Changing Futures Sheffield - Learning Report – Defining Multiple Disadvantage

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How helpful are definitions like 'Multiple Disadvantage' when trying to identify need?	The Changing Futures programme defines Multiple Disadvantage as applying to people who are experiencing three or more of: homelessness, substance use, mental health, contact with the criminal justice system and victims/perpetrators of domestic abuse.
	Learning from the Sheffield programmes Cohort Identification process questioned the usefulness of the term when trying to determine individuals who would benefit from an enhanced offer of support. This learning flagged that the term could exclude those whose needs are poorly understood or those with other needs such as physical health. The learning suggested that levels of risk and history of engagement in support could be better indicators of who needs enhanced provision.
Using terms like this could be detrimental to people seeking support	Speaking to adults with lived experience of multiple disadvantage it was clear the term held little value to them. They highlighted how the definition excludes other areas of need including poverty, social isolation and childhood experiences. They felt it was an attempt at categorising individuals and if used with the average 'joe bloggs' they would have no idea what it meant. Critically they felt that often individuals can't articulate their own needs so definitions based around needs would put them at a disadvantage.
	Services and teams believed that viewing people through what needs they had led to support being withdrawn or declined if the person wasn't seen as 'ticking' the right boxes. This was exacerbated as support needs reduced and people faced a cliff edge of support and limited help around transitions from one service to another.
There is a lack of consistency in how the term is understood and used	We worked with services to get a better understanding of how they viewed and use the term 'Multiple Disadvantage' through their work. What was clear is that many organisations felt they were supporting adults experiencing Multiple Disadvantage but there was significant variation in how the term was being applied.
	Some agencies support people who have support needs in three or more areas but live relatively stable lives yet the service would describe them as experiencing Multiple Disadvantage. Other providers would view that person as low to medium need and instead saw Multiple Disadvantage as applying to individuals who live more chaotic lifestyles. This further adds to the challenges around the use of terminology that relies simply on needs being present.
Using terms like 'Multiple Disadvantage' can create barriers to support	The challenge around terms like Multiple Disadvantage is that they depend upon the identification of need. For individuals and groups who are more hidden from support services the likelihood is that their level of need is not accurately understood, for example women are underrepresented in homelessness data despite several programmes evidencing that the level of need is equitable to that of men. See our learning report on women for more detail.
	At a system level this presents a challenge. When we use terms like Multiple Disadvantage to identify cohorts requiring support, we risk excluding groups of people who are typically underserved by support services and in turn fail to reach our intended target.
Intelligent data use could provide a solution	Where systems are trying to identify and target need we believe there are other data sets that could be more valuable than simply identifying areas of need. 100% of the Changing Futures cohort were well known to forums and processes (e.g. Safeguarding, MARAC, ASB) in the city that look to manage risk. We could use repeat presentation data from these fora to identify people who need increased support and by prioritising risk over areas of need we could avoid the noted pitfalls of relying on defining terms like Multiple Disadvantage.