

# Executive Summary: Making a Meal

Learning and reflections from three years making affordable good food for families

This is a summary of a [report](#) charting three years work led by [Shift](#) to increase families' access to affordable good food in South London. We hope that our reflections and learnings will inform and support others working on food inequity in urban areas further afield – especially local authorities, food operators, and funders taking community-led approaches. Below we share some questions you may want to think about in your own work.

## Context and design challenge

All children deserve the right to be healthy, no matter where they grow up. This includes access to enough nutritious food. But families' access to healthy food in the UK is incredibly unequal and our chances of accessing healthy food at an affordable price often depend on where we live. Urban areas with a high proportion of families living on a lower average income are often flooded with unhealthy – but affordable – food options. This spotlights unhealthy food and puts healthier options out of reach, contributing to health inequalities. Hence our central design challenge:

**How might we increase access to healthier food for local families\* living on low incomes'?**


*\*Specifically families with young children living in the London boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark. †Household income below 60% of the national median.*


After some years working in the fast food space, Shift ran an [ethnographic research project](#) with South London families in 2018 to better understand the link between peoples' food environments and their food experiences. The research surfaced several opportunities to tackle our central design challenge and create our desired social impact to increase families' access to affordable, healthier food.


## 01 'Better everyday takeaway'

One opportunity was to improve the local takeaway options on offer, to counter the saturation of unhealthy options in urban areas. We tested out this 'better everyday takeaway' hypothesis through a prototype in Birmingham in 2018, which validated the concept. We took the learnings from this prototype and, in early 2019, forged a partnership with [Impact on Urban Health](#) to

launch a healthier takeaway venture in South London called Medleys. This received positive feedback, and we learned much about what did and didn't work for our target customer of families with young children living on low incomes. However, Medleys struggled to gain traction selling exclusively through online platforms, which translated into slow sales. This meant few people were substituting unhealthy takeaway options with Medleys, limiting our social impact and leading us to rethink our approach.


 **Local authorities:** How might you support social ventures to set up local operations and access appropriate premises?


 **Food operators:** How might you partner with existing local entrepreneurs who already have customer relationships and brand visibility?

 **Funders:** How might you balance meaningful up-front funding with milestones to ensure new ideas are robustly tested and validated before fully rolling out?

## 02 Iterating our takeaway offer


During 2020, taking our learnings from Medleys, we took a lighter approach to iterating our takeaway offer which enabled us to validate assumptions more quickly. We shifted to running multiple, focused brands – Box Chicken and Peso – which better suited online platforms, as well as diversifying to different aggregators like Deliveroo (having previously only sold through Just Eat) and experimenting with selling through community networks. These iterations increased sales overall compared to Medleys, despite the challenges wrought by the Covid pandemic, but we remained a long way from commercial viability and delivering clear social impact.


 **Food operators:** How might you work within your community to develop culturally relevant menus and brands that reflect your social purpose?

 **Funders and Local authorities:** How might you influence big system players – like online aggregator platforms – to support locally-led social ventures to thrive?

### 03 Responding to the Covid crisis

When Covid hit, we quickly offered our resources and assets to support the crisis response, providing food for families hardest hit by the pandemic. This opened up stronger relationships with community hubs and local networks that were mobilising to distribute food to those who needed it most. It also steered us to experiment with creating cold, pre-prepared meals at scale. Whilst hugely challenging, the pandemic was a catalyst for us to explore and build credibility in a new, community-embedded way to tackle our central design challenge. This marked a definitive shift away from hot, delivered takeaway in early 2021.


 **Food operators:** How might you build relationships with existing networks of embedded local community organisations to distribute healthier food where it's needed most?


 **Funders:** How might you broker connections and support fundees or partners to collaborate effectively with each other and local community groups?


### 04 Pivot to community food provision

In 2021, building on traction built through the Covid response, we pivoted to operate as a community food provider under the brand Mama Leys. We supplied cold, prepared ready meals to families through a range of existing distribution channels or 'routes to market'. A significant part of this was supplying food for children taking part in school holiday programmes, through a partnership we forged with Southwark Council. We also explored different channels for selling meals in high volumes to organisations embedded in local communities, rather than directly to individuals.

Learning from our previous takeaway offer, we took a rapid test-and-learn approach with Mama Leys and worked more closely with local families and communities in all aspects of development. This approach generated significant growth in sales – to the tune of 10,000+ meals – and greatly increased our social impact as we were more confidently reaching our target audience. However, it was difficult to be sure of the sustainability of this impact, because low margins meant the operation was not financially self-sufficient.

 **Local authorities:** How might you adapt your procurement process and pricing strategy to ensure community-led healthy food operators can meaningfully engage with your services?

 **Food operators:** How might you centre the experience and participation of your local community in the design and delivery of all aspects of your operation, from menus to distribution?

 **Funders:** How might you structure financial support so that it enables delivery partners to effectively test and iterate their offers in the real world?

### Three key evolutions

Throughout our journey, we saw three key evolutions:

- **From a focus on healthier food to a holistic view of 'good food'**\*
- **From 'designing for' to 'designing and delivering with' people and communities**
- **From a single market solution to an integrated local system role**


*\*We came to understand 'good food' holistically, meaning food that is not only healthy or nutritious, but also affordable, accessible, culturally accepted, and non-exploitative in its production and distribution.*


These three evolutions reflect the ways in which Shift and Impact on Urban Health were also evolving as organisations, recognising and challenging the ways in which power is often held by funders and designers – rather than in the hands of those who stand to benefit.


### Concluding reflections

Our experience revealed the need for the whole ecosystem around any provision and distribution of 'good food' to be healthy in itself. Our closing hypothesis, therefore, looks beyond the successful and sustainable operation of a takeaway or food provider. Rather, we believe that to effectively improve access to good food for families living on low incomes – and thereby improve food equity – **we need to foster and support a healthy local food system.**

There are many roles required to support this, from convening and connecting, to advocacy and practical support, as well as providing subsidies. Whilst we didn't go on to test out these food system roles on the ground, we hope that our learning in this space will be helpful for different actors motivated towards improving food equity in similar urban environments elsewhere.

 **Local authorities:** What roles can you play to support local food systems to thrive by creating an enabling environment for local communities, healthy food operators and purpose-led SMEs?

 **Food operators:** How might you centre a community focus throughout your operations and collaborate within the local food system to help drive meaningful impact?

 **Funders:** What roles can you play to support local food systems to thrive, from providing subsidy to convening community-led local actors?

**We welcome your insights and questions via [hello@shiftdesign.org](mailto:hello@shiftdesign.org) and invite you to share this report with anyone who could benefit from or add to its shared learning. [Click here for the full report.](#)**

2018

# Starting hypothesis: 'Better everyday takeaway'

## 01

2019

### Launching takeaway in London

**Proposition:** Hot, delivered, mixed-menu takeaway

**Brand:** Medleys

**Features:** A 'one-stop shop' of healthier home-style meals including lasagne and chicken curry

**Nutrition:** Average 500-600 calories per meal

**Pricing:** Affordable pricing for families living on low incomes: £5.99 for an adult main including sides, £3.99 for a children's meal

**Distribution:** Just Eat, an online aggregator

**Location:** 1.5 mile radius around Herne Hill

2020

## 02

### Iterating takeaway

**Proposition:** Two hot, delivered takeaway offers

**Brand:** Box Chicken, Peso

**Features:** Multiple 'single food platform' offers, which focused on a particular cuisine category

**Nutrition:** Average 500-600 calories per meal

**Pricing:** Affordable pricing: £6.95 for an adult meal, £2.95 for children

**Distribution:** Just Eat, Uber Eats, Deliveroo, Too Good to Go (50% discount), direct online sales

**Location:** Delivery/pickup from Oval in Lambeth

## 03

Covid

### Covid crisis response

**Proposition:** Cold, pre-prepared meals, ready to collect and eat or heat at home

**Brand:** Mama Leys, early version

**Features:** Mass-appeal recipes to suit re-heating and distribution requirements, based on takeaway menus and local feedback

**Nutrition:** Average 500-600 calories per meal

**Pricing:** No cost to end customer (paid for by community hubs and partners)

**Distribution:** Community hubs and networks

**Location:** Distributed in Southwark and Lambeth

2021

## 04

### Community food provision

**Proposition:** Cold, pre-prepared meals, ready to collect and eat or heat at home

**Brand:** Mama Leys

**Features:** Meals and recipes reflecting local diversity, including Caribbean and Colombian dishes

**Nutrition:** Average 500-600 calories per meal

**Pricing:** Range from £0-£6 for end customer

**Distribution:** Community cafe, school popups, and holiday programmes

**Location:** Southwark, Lambeth, other boroughs

2022

# Closing hypothesis: A healthy local food system