
TRANSFORMING SERVICES AND SYSTEMS FOR PEOPLE FACING MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGE

Learning from the
MEAM Approach network



INTRODUCTION

This year, MEAM marks 15 years of supporting local areas and national policymakers to transform services, systems and policy for people facing multiple disadvantage.

In that time, the MEAM Approach network has grown to 50 local areas. We are inspired daily by their work and the positive impact they are having on local systems and people's lives. We have been proud to help shape and support the landmark investment programmes of Fulfilling Lives and Changing Futures.

As we look towards the future, we see both the significant progress made on how to tackle multiple disadvantage and also the persistent challenges that remain.

We are united in our assessment that bold cross-sector and cross-organisational collaboration will continue to be needed, local and nationally.

With the support of our funders, we are taking clear steps to ensure that MEAM can continue to offer our support to the people and local areas across the country who are leading change.

As we turn 15, we have been reflecting on 15 things we have learnt from the local areas we support: 15 things that make effective and sustainable work to tackle multiple disadvantage possible. This report is offered as a resource and conversation-starter for them, for us, and for other areas interested in progressing this vital work.

If you are interested in joining this movement, please do get in touch – info@meam.org.uk.

Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM)

is the national charity supporting practitioners, policymakers and people with lived experience to transform services and systems for people facing multiple disadvantage. Formed as a coalition in 2009 we work across sectors, across government, and with more than 50 local areas to improve responses and change lives. From January 2025, we will operate as a charity with our partners Clinks, Collective Voice, Homeless Link and Mind on our board.

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www.meam.org.uk

ABOUT MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGE

People facing multiple disadvantage experience a combination of problems. For many, their current circumstances are shaped by long-term experiences of poverty, deprivation, trauma, abuse and neglect. Many also face racism, sexism and homophobia.

These structural inequalities intersect in different ways, manifesting in a combination of experiences including homelessness, substance misuse, domestic violence, contact with the criminal justice system and mental ill health.

Multiple disadvantage is a systemic and not an individual issue. Over many years, public services have been designed, commissioned and delivered in silos. This starts at the top and permeates down through funding and commissioning, leading to services that focus on singular issues. While this works for many, it often fails people experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Often, services can be provided on a “We do this” basis – offering one thing, on their terms, and at a location and time of their choosing, regardless of what the person might actually need. This is not the fault of services, it is a problem created by the system we live and work in.

Our work with MEAM Approach areas seeks to turn this on its head, creating local systems, informed by lived experience, that can ask: “What do you need to move forward?” and “How can we as a whole system support you with that?” This is a fundamental re-imagining of what it means to provide support.

FROM:

“This is what our service offers. Do you want to engage with it?”

TO:

“How can we as a coordinated local system help you move forward?”

TOOLS, RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

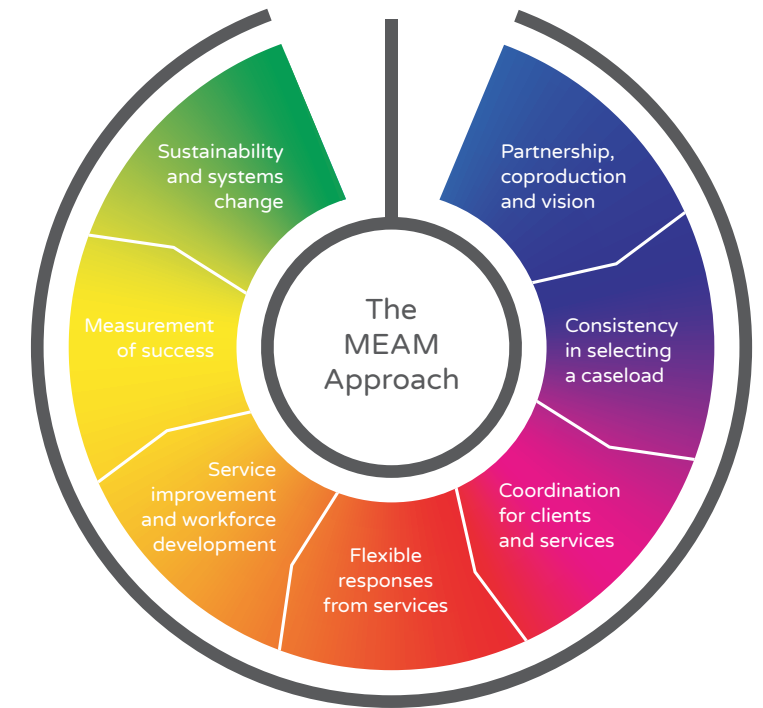
MEAM uses a range of tools and resources, alongside the expertise of our team, to support local areas with their work.

Our team have a deep knowledge of multiple disadvantage, a core commitment to coproduction and blend expert insight on systems approaches with a practical understanding of how services and local areas actually work.

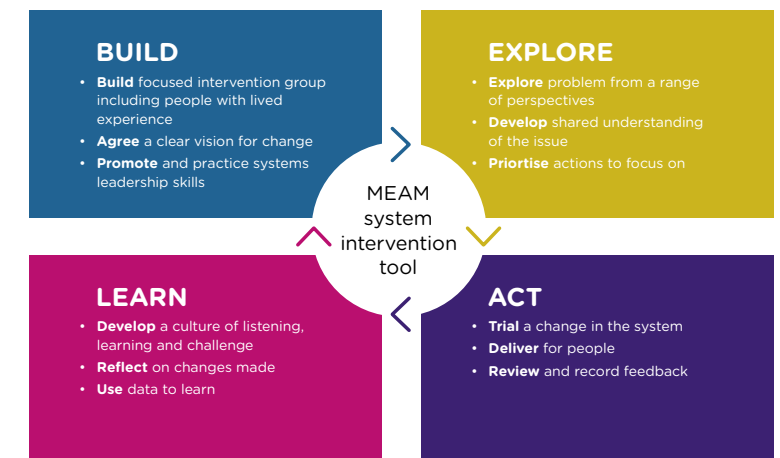
We provide a wide range of bespoke support, advice, training and consultancy to local areas within and outside the MEAM Approach network and support local areas to learn and share from each other. For more information on how we can support you, please visit [our website](#).



The MEAM Approach is a non-prescriptive framework that supports local areas to transform services and systems for people facing multiple disadvantage.



The MEAM System Intervention Tool provides a framework to help local areas explore specific challenges in their local systems.



THE MEAM APPROACH IN NUMBERS



50 local areas
in the MEAM
Approach network



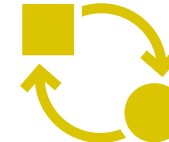
Over **2,687**
people supported



Longitudinal
evaluation data
from **924** people
in **27** areas



An **89%** reduction
in rough sleeping
From **46%** at the start
of support to **5%** after
two years.



Evidence of work
to change local
systems across
6 key themes



Statistically
significant
reductions in A&E
attendance (37%),
non-elective acute
hospital admissions
(50%) and nights
in prison (37%)
All figures over two
years, except for hospital
admissions over one year.



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

Figures from the independent evaluation of the MEAM Approach Network 2017-2022, Year 5 Final Report, available on [our website](#). The MEAM Approach network was further expanded in 2022 and 2024.

15 THINGS WE'VE LEARNT

This report highlights 15 things we've learnt over the last 15 years from more than 50 local areas working to tackle multiple disadvantage.

Each of the points are inter-related to the others and the depth to which they are achieved is important. Rather than trying to 'tick them off' we encourage local areas to use them as a basis for discussion and for deepening and strengthening cross-sector partnership.

The MEAM tools and resources on pages 6-7 are also a helpful reference and contain related material.

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Partnership and leadership

// **2**
Trust

// **3**
Continuous learning

// **4**
Coproduction and power

// **5**
Shared systemic understanding

// **6**
Clear vision and definition

// **7**
Intersectional and anti-oppression

// **8**
Trauma-informed and strengths-based

// **9**
Coordinated and personalised support

// **10**
Flexible responses from services

// **11**
Shared approach to risk

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Aligned funding and strategy

// **14**
Communication and tackling stigma

// **15**
National action

1

PARTNERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP

Partnership and leadership are at the heart of the MEAM Approach. No single organisation or individual can tackle multiple disadvantage alone.

- 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.
- Effective partnerships are needed at operational and strategic levels, allowing areas to improve frontline service responses for individuals and tackle the systemic barriers to long-term change. We say more about these twin aims under points 9 and 10.
- Partnership requires leadership – not just from the top, but from people across local systems. There are normally a group of leaders in MEAM Approach areas with the commitment, passion and vulnerability to take a more diverse, system-wide approach to leadership; to create space for the work to happen; and to inspire others to work alongside them.
- By focusing on the other points in this report, successful partnerships ensure that they are more than just “meetings” and that they develop the depth of partnership needed to achieve change. They make themselves strategically relevant to the local context and are open to, and inclusive of, a wide range of people, organisations, communities and views.



2

TRUST

To be effective, local partnerships need to be having the right conversations. This isn't possible without high levels of trust, safety and a willingness to include a wide range of views and experiences.

- Effective partnerships create a culture of trust and constructive challenge, allowing members to explore the issues they are trying to solve, to speak frankly about the difficulties they face, and to avoid laying blame with other parts of the system.
- People in partnerships need to feel safe to share their views and to take ownership for the things they can and can't change. Everyone needs to trust the people they are working with across the system, not just the people in their own organisations.
- Partnerships should be a place where people go to boost morale, to validate and challenge their thinking, and to find solidarity with people working for change.
- Effective local partnerships are open and inclusive, listening to and including the views of people from across local systems. They involve people with lived experience as equal partners (see point 4) and they value and include frontline workers as a vital source of insight and expertise.



3

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

No-one has all the answers, and so to be effective, local partnerships need to embed a culture of continuous learning and reflection.

- Effective local partnerships understand that multiple disadvantage is a systemic problem with no single cause or solution (see point 5).
- A culture of continuous learning is therefore needed, so that the challenges being faced and the actions taken can be used to learn, adapt and improve the local system over time.
- For learning to make a meaningful difference, effective partnerships create feedback loops – both horizontally and vertically – enabling the connection of action and outcome to improve the learning of the whole partnership, not just each team or organisation.
- Partnerships in the MEAM Approach network know that they can learn from areas doing similar work and equally that their experiences are highly valuable to others. They engage with peer-to-peer learning and support, building trusting relationships across the network.



4

COPRODUCTION AND POWER

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

- Successful local partnerships recognise that people with lived experience are the experts in their own lives and should be central to designing and delivering the support they access.
- Partnerships understand that everyone has different forms of power, but that power imbalances exist and must be mitigated. All voices, including lived and professional experience, should be equally heard.
- Partnerships treat everyone with dignity and respect, recognising that in many cases organisations have contributed to the trauma that people are experiencing. Coproduction work is trauma-informed, inclusive and strengths-based to avoid re-traumatisation.
- Coproduction happens in many forms. Partnerships think creatively and collaboratively about how to engage people with different needs and experiences in a safe and constructive way. Coproduction activity should be developed across the system and at all levels (not just at the service level) to avoid it happening in silos.
- Effective coproduction requires a significant change in culture and practice (as well as ongoing time, commitment and resource) rather than one-off interventions. A shared set of values must be co-created, providing accountability and a sense of safety for all involved.



5

SHARED SYSTEMIC UNDERSTANDING

Local partnerships need a shared understanding of multiple disadvantage as a systemic issue.

- Effective partnerships understand that multiple disadvantage is a systemic, not an individual problem (see page 4). They take time to explore the issue from a range of perspectives, listening to people's past and current experiences and the reasons why they view the system as they do.
- Partnerships recognise that we are all part of the system we are trying to change and that coordination across and within sectors is vital for success. They understand that actions in one part of the system affect other parts and that there is a need to change the narrative to one that recognises the system as a whole: 'our work' not 'my/your' work.
- Partnerships focus on consensus rather than agreement, adopt a learning approach (see point 3) and are careful not to use traditional 'project management' or 'problem solving' techniques.
- The MEAM Systems Intervention Tool (alongside the support of our Systems Practice Team) can be a helpful framework for local areas looking to address specific challenges in their local system.



6

CLEAR VISION AND DEFINITION

Local partnerships need a shared vision for change and a working definition of multiple disadvantage.

- Partnerships often start by exploring a shared set of values and co-creating a shared vision and ambition about what can be achieved. This helps them to form a strong identity as a group and keeps the work focused.
- Local partnerships understand that defining multiple disadvantage is difficult – a too closed definition can create further exclusion, while a too open definition can lead to a lack of focus. MEAM provides advice and guidance to local areas on definition and encourages local areas to adapt this to the specific needs of local populations. An intersectional and anti-oppression approach is vital (see point 7).
- Local areas use their thinking on vision and definition to identify a cohort of people to work with as part of the frontline work. MEAM advises that caseloads are kept small (maximum 10) and that people are supported long-term rather than being taken on and off the cohort. For more information on cohorts please see the relevant section of the MEAM Approach wheel.



7

INTERSECTIONAL AND ANTI-OPPRESSION

Local partnerships understand that everyone's experience of multiple disadvantage is unique and that oppression contributes to people's exclusion.

- Effective local partnerships 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. This includes, but is not limited to disability, race, gender, and sexuality. They understand 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.
- Partnerships recognise that systemic racism and oppression are a feature of society and therefore exist within the services and systems that support people facing multiple disadvantage. They recognise that services and systems often perpetuate systemic disadvantage through the way they operate.
- Partnerships aim to avoid reproducing systemic inequity, oppression and racism within their work on multiple disadvantage and to engage with – and actively support – a wide range of community groups and services.
- There is much more work to be done to acknowledge and fully appreciate how systemic oppression shapes work in MEAM Approach areas. We have recently undertaken a programme of work to promote activity on racism and multiple disadvantage and continue to work with our team and local areas to embed anti-oppression in our work.



8

TRAUMA-INFORMED AND STRENGTH-BASED

Local partnerships aim to embed trauma-informed and strength-based approaches across their whole system, not just frontline services.

- Partnerships recognise that experiencing trauma, particularly in childhood, can shape behaviours, emotional responses and how people present to services later in life. They know that services and systems often exclude people who have experienced trauma, and that contact with services can be re-traumatising or the very cause of the trauma.
- Partnerships are also aware that many services and systems are deficit-based, focusing by default on what people can't do, rather than what they can; and trying to 'fix problems' rather than building on people's strengths and ambitions.
- Tackling this requires trauma-informed and strength-based approaches and values to be embedded at all levels of the system including policy, leadership and commissioning. This requires system-wide workforce development (including senior strategic stakeholders) to allow the system's practices, policies, strategies, cultures and values to be created through a trauma-informed and strength-based lens.
- Partnerships recognise that there are close links between trauma, strength-based practice and coproduction and seek to draw these together in their work.



9

COORDINATED AND PERSONALISED SUPPORT

Changing the way that people receive support is vital. To achieve this, frontline workers must be given a “remit to have no remit” from operational and strategic colleagues.

- Successful local partnerships recognise that a “We do this” approach from services does not work well for people facing multiple disadvantage. Individuals need personalised support, which can help them to define their own pathway to recovery and address the issues they face in the order they wish.
- Support must be long-term and relational; follow people on their journey across services, places and transition points; be built on mutual trust; and not be time-limited. It must draw on people’s strengths and aspirations and be shaped by an understanding of the trauma they have faced. Caseloads must be kept small (see point 6), nobody should be excluded from being supported, and workers should have access to reflective practice from a clinical supervisor.
- Partnerships use a range of ways to put this kind of personalised support in place including navigator/ coordinator models, embedded lead workers, co-locating services or seconding specialist workers. Regardless of the models chosen, the work should align with the values above.
- Providing “no remit” support like this and working with autonomy and creativity is impossible if the workers doing it are not given permission and support to act in this way from operational and strategic colleagues. We call this being given a “Remit to have no remit” (also see point 10).



10

FLEXIBLE RESPONSES FROM SERVICES

Personalised support for people must be matched with flexible responses from services so that people can access specialist support when and where they need it.

- Effective local partnerships recognise that part of giving frontline staff a “remit to have no remit” is to ensure coordinated and flexible responses from a wide range of services so that workers can help people access the specialist support they need, when and where they need it.
- Local areas tend to develop strategic and operational groups to support this. Operational groups, formed of service managers, enable flexible service responses on a day-to-day basis. Strategic groups, formed of senior commissioners and decision-makers, provide a system-wide strategic commitment for the work. There must be a clear link between these groups, so that both can actively listen to and understand the systemic barriers preventing flexible service responses, and take action to break these down.
- Strategic and operational groups are formed of staff who know and trust each other, have a clear vision, and who can effectively learn from and challenge each other (see earlier points). There must be organisational as well personal structures/ relationships to support good partnership work.



11

SHARED APPROACH TO RISK

A shared approach to risk is an important part of tackling multiple disadvantage.

- Local partnerships recognise that the way services and areas approach risk can negatively impact the support provided to people experiencing multiple disadvantage. Many individuals can be deemed 'too risky' or 'not risky enough' to access support, with services putting in place assessments and thresholds or arguing about who should hold the risk. This leads to individuals being bounced between services, or not seen until they reach crisis point.
- Effective partnerships recognise that risk doesn't go away when services refuse to engage - it is just moved around the system, often to services with the least capacity to hold it. They acknowledge that a shared system-wide approach to assessment, risk management and thresholds is needed and they put in place plans to achieve this within their day-to-day work.
- Local areas also recognise that involving people and staff directly in decisions and discussions about risk and risk management is often the best way to create suitable and sustainable service responses.



12

DATA

Data is important for tackling multiple disadvantage, as long as it is used well.

- Local partnerships recognise that clear data on multiple disadvantage is difficult to obtain as service-level data misses people not using services, including disadvantaged and minoritised groups, and it is often difficult to link datasets across services and sectors to get a clear picture of those facing multiple disadvantage.
- Effective local partnerships develop data-sharing agreements across statutory and voluntary services, to get the best possible picture of local need.
- Partnerships use the data they collect for a range of reasons including service planning, evaluation, and as a source of learning and enquiry. They see data as something to help shape partnership discussions, rather than a source of definitive truth.
- Many local areas have started to explore how to use data to tell stories about their work, engaging the public and reducing stigma (see point 14).



13

ALIGNED FUNDING AND STRATEGY

Work to tackle multiple disadvantage needs to benefit from aligned funding and strategy to be sustainable.

- Effective local partnerships seek to find a strategic home for work on multiple disadvantage, aligning it with local oversight mechanisms and key strategic priorities, while also challenging the silo nature of these as needed. This helps to drive local leadership and commitment.
- Partnerships recognise that effective work needs secure funding and that the way in which services are funded and commissioned has a significant impact on how services are delivered. Poor practice can both cause and perpetuate multiple disadvantage.
- Funding and commissioning silos mean that local areas are often forced to 'knit together' local service offers from duplicative and competitive funding streams. Local work to secure and align funding is important, but MEAM will also continue to make the case for national-level funding alignment (see point 15)
- As well as long-term funding, effective local partnerships are clear about the need to fund the systems change aspects of the work as much as the service delivery itself. This is because convening and changing local systems takes time, energy and resource. Funding or commissioning for delivery only will not change local systems.



14

COMMUNICATION AND TACKLING STIGMA

Clearly communicating work on multiple disadvantage can help to strengthen partnerships and reduce stigma.

- Partnerships understand that effectively communicating the work they do is vital for long-term success and sustainability.
- Effective communication can draw in support from key commissioners, partners and policymakers and help to expand partnerships by making them relevant and accessible to a wide range of local communities, businesses and grass-roots agencies.
- Communication of the work, and the active involvement of people with lived experience as part of this, can also help to reduce stigma and connect other residents to the local work.



15

NATIONAL ACTION

The national policy, commissioning, funding and regulatory environment needs to make it easier for local areas to develop coordinated action to tackle multiple disadvantage.

- While significant progress has and should continue to be made in local areas, there are changes at the national-level to funding, outcome and accountability structures that could improve incentives and make it easier for local areas to deliver better coordinated local services for people facing multiple disadvantage.
- MEAM regularly uses learning from our work in local areas to make the case for this change across government.
- More information on the changes that are needed is available in our recent publications: *Future Focus: Where next for policy on multiple disadvantage?* and *Future Focus: Foundations for success*.
- Ultimately, sustainable progress on tackling multiple disadvantage will only be possible through a close partnership between national and local government, service providers and people with lived experience. MEAM will continue to play its part in supporting this vital work.

CONCLUSION

Whatever your place in the system, we hope that you find this summary of learning from the last 15 years helpful for your work to tackle multiple disadvantage.

Our team regularly provides bespoke support, training, and consultancy to local areas wishing to progress their work on multiple disadvantage, with a focus on the 15 points discussed in this report and beyond. We would be happy to talk about how we can support you and your local work.

To join the cross-sector movement on tackling multiple disadvantage please see [our website](#) or contact info@meam.org.uk for more information.



