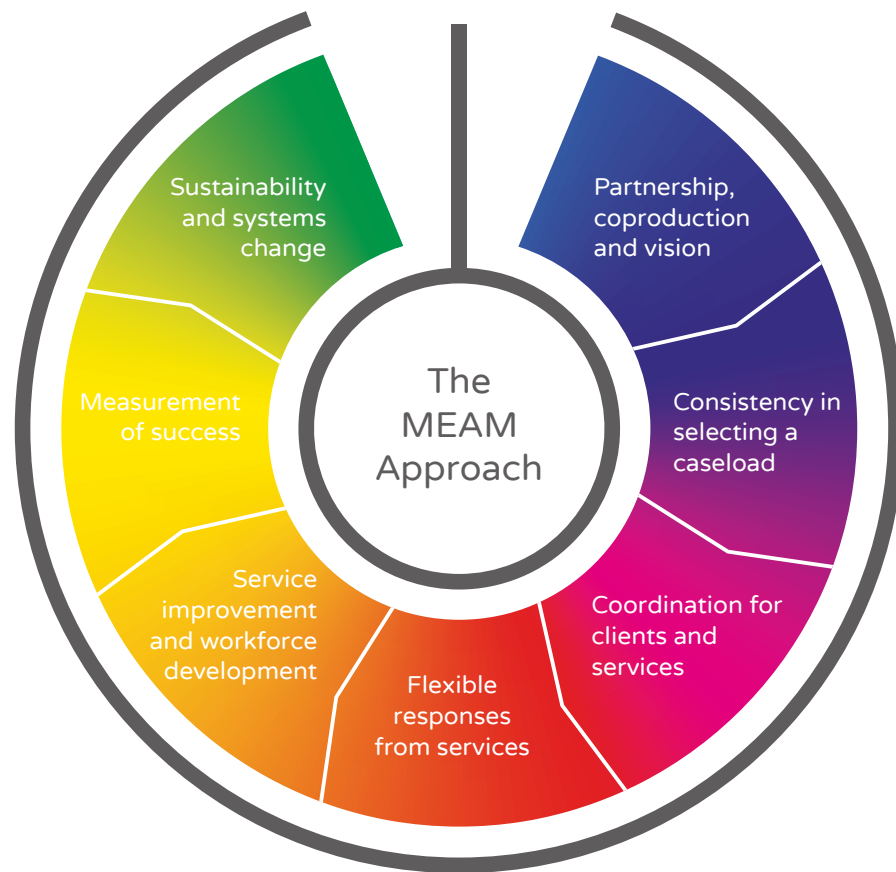
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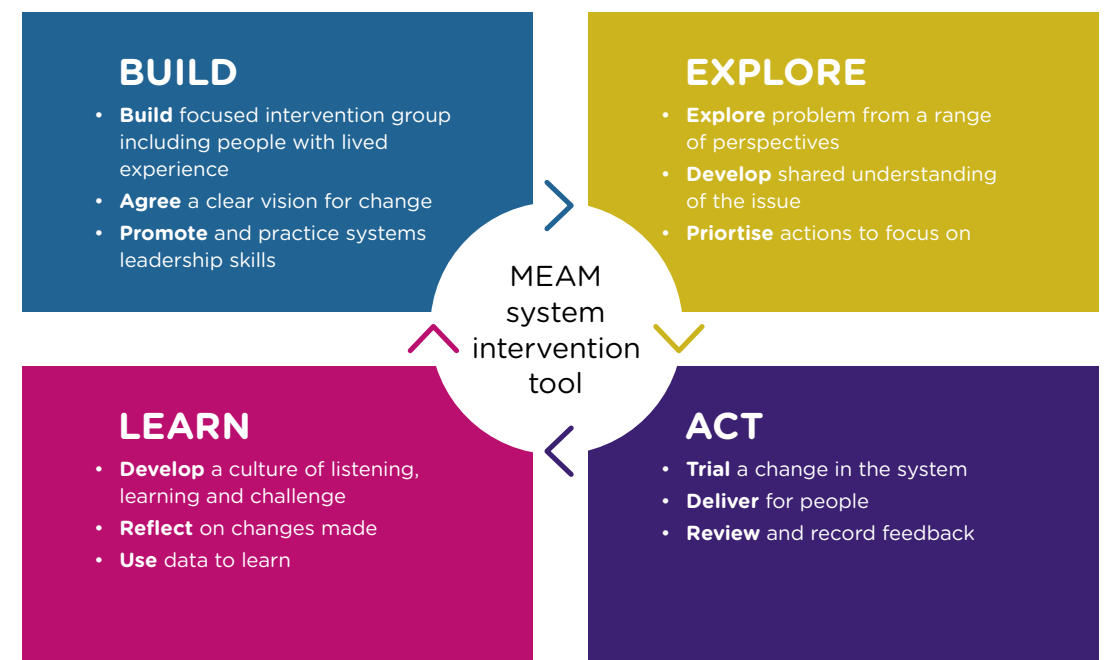
THE MEAM APPROACH

The MEAM Approach is a non-prescriptive framework that supports local areas to transform services and systems for people facing multiple disadvantage. Local partnerships consider the seven principles and adapt them to local needs and circumstances. MEAM provides hands-on support to the local partnerships as part of this process. A [booklet](#) providing detailed information about the MEAM Approach can be downloaded from our website.

MEAM SYSTEM INTERVENTION TOOL

As part of their work using the MEAM Approach, many local areas wish to explore specific challenges in their local systems. The MEAM System Intervention Tool provides a framework for this and forms the basis of our more focused intervention support to local areas. The tool includes four key elements – Build, Explore, Act and Learn –

supporting local areas to build effective partnerships for change; explore a systemic problem from a range of perspectives; take action to make a change in the system; and to learn from and reflect on the impact to determine next steps. More information [about the tool](#) and the support we can provide is available on our website.



BUILD

- **Build** focused intervention group including people with lived experience
- **Agree** a clear vision for change
- **Promote** and practice systems leadership skills

EXPLORE

- **Explore** problem from a range of perspectives
- **Develop** shared understanding of the issue
- **Prioritise** actions to focus on

MEAM
system
intervention
tool

LEARN

- **Develop** a culture of listening, learning and challenge
- **Reflect** on changes made
- **Use** data to learn

ACT

- **Trial** a change in the system
- **Deliver** for people
- **Review** and record feedback

THE MEAM APPROACH IN NUMBERS



33 current MEAM Approach areas in the evaluation



An **82%** reduction in rough sleeping
From **49%** at the start of support to **9%** after a year



Longitudinal evaluation data from **785** people in **25** areas



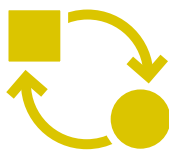
Statistically significant reductions in A&E attendance and nights in hospital
33% and **49%** reductions respectively after a year



Over **1,944** people supported



Improvements to individuals' wellbeing and circumstances as evidenced by the Homeless Outcomes Star and New Directions Team assessment



Evidence of work to change local systems across **6** key themes

KEY INGREDIENTS TO SUCCESS

In this report we explore a set of 'key ingredients' that MEAM Approach areas and the MEAM team see as essential to successful work:

// 1

Partnership and leadership

// 4

Developing trauma-informed systems

// 2

Coproduction and power

// 5

An intersectional approach

// 3

New operational approaches

// 6

Shaping the wider environment

Figures from the [Year 4 evaluation report](#), available on our website. The Year 5 report will be published in autumn 2022.

PARTNERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP

Partnership and leadership are at the heart of the MEAM Approach.

All MEAM Approach areas are based around strong **cross-sector** partnerships involving a wide range of **statutory and voluntary** services, commissioners, policymakers and people with lived experience.

These partnerships have a **clear vision for change** and operate at **operational and strategic** levels, allowing them to improve service responses for individuals and tackle the systemic barriers to long-term change.

The best MEAM Approach partnerships invest significant time and energy in ensuring that they are **healthy and able to drive change**. This means that they:

- Are **open and inclusive**, involving and engaging a wide range of viewpoints.
- Understand the **impact of power** and take action to mitigate power imbalances.
- Are prepared to be guided by and to share power with **people with lived experience**.
- Have a **shared understanding of multiple disadvantage**.
- Have a strong identity as a group, based on a **shared vision and ambition** about what can be achieved.
- Create a culture of **trust, learning and constructive challenge**.

“Partnerships require constant attention and support to enable them to remain healthy and drive change.”

- Are **strategically relevant**, with strong links to local agendas and a clear ‘strategic home’ for the work.
- Are **well attended**, with senior and consistent attendance.
- Ensure **clear links between operational and strategic** aspects of the partnership, allowing issues to be escalated and addressed.
- Take a **system wide view**, using systems thinking to guide change.
- Understand that fundamental shifts are needed to create an **area-wide leadership culture** that is trauma-informed and strengths-based.

Where next?

Partnerships require constant attention and support to enable them to remain healthy and drive change. The changing policy and practice landscape, competing local priorities, partnership ‘fatigue’ and the turnover of staff can have a detrimental effect, which requires constant local leadership to overcome. MEAM Approach areas report that taking

action can be a motivating force in itself, as can connecting with like-minded peers from across the network.

The availability in recent years of a range of national funding streams, focused on silo outcomes rather than system-wide change, has often caused local partnerships to be drawn away from their systems-focused work in pursuit of much needed investment. Recent policy work from MEAM is highlighting this challenge and exploring how greater coordination of national funding could support systemic work.

Some sectors continue to engage better with multiple disadvantage partnerships than others and local areas must act to fill gaps in membership where they exist.

MEAM will continue to support local areas to ensure their partnerships are healthy, active and fit for purpose.

Resources

The MEAM [Partnerships self-assessment tool](#) is available on our website. The MEAM team provide regular support to local areas to develop and strengthen local partnerships.

COPRODUCTION AND POWER

Coproduction and the sharing of power are a vital part of any healthy and effective local partnership.

Understanding **power** and the harm caused by power imbalances within systems, is central to coproduction. All MEAM Approach areas are encouraged to develop their own understanding of coproduction, with a particular focus on empowering people with lived experience of multiple disadvantage and the frontline workers that support them.

Successful MEAM Approach areas recognise that people with lived experience are the experts in their own lives and should therefore be central to designing and delivering the support they access. All voices and experience, including policymakers, commissioners, frontline staff and experts by experience should be equally heard. To achieve this shift of power requires a significant change in culture and practice, rather than one-off interventions or activities.

MEAM Approach areas that have made the most significant progress in coproducing their work recognise that:

- A **shared set of values** must be co-created within a group, providing accountability and a sense of safety for all involved.

- Everyone involved in partnerships has **different levels and kinds of power**. Developing plans to share power, and mitigate the misuse of power, is vital to success.
- Coproduction happens in many forms. Partnerships must think creatively and collaboratively about **how to engage people with different needs and experiences** in a safe and constructive way.
- Coproduction has the potential to re-traumatise people who have had negative experiences of systems. Partnerships may wish to seek specialist support to ensure that their approach to coproduction is **trauma-informed, inclusive and strengths-based**.
- Coproduction requires a deep **culture change**, which requires ongoing time, commitment and resource.
- Coproduction activity should be **developed across the system**, to avoid it happening in silos.

Where next?

Coproducing work with a range of stakeholders, particularly those who don't hold traditional forms of power, requires challenging how systems traditionally behave. Progress is therefore often slow, with a lot of learning and many engrained behaviours to challenge and change. Further work is needed to ensure that coproduction happens at senior levels too, rather than just being seen as a service-level issue.

Many MEAM Approach areas are progressing long-term work on coproduction, increasing the range and representation of people they work with, finding opportunities to influence, and ensuring that more people across the system see first-hand the value of this approach.

MEAM will continue to support this vital work, whilst continuing to challenge ourselves in our own practice and cultures.

Resources

The MEAM resources [Getting started with coproduction](#) and [Co-design self-assessment tool](#) are available on our website. The MEAM team regularly provide bespoke support to local areas on coproduction.

“Coproduction requires a significant change in culture and practice, rather than one-off interventions or activities.”

NEW OPERATIONAL APPROACHES

Successful MEAM Approach areas have transformed the way that services engage with and support people facing multiple disadvantage.

Many local areas have developed teams of **navigators** or **coordinators** to walk alongside people, to support them to achieve their goals and to advocate for appropriate flexible responses from services. Some areas have adopted a **lead worker model** utilising existing staff from across the system. Some areas have created easier access to services by **co-locating services** in one space or by **embedding specialist workers** within navigator or outreach teams.

Regardless of the methods used, MEAM Approach areas recognise that a different approach to support is needed – one which is **long-term and relational**, draws on the **strengths and aspirations** of individuals, is shaped by a clear **understanding of the trauma** that people have faced and which works **across local places and transition points**, rather than in service silos. MEAM Approach areas seek to ask people “What do you need from us as a system?” rather than “This is what our service offers, do you want to engage with it?”

Transformative approaches require:

- A belief in every person’s potential and a commitment to letting **people define their own pathways** to independence and recovery, understanding that progress looks different for different people.

“MEAM Approach areas recognise that a different approach to support is needed.”

- Passionate navigators/staff with **small caseloads**, the time to form **trusting relationships** and who can take a **trauma-informed and strengths-based approach** to their work.
- Senior and **system-wide strategic commitment** which empowers people to work with **autonomy and creativity**, and **identifies and tackles the systemic barriers** that cause and perpetuate multiple disadvantage.
- New approaches to **assessment, risk management and service access thresholds**, a commitment to **long-term support** rather than “closing” cases, and a system-wide agreement that **nobody should be excluded** from support.
- Staff across a wide range of statutory and voluntary organisations who **trust each other**, understand their local system, know what they are **collectively trying to achieve** and are clear about the **roles they each can play**.
- Sufficient time and resource in the system to **properly support navigators and other staff** with the unique challenges they face in their roles, for example in the form of reflective practice with a clinical supervisor.

Where next?

The navigator model, combined with a strong operational and strategic partnership, helps people to improve their lives. As work on multiple disadvantage expands nationally, we must ensure that the fidelity of this approach is not watered-down. Local areas must ensure that navigators have small caseloads and that the strategic and operational partnership structures they need to succeed are in place.

Whilst navigators and specialist roles in teams are successful at improving support for individual people, we must continue to address the systemic failings that create the need for these roles in the first place.

Access to navigators has not been equitable across different demographics. For more information on this please see the section on an intersectional approach.

Resources

The briefings [*What makes an effective multiple disadvantage navigator?*](#) (Fulfilling Lives) and [*Rough Sleeping Navigators: Learning from the MEAM Approach and Fulfilling Lives*](#) are available via our website and provide more information on the important role of navigators and the environment they need to succeed.

DEVELOPING TRAUMA-INFORMED SYSTEMS

Successful MEAM Approach areas recognise that they need to embed trauma-informed approaches across their whole system, including policy, leadership and commissioning.

There is a growing understanding of the impact of trauma, particularly when experienced in childhood, and how these experiences can shape behaviours and emotional responses later in life. It is becoming more widely accepted that services and systems are often designed in a way that exclude people who have experienced trauma, and furthermore, that contact with services can be the very cause of the trauma or re-traumatisation.

The most progressive MEAM Approach areas recognise that to achieve systemic change **a trauma-informed approach must be embedded strategically as well as operationally**. This includes system-wide workforce development (including senior strategic stakeholders) to allow the system's **practices, policies, strategies, cultures and values** to be viewed through a trauma-informed lens.

Local areas which understand trauma-informed approaches find that there are close links between **trauma, strengths-based practice and coproduction**. Imbalances of power between people and systems can be a cause of trauma, therefore sharing and re-distributing power can be key in restoring trust and healing. Similarly,

valuing a person for their strengths and co-creating opportunities for them to thrive is central to moving towards a more effective and truly trauma-informed system.

The most successful MEAM Approach areas have found that:

- Developing an **area-wide group of people and services** committed to trauma-informed practice, alongside **strategic support and resource** for the work is a powerful combination for driving change.
- A trauma-informed approach requires **workforce development at all levels** of the system. As well as formal training, this involves modelling trauma-informed practices and speaking out about problematic practices or language.
- The work succeeds when strategic leaders invest time in understanding how trauma-informed approaches, strengths-based practice and coproduction can **inform the whole system**, not just the work of frontline colleagues.
- Frontline workers have benefitted from **recognising vicarious trauma** experienced in their own work, which is a common cause of burnout in teams.

Where next?

In many local areas as well as in central government, traditional approaches to policymaking and commissioning hamper efforts to embed trauma-informed systems. There is more work to be done to achieve the structural conditions required for truly trauma-informed systems to be developed.

Some MEAM Approach areas have committed to becoming a “trauma-informed city/place,” with significant investment in workforce development and a commitment to reviewing and transforming cultures, policies and practices that exclude people. We welcome this and look forward to learning from their achievements.

Modelling trauma-informed practice day-to-day is vital to leading change. Across the network, there are a growing number of people modelling and advocating for trauma-informed systems. Peer support across the network will allow this learning to be easily shared.

Resources

MEAM offers an introduction to trauma-informed and strengths-based practice as part of our core training package. Please see our [website](#) for more information.

“To achieve systemic change, a trauma-informed approach must be embedded strategically and operationally.”

4

AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

To effectively tackle multiple disadvantage, local areas need to have a detailed understanding of what causes multiple disadvantage and how it is experienced by individuals.

Some areas across the MEAM Approach network are making a concerted effort to take an intersectional approach to multiple disadvantage, recognising how people's personal, social and political identities and the discrimination linked to these intersect to create unique experiences of multiple disadvantage.

Through this work they are highlighting that everyone has a nuanced, and individual, experience of multiple disadvantage, and are striving to meet people at the intersections of their oppression and disadvantage. Responses range from contextualising systemic racism in services and systems, to ensuring that services are gender and trauma-informed.

Utilising an intersectional framework allows local areas to engage with the complexities of people's lives and to consider how the system often perpetuates systemic disadvantage through the way it operates.

In recent years, we have encouraged local areas to have a particular focus on racism, seeking to understand how systemic and structural racism as well as power and privilege impact people's likelihood and experience of multiple disadvantage.

“An intersectional approach recognises how people's personal, social and political identities and the discrimination linked to these intersect.”

MEAM has been supporting the network to recognise that:

- Systemic racism is a **feature of society including within the services and systems** that support people facing multiple disadvantage, and that focused work is needed to address this.
- More work is needed to ensure that commissioning and decision-making processes avoid **reproducing systemic inequity and systemic racism**, for example by coproducing data and performance infrastructures that can promote racial equity and challenge the status quo.
- Engagement with **specialist community-led organisations** needs to be adequately resourced and remunerated, encouraging and allowing for meaningful participation rather than tokenistic efforts to consult with underfunded community-led services that are often filling the gaps left by mainstream services.

Where next?

There is much more work to be done to acknowledge and fully appreciate how systemic disadvantage informs and impacts on individual experiences of multiple disadvantage. There remains a significant concern that some MEAM Approach cohorts are not representative of local need. For example, the majority of people supported in MEAM Approach areas are white.

MEAM has launched a programme of work to promote activity on racism and multiple disadvantage and will continue to support local areas on this in the next phase of our work.

Resources

Information on MEAM's work around systemic racism and multiple disadvantage and gender and multiple disadvantage can be accessed via our [website](#). Our team can provide support to local areas wanting to better understand an intersectional approach.

SHAPING THE WIDER ENVIRONMENT

Successful MEAM Approach areas recognise that to achieve long-term change they need to influence the way that the system is structured at central and local government levels.

Our current system for tackling social problems is **deficit-based and silo-orientated**, focusing on the ‘problems’ of homelessness, substance misuse, mental health, criminal justice, domestic and sexual violence as separate issues and with separate solutions. From the very top, these issues are the responsibility of different ministers and departments, with limited cross-cutting mechanisms to coordinate activity or output.

Government funding, outcome measurements and accountability structures mirror these silos and are passed down to local commissioners and then to delivery partners. This creates a **web of policy, commissioning and service delivery which is poorly coordinated locally and nationally**.

At best, this system fails to effectively support people facing multiple disadvantage, while at worst it actively contributes to the difficulties they face.

In recent years there has been an increased focus on multiple disadvantage across funding and commissioning in many government departments. While this is welcome, the work is often directed from and focused within each silo, duplicating effort rather than promoting a coordinated approach.

Much of the work in MEAM Approach areas is about developing approaches that can better coordinate the various inputs that the system provides and mitigate negative impacts. This requires significant **local leadership and an ability to think and work across systems**, something which needs to be developed and supported on a far greater scale.

Where next?

Ultimately, reform is needed to transform the silo-based approach of the current system, creating an environment that can better incentivise and support local work on tackling multiple disadvantage and create a **shared ownership and accountability across government** for those who continue to be failed by traditional ways of working.

Such a system would hold the issues and values identified in this report at its core, ensuring that partnership, leadership, coproduction, long-term relational-support, and trauma-informed, strengths-based and intersectional approaches cut across government policy and local delivery.

Conclusion

We hope that the reflections in this report inspire local areas and national policymakers in their work to tackle multiple disadvantage.

MEAM will continue to advocate for a better system, locally and nationally, utilising the experience and expertise of the MEAM Approach network to inform our work.

Through our support to the MEAM Approach network and others, we will ensure that there is a healthy and diverse eco-system of local areas across the country working to tackle multiple disadvantage. We will enable these networks to learn and share from each other and ensure that the growing movement of people committed to tackling multiple disadvantage is supported to achieve change.

“Reform is needed to transform the silo-based approach of the current system, creating an environment that can better incentivise and support local action.”

