



Making a Meal

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

Shift

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Welcome

For around ten years, Shift has been working on widening access to affordable, healthier food. We're motivated by startling food inequity in the UK, where healthy food is nearly three times more expensive than unhealthy food. Many urban areas with a high proportion of families living on a lower average income are flooded with unhealthy food options that are very difficult to avoid, which contributes to health inequalities.

After a number of years spent learning and designing in this space, in 2018 we ran some research exploring South London families' experiences with food. This research surfaced opportunities to create social impact by increasing access to healthier food for families in the area, including improving the takeaway options on offer.

What followed was a rich learning journey, from launching a pilot takeaway venture in 2019 – through four brands, three kitchens, many partner collaborations, and more than 20,000 meals – to becoming a community food provider in 2021.

This journey was characterised by three key shifts:

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

We ultimately came to believe that our best contribution to increasing families' access to healthier food was to support a healthy local food system.

In this report, we share our reflections and learnings along the way and hope these will inform and support others working on food inequity in urban areas further afield.

About this report

This report charts the evolution from our starting hypothesis in 2019 to closing operations in late 2021.

Each chapter focuses on what we learnt at critical points along this journey:

01 Launching a healthier takeaway in South London

02 Iterating our takeaway offer

03 Responding to the Covid crisis and a key pivot

04 Operating as a community food provider

Shift is an organisation rooted in design, so you'll see the influence of this in our report. In each chapter, we share our assumptions, what happened, and what we learnt. The report also includes inspiration and provocations for others working towards similar goals.

Finally, in the conclusion, we share our overall reflections on this work and a closing hypothesis.

Who's this report for?

We recognise that our learnings are specific in a number of ways. First, we operated in the London boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark – two urban areas with high population density and food inequity. Second, we focused more on the 'demand' side of the food system (where food is made, bought and consumed) rather than the 'supply' side (where food is grown, manufactured and distributed). Finally, our learnings are specific to a moment in time. In the middle of our programme, we faced the global coronavirus pandemic that amplified existing food inequity and disrupted the system around us.

However, we hope our learning can inform and support others working on food equity and taking community-led approaches. We believe this report is especially relevant if you're working in other urban areas facing a flood of unhealthy food options and the resulting pervasive health inequalities. In particular, we hope this report offers valuable insights for:

- Local authorities and statutory services who run food or health programmes for families
- Local food operators and distributors taking community-led or health-first approaches
- Foundations and funders investing in food equity

We welcome your insights and questions via hello@shiftdesign.org and invite you to share this report with anyone who could benefit from or add to its shared learning.



Image: Making batches of healthy meals in one of our rented kitchen spaces in Mission Kitchen

**Healthy calories
are nearly three
times more
expensive than
unhealthy calories.**

The Broken Plate, 2021 – Food Foundation

Executive summary

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

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?

Starting hypothesis: 'Better everyday takeaway'

01

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

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 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

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

Closing hypothesis: A healthy local food system

Background and starting hypothesis

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.

Many urban areas with a high proportion of families living on a lower average income are flooded with unhealthy food options. Healthy food is nearly three times more expensive than unhealthy food and, as low-income households spend a larger proportion than average of their income on food, they are more affected by any increases in food prices.

This is taking place in a broader system context that is characterised by powerful forces that skew away from healthier food. For instance, spending on junk food advertising in the UK is nearly 30 times what the government spends on promoting healthy eating.

Without action to ensure healthier products are available and affordable, people – particularly those living on a lower income – will be pushed towards the unhealthy food and drink options that flood cities like London, contributing to health inequalities.

The challenge

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 influence of food environments on their lives and experiences. This research surfaced a number of opportunities to tackle a 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.

The research revealed what was getting in the way of buying and cooking healthy meals and highlighted the growing role of takeaways in everyday family food. We found that takeaway meals were incredibly available and accessible, flooding high streets and delivering what families really wanted: taste, convenience and affordability. But, with a high average calorie content and low nutrient density, takeaways were also leading to detrimental health impacts.

Starting hypothesis

Rather than trying to change this trend towards everyday takeaway, we began to explore how to lean into it and drive environmental change that might answer our central design challenge and deliver social impact. Takeaways were valued for being convenient, tasty and affordable – why not healthier too?

This is our starting hypothesis: the opportunity we refer to as 'better everyday takeaway'.

To test out this idea, we set up a rapid prototype in Birmingham called Family Feeds, which offered a mixed menu of healthier family favourites for online delivery. The prototype validated the 'better everyday takeaway' concept by demonstrating a level of potential demand. This suggested there was a viable commercial opportunity to pursue that could deliver social impact by increasing families' access to healthier food.

01

Launching a healthier takeaway in South London

Spring 2019–Summer 2020

Launching a healthier takeaway in South London

We took the learnings from the Birmingham prototype and, in early 2019, secured funding with Impact on Urban Health to launch a 'better everyday takeaway' venture in South London called Medleys, which provided food for families with young children living on low incomes. The Medleys menu and meals received positive feedback, and we learnt a lot about the challenges of proving demand and reaching our target customers as a social venture in a competitive marketplace.

Testing assumptions

Assumption: A new venture starting from scratch would be most efficient operationally, and have the best chance of engaging customers, if it partnered with an existing local enterprise.

Learning: We initially partnered with a local entrepreneur to share a cafe kitchen space, but we weren't able to make it work due to logistical challenges with local council permissions. This left us exposed to the greater risk and inefficiency of 'going it alone' and impacted how quickly we were able to forge relationships with suppliers, distributors and customers in the local community. Our initial assumption was probably right and, if we'd felt able to extend the timeline for launching, we might have redoubled our efforts to set up in partnership with another local entrepreneur.

[More on setting up operations >](#)

Assumption: There would be demand for a takeaway menu of lower-calorie 'family favourites' in South London.

Learning: Medleys' fresh, healthier dishes received positive feedback from families in our testing and post-launch but low sales meant demand was hard to fully prove. Our menu had expert input from chefs and nutritionists but wasn't specifically designed to suit local cultures and tastes in South London. We reflect that we could have tested our menu more lightly after the Birmingham prototype and/or had more co-design input from local families before over-investing in the Medleys menu.

Assumption: A 'stealthy healthy' brand would reflect families having more immediate concerns than health, such as affordability, convenience and taste.

Learning: We positioned Medleys as a fun, family-friendly brand but didn't highlight that it was healthier than average takeaways, based on our research

finding that parents might be put off by explicit health messaging. However, we found that our relative healthiness compared to other takeaways was a key brand differentiator and something that our customers valued. They also valued the fact that Medleys was a local social enterprise with community interests at heart – rather than profit alone.

[More on creating the Medleys menu and brand >](#)

Assumption: Without a bricks-and-mortar space in which to reach customers, we would achieve sales by diverting existing online Just Eat customers from their usual takeaway to our offer.

Learning: Despite local flyering, social media advertising, and in-app promotions on Just Eat, Medleys sales were much smaller than we hoped. We learnt that we would need a much bigger marketing budget to compete in a saturated marketplace as a social venture, especially with no customer-facing premises or pre-existing brand visibility to build upon. Building and connecting into community networks and relationships would have enabled us to build brand familiarity with our target customers and cut through the noise online.

Assumption: A 'mixed menu' offer would fit in the online aggregator marketplace.

Learning: Our research and testing suggested that families valued the convenience of different cuisines or dishes from one operator, but we learnt through Medleys that this really didn't suit the way we were selling. We interpreted the white space in the online takeaway space for a mixed menu as an opportunity, but didn't understand that this was partly due to the way aggregator platforms were optimised around single cuisine offers like 'chicken' and 'burgers' – as well as large marketing budgets.

[More on reaching our target customers >](#)

Assumption: With venture investment, we would be able to pursue viability and sustainability for an impact-led takeaway offer.

Learning: Generous venture funding provided us with a long runway to develop Medleys as a robust offer with a high level of fidelity. However, this generous runway also allowed us to be too slow to iterate and adapt the offer as it failed to gain traction. We needed to have a more robust project plan, deeper food sector-specific expertise, and to test fewer assumptions at once. This may have been supported by aligning funding to progression milestones. Overall, we came to question the validity of an organisation like Shift playing the role of venture builder or founder, given gaps in our food sector knowledge and not being embedded (at this point) in the local community.

Assumption: Medleys would deliver social impact by enabling families living on low incomes to substitute unhealthy options with affordable, healthier takeaway meals.

Learning: In order to estimate our social impact, we mapped Medleys sales to location-based data around multiple indices of deprivation. This had to be done manually as Just Eat held all the sales data, so we had a limited view of which customers we were actually reaching. We therefore had low confidence in our social impact, which raised fundamental questions about the viability of the venture. By developing deeper connections with our customers and community, we might have been better able to learn what was or wasn't working and increase confidence in our social impact.


[More on the success and sustainability of Medleys >](#)


Taking our learnings forward


Overall, Medleys struggled to gain traction selling through online platforms, which translated into slow sales and limited confidence in our social impact. There were clues as to what needed to change, including the menu, selling platform and our approach to reaching customers. This led us to [significantly iterate](#) different elements of our offer during 2020 so we could more confidently prove or disprove the 'better everyday takeaway' hypothesis.

Provocations

This phase surfaced some questions you may want to think about in your own work.

 **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?



Images, from top:

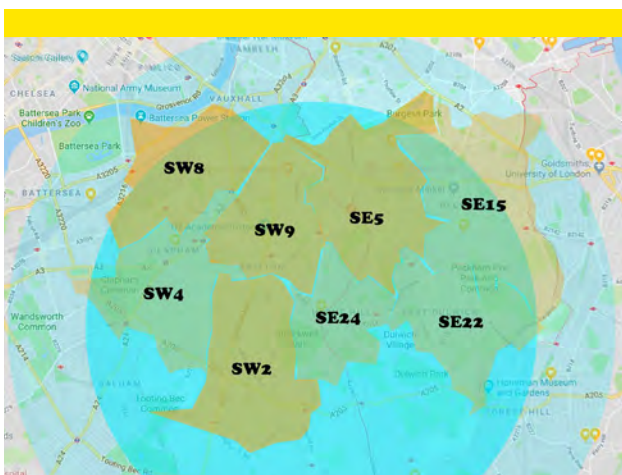
A Medleys takeaway meal ready for delivery

Chef Charles in the Medleys kitchen (photo by Antonio Olmos for The Observer)

Medleys promotional imagery showing different menu items

A map of Medleys delivery postcodes

Team member Rachel flying in Brixton





Medleys

**ONE TAKEAWAY
ALL THE FLAVOUR**

**FROM 4.99 FOR A MAIN & SIDE
ALL KIDS MEALS ONLY 3.99**

JUST EAT
EATMEDLEYS.COM

I enjoyed this a lot.
The chicken dish was
tasty and full of flavour.
Everything was very fresh,
natural, and dare I say
healthy (for a takeout!).
It was really like an
excellent home-cooked
meal! And all at a very
reasonable price.

Medleys customer

Deliciously fresh, huge
portions. Worth
every penny!

Medleys customer

Images: Medleys promotional content, in partnership with Just Eat (left) and on social media (below)



Medleys
Published by Rachel Hope St [?] · 10 mins · 🌐

Awwww shucks... ❤️ Team Medleys is loving this ★★★★★ review as much as Millie loved her cheesy cottage pie with greens! Order now on [eatmedleys.com](https://www.eatmedleys.com), via Just Eat or give us a bell on the batphone 07925 951140
#EatMedleys #DinnertimeDelivered #SE24 #Lambeth #Takeaway

“Absolutely delicious and great value. We highly recommend!”
 ★★★★★
 - Millie, London

02

Iterating our takeaway offer

Summer 2020–January 2021

Iterating our takeaway offer

We focused the second half of 2020 on proving or disproving the viability and impact of the ‘better everyday takeaway’ concept. Learning from our approach to developing Medleys, we took a lighter approach to testing which enabled us to validate assumptions more quickly.

We shifted to running multiple focused brands – Box Chicken and Peso – as well as diversifying to different online platforms and experimenting with selling through local community networks. This iteration process took place in parallel with our emerging Covid crisis response, which is detailed in [Chapter 03](#).

Testing assumptions

Assumption: Single food platform offers focused on narrow cuisine types would get more cut-through online than a mixed menu.

Learning: With expert support from [Think Hospitality](#), we launched two focused brands in the place of Medleys to better suit the online aggregator platforms: Box Chicken, offering fresh, protein-led meals with grains, and Peso, offering Mexican-inspired burritos. We saw greatly increased sales for Box Chicken and Peso compared to Medleys, but it was still hard to compete in a saturated takeaway landscape against the likes of McDonald’s and KFC.

Assumption: More culturally appropriate and explicitly ‘healthier’ food from a local business would be loved by our target customers.

Learning: Customers valued the new menus of Box Chicken and Peso, which dialled up messaging around our social purpose and the freshness of the meals, but we still had a limited view of how they were landing

specifically with our target audience of families living on low incomes. We learnt that brand success comes from more than smart positioning and meeting customers’ product needs: there’s something valuable in being of and for the local community.

[More on iterating our takeaway product and brand >](#)

Assumption: Online sales would increase through clever, social media-led marketing and forging local community relationships.

Learning: As well as working with a social media expert to help promote Box Chicken and Peso, we hired two community outreach roles to forge relationships and sell meals through local networks. This community connector approach worked to reach, meaningfully engage and build trust with our target customers, whilst brand marketing did boost online sales to an extent. However, even with expert input and stronger customer-facing brands, we continued to struggle to compete in the online takeaway space.

[More on adapting our approach to reaching customers >](#)

Assumption: The pandemic lockdowns would increase demand for online takeaways and therefore drive our sales.

Learning: When Covid hit in March 2020, the takeaway marketplace was steadily flooded with existing restaurants taking their menus online to serve more customers throughout the lockdowns, which increased overall competition for sales, staff and delivery drivers. Despite a booming market for online takeaway, our target customers were priced out of this as well as struggling more financially. This limited our confidence that our growth in sales could translate into social impact. The pandemic also significantly disrupted the food supply chain, which made securing food from wholesalers logistically challenging and drove up our base costs.

[More on the impact of Covid on our operations >](#)

Assumption: Significantly scaling sales by improving our takeaway offer would lead to financial viability for the venture and a sustained increase in families' access to affordable, healthier food (our intended social impact).

Learning: The takeaway marketplace was so competitive and saturated that, even with increased sales compared to Medleys, we failed to achieve the necessary scale for financial viability. Significant platform listing costs as well as our commitment to fair pay and quality ingredients were also driving down our margins, so it was difficult to compete on price. We explored selling at higher prices to non-target customers to subsidise cheaper meals for those we did want to reach, but this didn't increase sales enough to have an impact. We also continued to have a limited view of which customers we were reaching with Box Chicken and Peso, having failed to effectively iterate our approach to evaluation, and therefore retained low confidence in the extent of our social impact.

[More on the social impact and viability of our iterated takeaway offer >](#)

Taking our learnings forward

Despite the challenges wrought by the Covid pandemic, these different iterations increased sales overall compared to Medleys, with Box Chicken achieving five times Medleys sales in its first month. However, there remained significant challenges around scaling which jeopardised both our commercial viability and social impact. This meant we came to disprove our initial hypothesis that 'better everyday takeaway' was an effective and sustainable way to improve access to healthier food for families living on low incomes. We took the decision to close up takeaway operations at the start of 2021 to focus on a community-embedded offer, which we had the opportunity to experiment with as part of the Covid crisis response [explained in the next chapter](#).

Provocations

This phase surfaced some questions you may want to think about in your own work.



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?



Image: Promotional food photography showing some of the Box Chicken dishes



Images, from top:

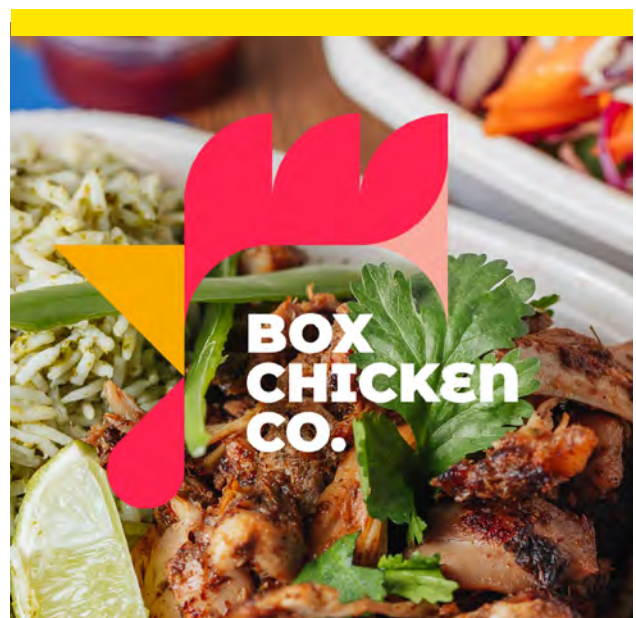
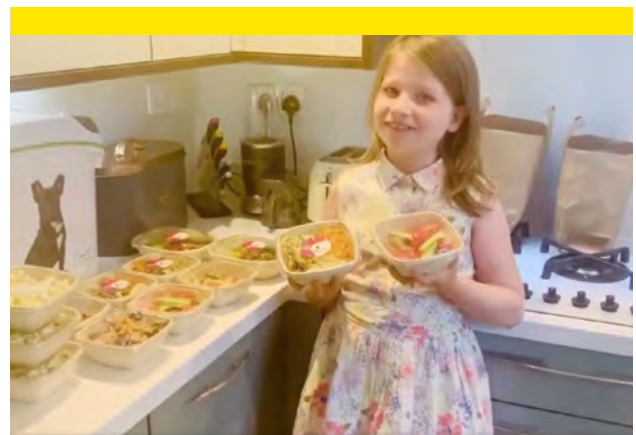
The full spread of Box Chicken menu items, including healthy sides like veggie sticks

The Peso website, which allowed for direct online orders

A young customer testing out a meal from Box Chicken

One of our wraps showcasing the shared menu components used between Peso and Box Chicken

Promotional imagery for Box Chicken



A nutritious, affordable
and tasty meal.

Box Chicken customer

It's hard to find something
healthy that the kids
will eat.

Box Chicken customer



Image: Part of the Box Chicken menu

5 *

Average online rating
for Box Chicken and Peso

03

Responding to the Covid crisis and a key pivot

Spring–Summer 2020

Responding to the Covid crisis and a key pivot

When Covid hit, we quickly shifted to use our resources and assets to support the crisis response, providing food for families hardest hit by the pandemic. We forged relationships with community hubs and local networks that were mobilising to distribute food to those who needed it most, and began supplying them with cold ready-to-eat meals at scale.

Testing assumptions

Assumption: Quickly adapting our menu and operations from hot, delivered takeaway to cold, prepared, distributed meals could benefit the local pandemic response in South London.

Learning: Rapidly changing our model to make cold meals at high volumes led to an immediate and dramatic scaling of our social impact. We served 3,500 meals in the first months of the pandemic, compared to ~2,600 takeaway meals over six months (all three brands). Not only were we distributing hundreds more meals each week, but we were also able to be much more confident that we were reaching our target audience – something that was so difficult with online takeaway.

[More on our Covid crisis operations >](#)

[Adapting our product and brand for the pandemic >](#)

[Reaching a new customer >](#)

Provocations

This phase surfaced some questions you may want to think about in your own work.



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

Taking our learnings forward

Overall, our experience of contributing to the Covid response validated two things. Firstly, there was an even greater need for low- and no-cost food among local families, who were facing more financial pressures in the face of lockdowns and insecurity caused by the pandemic. Secondly, our initial 'better everyday takeaway' hypothesis was not an effective solution to meeting this challenge – we needed to pivot to a new model for a real step-change in impact. Acting as a food provider and plugging into community networks to reach people opened up a new, more effective way to increase access to healthier food for families living on low incomes. This became our focus going forwards after closing down takeaway operations in early 2021.



Images: Cooking, packaging and distributing meals as part of the Covid crisis response, with local community groups and networks



04

Operating as a community food provider

Early–Late 2021

Chapter 04

Operating as a community food provider

In 2021, we pivoted to operate as a community food provider under the brand Mama Leys, supplying cold, prepared ready meals to families through a range of existing distribution channels or 'routes to market'. This involved selling meals in high volumes to organisations rather than individuals – the new customer group we had begun to build as part of the Covid crisis response. 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.

Testing assumptions

Assumption: A brand and menu codesigned with the community would resonate with our target customer and contribute to increased sales.

Learning: We collaborated with a local student to develop the Mama Leys brand, and hired a community outreach team who led an ongoing process with local families and groups like *Oasis* to co-develop and continually test a menu rich in local tastes and cultures – including Colombian, Caribbean and West African dishes. Overall, our brand and menu came to embody a more holistic view of what makes food good: not only were our meals healthier than many other affordable options, they also reflected the cultures and preferences of the people eating them, were sustainably packaged and delivered, and had social purpose at the heart. This resonated well with both our target end

customer as well as our new organisational customers, like schools and statutory services, who seemed to have more confidence believing in and partnering with a community-led, local brand.

[More on Mama Leys' community-led brand and menu >](#)

There was a lot of positive feedback from the families and it was inclusive with the vegetarian and halal options.

Community hub leader, holiday programme

Assumption: Shifting to cold, prepared meals would need and enable more flexibility in our operations.

Learning: Batch cooking Mama Leys meals required specific equipment and large kitchen space, but less frequently than when we were running a takeaway operation cooking to order on a daily basis. We experimented with hiring temporary kitchen space and ultimately took on an area in the shared [Mission Kitchen](#) initiative. This helped us build even more connections and collaborations with other local food operators, like working with [Eli & Pie](#) to supply meals alongside Mama Leys for school pickup.

Assumption: To generate sales and therefore impact, Mama Leys would need to reach our target customer through existing local spaces and channels.

Learning: We experimented with multiple 'routes to market' including selling Mama Leys meals direct to customers in a community cafe, providing meals for children's activity programmes during school holidays, and school pop-ups where parents could order ahead and pick up meals at the school gates. This involved testing different price points, including free to the end customer, and negotiating bulk order contracts, such as with [Southwark Council](#). We learnt that selling directly to customers allowed for better feedback and customer engagement, but was more commercially precarious than the supplier contracts we took on.

[More on our larger-scale production and multi-channel distribution >](#)

I'm St Lucian and I know Jerk and this was good.

Mama Leys customer

Assumption: By scaling production and reaching families with low or no income, a community-embedded distribution model would lead to greater social impact than 'better everyday takeaway'.

Learning: We provided more than 10,000 Mama Leys meals in 2021, which represented a significant increase compared to Medleys, Box Chicken and Peso sales, validating our hunch that community food provision would be more effective than 'better everyday takeaway'. We also had greater confidence that we were reaching our target customer, by distributing through channels that were directly engaging families with young children living on low incomes. We had a broader view of what types of food Mama Leys was substituting for this audience: no longer only the less healthy online takeaway options, but also supermarket ready meals and even no meals. We gained a clearer insight into our social impact, and greater confidence that Mama Leys was effectively increasing families' access to affordable, healthy food. However, our confidence in the sustainability of this social impact was low because

our model was generating scale but very little margin or profitability – which meant we were relying heavily on the 'subsidy' of our funding from [Impact on Urban Health](#) and later [STOP](#) to make it work.

The children really enjoyed the meals, because of the variety and flavours.

Community hub leader, holiday programme

Taking our learnings forward

Overall, our test-and-learn approach to developing Mama Leys throughout 2021 validated community food provision as a more effective way to increase families' access to affordable, healthier food. Increased sales, more effective operations, local collaborations, and having local people in the driving seat all contributed to greater social impact compared to 'better everyday takeaway'.

We saw locally that there was a gap for more locally-invested, community-led food provision but, with perpetually low margins, we found that this model required subsidy to be viable. We had subsidy in the form of our investment funding, but we also explored a 'pay it forward' model where customers outside our target group could access Mama Leys at a higher price to subsidise low- and no-cost access. Without subsidy, we learnt that community-led local food provision has precariously low margins, which limits the long-term sustainability of its positive social impact.

Provocations

This phase surfaced some questions you may want to think about in your own work.



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?



Images, from top:

Prepping Mama Leys meals in the space at Mission Kitchen

Carly, a parent who tested Mama Leys

Mama Leys meals being enjoyed as part of a holiday activity programme

Schools pop-up stall promoting Mama Leys to families, run by team members Heidi and Massai



I really like the flavour!
Really different taste of
spices. I liked there was
loads of chicken in it too.

Carly, parent (left) at Oasis Waterloo



**We would like to have your
food permanently, not just
for four weeks**

Parent, school pilot

**Mama Leys is so
convenient for parents
that are too tired or don't
have time to cook**

School headteacher



Image: We promoted the Mama Leys school popups to parents at the school gates

**Increase in orders
from week 1 to week
4 for the Mama Leys
school popup pilot**

66%



Image: We trialled different types of sustainable packaging for different distribution channels

The more places we can buy the better when it comes to getting good food to families. It would be great if you sold at a few other places in the area.

Community hub leader and local mum of two

Spotlight: Influencing Southwark Council's holiday programme procurement

We were appointed as the single supplier for Southwark Council's Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme in Easter 2021, with an explicit remit to trial a more embedded, community-focused approach. We supplied 5,865 meals over two weeks to distribution hubs running activity programmes and offering meals for the children attending at no cost – something that was hugely needed by local families after a year of pandemic pressures on top of existing financial hardship.

We've become aware that children are taking meals home to share with families where financial wellbeing is really poor.

Youth Club Leader

We collected feedback from the hubs, parents and children to learn what could be done better, and put this together with our own financials to run a detailed session with Southwark Council to inform future procurement. We shared that the price point was too low to cover the cost of meeting their criteria, which included providing a tasty, healthy and varied menu, meals suitable for different ages, sourcing food locally where possible, and sustainable packaging and delivery. We learnt that the procurement process excludes small food operators who were less likely to understand or engage with the tender and didn't have the capacity to take on the full contract. This meant that local providers

were losing out to larger companies who didn't know the local community.

When we asked children if the food portions were the right size, one child said "no because I have to share with my siblings". We're supporting the whole family.

Youth Club Leader

As a result of this feedback, Southwark Council increased the price paid per meal from £2.50 to £3.50 for the summer contract and broke up their contracting process so that smaller local businesses could apply for different parts. This enabled us to broker an introduction to local food business, [Eli & Pie](#), for the winter 2021 programme.

Interestingly, with community hubs that were willing to supplement the council funding with their own budget, Eli & Pie went on to charge upwards of £6 per meal. This reflects the margins required for small, local food operators to not only cover costs but also generate enough profit to grow.

As well as changing prices, Southwark Council also went on to explore how to better support small community providers to apply effectively through their procurement and tendering process.

Inspiration

Community-led food initiatives

Our community food provision approach and the Mama Leys brand drew inspiration from a number of initiatives across the globe, including:

- [Al Sanabel catering, the Hura Model](#), a social enterprise with the joint goals of minimising school lunch waste and empowering women in the Bedouin community of the Negev.
- [La Cocina](#), whose mission is to cultivate low-income food entrepreneurs as they formalise and grow their businesses.
- [Greater Chicago Food Depository](#), which is part of a united effort working to bring food, dignity and hope to the community. They also address the root causes of hunger – public benefits outreach and job training programs offer support for people to overcome poverty.
- [Eat Right School / Campus India](#) is a settings-based initiative to promote safe, healthy and sustainable food on campuses such as schools, universities and hospitals.
- [Epode](#) is a large-scale, coordinated, capacity-building approach for communities to implement effective and sustainable strategies to prevent childhood obesity.
- [Amsterdam Healthy Weight Programme](#), a long-term approach from the Council and Health Department of Amsterdam that reaches into every domain of a child's life with unanimous approval and a sizeable, structural budget reaching as far as 2033.



Image: [La Cocina](#) is a nonprofit working to "solve problems of equity in business ownership for women, immigrants and people of color."



Conclusion and closing hypothesis

Three key evolutions

Over the course of our journey from 2019-2021, we saw three key evolutions in our approach:

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

These 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.

1. From a focus on healthier food to a holistic view of 'good food'

We began by focusing on improving the healthiness of takeaway food itself by reducing average calories per portion. Over time, we came to a broader view of what 'healthy' meant for food – not only its nutrition profile but also what and who was involved in preparation and distribution, as well as how food suits people's tastes and cultural preferences. This more nuanced approach, which Mama Leys came to embody, represents our holistic view of 'good food':

- **Affordable** Everyone can access good food at a cost that suits them, no matter their income or situation.
- **Accessible** It's easy and convenient for everyone to access or buy food. Food is easy to prepare and consume, so you don't need a big kitchen or expensive equipment.
- **Nutritious** Food is varied and dense in nutrients, supporting people's health.
- **Culturally accepted** Food suits the tastes and preferences of the people consuming it.
- **Non-exploitative** Food suppliers, producers and distributors operate ethically, for the benefit of both people and planet.

2. From 'designing for' to 'designing and delivering with' people and communities

We began by taking a user-centred design approach,

running research, sessions and testing with families who would be our target audience. Over time, we evolved to take a more community-led approach, involving and valuing different types of experience and expertise. People from the communities we were trying to reach came on board to play key operational and delivery roles, and we worked more closely with local families and groups to co-develop and distribute our food.

This evolution enabled a lighter, quicker approach to testing and iterating, meaning we were better able to understand what was – and wasn't – working in the real world. Fundamentally, this approach shifted the power balance so that our customers in the local community were in the driving seat, playing key roles, influencing decisions and getting more of what they wanted from the offer.

3. From a single market solution to an integrated local system role

We set out to build a new venture – a single player – that could fill a gap in the market and scale to deliver our social impact ambition of increasing families' access to affordable good food. We learnt that building new, trusted relationships with customers from scratch is expensive and time-consuming, and we spent too much energy testing key early assumptions.

We reflect that, even if we'd achieved greater scale, the financial equation needed to deliver 'good food' as it is explained above would have been very difficult to balance with us operating as a lone actor. More broadly, the UK food system is not built to support low-cost, sustainable and healthy food ventures – we reflect now that this is probably why they don't exist. We evolved to focus on what we did best – making great food that people loved – and intentionally partnering with existing, trusted networks to reach our target customers. This more system-minded approach enables us to see a route to delivering impact at scale that could, with appropriate subsidy and support, be sustainable.

Closing hypothesis

We originally intended to build a venture that could deliver 'good food' to those who needed it most and achieve commercial viability to ensure sustainable social impact. We disproved our starting hypothesis that a 'better everyday takeaway' offer in the marketplace would effectively increase families' access to affordable, healthier food. Even after significant iterations, we

found it was not possible – as a small social venture entering the marketplace from cold – to achieve both the necessary scale for financial viability and confidence in reaching our target customer required to create our intended social impact.

Our evolved approach to operating as a community food provider was more effective in answering our central design challenge. It put local people in the driving seat and forged connections and collaborations with local community networks, resulting in increased reach and social impact: more local families having increased access to affordable good food.

However, this still wasn't commercially viable as a standalone entity – there needed to be subsidy in the model somewhere to make it work, because delivering good food in the holistic sense is more expensive and therefore squeezes margins. In the current environment, making the finances stack up means something has to give: staff pay, the quality of ingredients, or the price of meals for customers. Our experience highlighted the need for the whole ecosystem around any provision and distribution of 'good food' to be healthy in itself.

Food is generally understood as a commodity, but it is also a powerful lever for change. We know that changing the food people eat means influencing preferences, which are shaped by a huge range of factors – from biology and social factors (like cultural appropriateness, who the meal is shared with, trends) to price, availability, placement and marketing. These factors, in turn, are shaped by trade and agriculture policy, business models, political ideology, and economic paradigms.

Food systems result from complex dynamics, and transformation requires interventions at multiple levels – it's challenging to achieve with any individual standalone solution. We believe it is best to examine these influences as they play out within a particular locality and that a neighbourhood approach offers the opportunity to test overlapping interventions with a clear focus on population-level outcomes.

Our closing hypothesis, therefore, looks beyond the successful and sustainable operation of a single 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**.

Many roles are needed to support this, from convening and connecting, to advocacy and practical support, in addition to providing subsidy, as explained above. We were especially inspired by the Cookbook for Systems Change, used across the Nordics, which models different roles with complex and dynamic food systems.

Overall, we came to question the validity of an organisation like Shift playing the role of venture builder or founder, given gaps in our food sector knowledge and not being embedded in the local community. Moving

towards community food provision made better use of our skills and assets, but we reflect that we could have done more to support actors in and across the local food system to thrive more broadly.

Our work to influence Southwark Council's holiday programme is an example of this kind of system-level role which can enhance the availability of affordable good food for those who need it most. At the close of our operations at the end of 2021, we explored a partnership with Pembroke House focusing on a connected food system approach around Walworth. At this time, Southwark Council was developing a new three-year strategy for their school holiday food provision. Based on our feedback, this divided the tender into localised lots, making it possible for smaller, community-based food providers to meet local needs. The council was actively seeking opportunities to work with local partners – such as the Walworth neighbourhood programme – and wanted to use this as an example of how a better-coordinated approach between the council and local food offers can improve outcomes for children and families.

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.

Inspiration: Effective subsidy models

Different subsidy models have the potential to support local food systems to thrive, ensuring more equitable access for those who need it most. In exploring options for Mama Leys and ideas for the future, we were inspired by:

The HealthyFood programme in South Africa in 2009, through which members received a 10% rebate for healthy foods, which increased to 25% on completion of an online health risk assessment questionnaire.

Good Bowls, a frozen ready meals business built to provide meals to communities that might not have access to nutritious options and to support a local network of producers. They have an online and partner-restaurant pay-it-forward campaign to distribute their meals to families struggling with food insecurity.

The Detroit Black Community Food Network, which works to build self-reliable food security and justice in Detroit's Black community by influencing public policy, engaging in urban agriculture, promoting healthy eating, encouraging cooperative buying and directing youth towards careers in food-related fields. They work on a membership basis with annual dues.

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Team

Patrick, Duncan, Rachel, Alice, Charles, Veronica, Massai and Heidi. Thanks to chefs and kitchen staff who joined us from Hawksmoor during the early months of the Covid pandemic.



Image: Team member Massai helping to prepare hundreds of meals

Appendix

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02 Iterating takeaway in more detail

03 Responding to Covid in more detail

04 Community food provision in more detail

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01 Launching takeaway in more detail

Setting up operations

We believed that we'd have the best chance of efficiently operating and connecting with local customers in South London if we collaborated with an existing community-based food operator. We met and developed a relationship with a local entrepreneur very early on with a plan to share rent for kitchen space in the same premises and collaborate around menus, recipes and marketing.

Unfortunately, there were logistical and operational barriers to us succeeding with this approach. For instance, whilst Lambeth Council shared our ambition to improve the availability of healthy food for local residents, they were unable to grant permission for us to operate in the evenings in the same premises as the local entrepreneur. Ultimately, we had to abandon the partnership and, facing time pressure to go live, we decided to run the venture ourselves. In the place of collaborating with a local food entrepreneur, we set up in a 'dark' (non-customer-facing) kitchen and leant on experts – such as development chefs and nutritionists – for specialist advice and input on kitchen operations, menu design and branding.

Working with experts enabled us to create a robust and thoughtful offer, but we reflect that this input influenced the development of Medleys much more than local and lived experience. Being unable to partner with the local entrepreneur meant we started from a blank slate in terms of community trust and customer traction. It also limited the depth of our knowledge of local tastes and cultures, which are deeply important factors when it comes to the role of food in families' lives. Giving more credence to the learned experience of experts meant we were slower to challenge the assumptions of our approach and make adaptations.

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Product and brand

We launched Medleys in South London in late 2019, offering a 'one-stop shop' mixed menu of different cuisines including family-friendly dishes like chicken curry and lasagne. In testing, this concept received positive feedback from local families, who told us they would value the convenience of being able to suit their own and their children's tastes from just one outlet, rather than going up and down the high street to purchase different meals. Once live, Medleys received positive customer feedback about the menu options, suitability for children, and price. However, we didn't hear much about how familiar, authentic or culturally appropriate our customers found the Medleys menu options.

Medleys meals were on average around 500-600 calories per portion, compared to an average takeaway

meal of 1000+ calories. We chose this relatively crude approach of creating 'healthier' meals by reducing calories because this approach is easier than analysing overall nutrient density and aligned with the approach of our primary funder, Impact on Urban Health. However, in our research, parents told us they would be turned off by anything preachy around health or lower calories, as it could make them feel as if they were being told what to do or how to parent. We also learned that people (rightly) associated healthy food with being expensive, and would see explicitly healthy options as being out of their price range. Finally, parents shared how important it was to make sure they didn't waste money on food their children might reject or dislike, for instance due to an unfamiliar taste or texture.

I walk past this Pret a Manger everyday but I've never been in it, it's for office workers and organic people. It's £5 for a sandwich. You don't see it on Walworth Road.

*Mother of one child aged 0, Southwark
Families and Food research, 2018*

These insights led us to take a 'stealthy healthy' approach to the Medleys brand and messaging. We focused on offering dishes that were familiar, appealing and really tasty, just with fewer calories. In our messaging, the relative healthiness of the food took a back seat to its desirability, taste, convenience and price – the factors families prioritised. We were therefore surprised to see how much the freshness and perceived 'healthiness' of our dishes came through in customer feedback for Medleys: "Deliciously fresh" "The food is nice and healthy".

We also kept to a minimum any messaging about Medleys being a social enterprise with the goal of improving health outcomes through better food. We wanted to avoid being perceived as paternalistic or overtly charitable, something that could risk jeopardising families' own sense of agency and dignity in making food choices. However, through feedback and conversations with customers, we began to realise that a local business with local interests at heart was a real draw for a food brand and something we could make more of.

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Reaching customers

Similar to the Birmingham prototype, Medleys meals were delivered hot to customers' doors via the online ordering platform Just Eat, chosen because it accepted

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cash payments (as well as card payments) at the time and was associated with a lower price point – important factors for our target customer. Whilst listing on Just Eat opened up our reach to potential customers browsing online for takeaway, we found it difficult to position the Medleys mixed menu in its specific categories (like ‘Italian’ or ‘Chicken’) and get much traction. The insight we gained from parents that they would value a ‘one-stop-shop’ didn’t stand up in the real online marketplace.

Another limiting factor to our cut-through on Just Eat was that we didn’t have any previous brand recognition locally – Medleys was operating from a ‘dark’ kitchen, rather than being a local outlet with high-street visibility where customers could pick up meals as well as order online. This meant we were starting from cold in terms of building a customer base in the local community and, with no premises, we had few opportunities to build relationships.

We tackled these challenges with a two-pronged marketing approach. Online, we focused on location-targeted social media ads and in-app promotions, with some pro bono support from Just Eat to improve the visibility of Medleys in our delivery radius. Offline, we ran street flyer campaigns in key areas like transport hubs and local estates to promote family-friendly deals. The offline approach appeared to be more effective as our budget struggled to keep up online in competition with the big, well-known high-street brands like KFC and McDonald’s.

However, we still struggled to grow Medleys sales, and began to explore how we could both improve our product-market fit and reach our target customers through existing community-based networks.

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Success and sustainability

To launch Medleys, we built a robust brand, developed our own menu from scratch, set up kitchen operations and hired a chef – all before operating in the real-world setting of South London and getting live feedback from our target customers. We became too invested in this first iteration of our offer and, as a result, we were slow to validate some of our early assumptions outlined above and reluctant to iterate because of the sunk cost fallacy. This is a common pitfall in design and development: there’s a fine balance between creating high enough fidelity for something to live in the real world and holding it lightly enough to quickly iterate and improve.

A contributing factor in our struggle to find this balance was embracing a venture mindset from the start of developing Medleys. Together with our funder Impact on Urban Health, we had set out with a clear, shared aim to build a sustainable and viable social impact venture. We had a two-year, fully-funded runway to deliver it, which was an amazing up-front investment allowing ample

space to pursue success. However, a less welcome result of this was becoming over-committed to making hot, delivered takeaway – and specifically Medleys – viable, rather than adapting our approach as we gained better insights and feedback. We felt like we were in start-up mode, needing to make it work at all costs, rather than directing that investment into rapid iteration.

Our intention was to create Medleys as a social venture that could be commercially viable whilst delivering social impact by increasing access to healthier, affordable food for families living on low incomes. Once we were up and running, we measured this potential impact by mapping sales locations against local data for multiple indices of deprivation. This served as a loose proxy to understand the extent to which we were reaching the ‘right’ audience, but it was a leap and hard to prove. Selling through the online aggregator also meant that sales location data belonged to Just Eat, not to us, which created a burden of capturing this information manually. Even with some sense of who was buying Medleys meals, and positioning our offer at an affordable price point, we struggled to know how well we were reaching our target customer and therefore creating social impact.

When Medleys didn’t quickly get traction, it was hard to determine which of our assumptions wasn’t holding up – because we were testing too many at once – leaving us unable to be fast or confident enough in iterating the different elements. Whilst we used monthly reviews with Impact on Urban Health to interrogate key data (such as sales, feedback, and estimated social impact), we didn’t attach the unlocking of funding to any milestones like this. We reflect we may have pushed to challenge our approach more robustly and sooner if accessing the next phase of funding was dependent on validating agreed assumptions at specified milestones. This reflection is in some ways counter-intuitive, as openness and flexibility are hugely valuable in any social investment relationship.

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02 Iterating takeaway in more detail

Iterating our product and brand

To improve our visibility and differentiation in the online takeaway space, we decided to move away from a mixed menu and focus on single ‘food platforms’ which would better fit the aggregator apps like Just Eat and Deliveroo. Given the Medleys brand was all about a ‘one-stop shop’ of different cuisines, we developed two new focused brands: Box Chicken, offering a menu of flavoured chicken and rice boxes, and Peso, offering Mexican-inspired wraps. We developed these new brands with support from Think Hospitality, a company with expertise in social media-led brand and menu development in the fast food sector. Whilst distinct, the menus shared components to allow for operational efficiency.

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This change in approach contributed to an increase in sales, with Box Chicken achieving five times Medleys sales in its first month. Both brands – and especially Box Chicken – incorporated the learnings and feedback from Medleys and dialled up messaging about being a local, purpose-led business (“We’re good eggs”) and having healthy options on the menu. Feedback from customers reflected this shift and validated that ‘healthiness’ was important alongside taste, convenience and affordability: “So fresh and clean, and an excellent price”, “The meals contained healthy ingredients which is very good”, “A nutritious, affordable and tasty meal”, “Great food, great value”.

Through Box Chicken in particular, we also began to improve the cultural appropriateness of our food to suit local communities’ tastes, recognising the specific demographics of our target communities and incorporating relevant recipes. We also worked with local groups like [Migrateful](#) to run competitions and develop recipes for dishes loved by locals. This garnered positive feedback from customers: “I’m St Lucian and I know Jerk and this was good”.

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Adapting our approach to reaching customers

Learning from Medleys, we diversified which online aggregator platforms we were listing on to reach more customers, and began selling through Uber Eats and Deliveroo as well as Just Eat. Each posed some challenges (such as commission rates and working across multiple POS tablets in the kitchen), but overall this opened up Box Chicken and Peso to a greater number of potential customers and translated into increased sales. We also experimented with direct online sales through Slerp and Shopify platforms, which made up a smaller proportion of our sales but opened up more flexibility in who we were selling to (not just direct to customers, which became important in our next phase of iteration explained below). Finally, in a context dominated by Covid, our discounted sales through Too Good to Go continued to make up a significant proportion of our orders – enabled by a move in kitchens to a premises where customers could more easily pick up meals directly from the team.

Support from Think Hospitality, a team with expertise in social media marketing for food brands, allowed us to build visibility and engagement online for Box Chicken and Peso. We complemented this by hiring for two community outreach roles and welcoming team members to the venture who lived locally and better understood community networks and preferences. Having struggled to build a customer base from cold for Medleys, these roles focused initially on recruiting and building relationships with local people who could act as community connectors, advocating for our food and helping place bulk orders so local groups and networks could benefit from easy deliveries and discounts.

This immediately increased our understanding of what our customers thought about our food, and shone light on just how much energy and resource was needed to increase customer acquisition online through aggregator platforms in what was such a competitive landscape. Working with community connectors and forging stronger local relationships with groups like tenant and resident associations (TRAs) helped us validate our move away from hot delivered takeaway, explained below.

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The impact of Covid on our takeaway operations

A few months into running Medleys, the coronavirus pandemic hit and significantly impacted our operations, marketplace and customers. Logistically, accessing supplies of ingredients became a real challenge, as was ensuring the availability, safety and wellbeing of our kitchen staff who were considered key workers. During this period, we also relocated to a different dark kitchen and took on new staff in an unstable and unpredictable labour market. As many local restaurants closed their doors, the online delivery market was flooded with new operators (20,000 restaurants joined Deliveroo in 2020), meaning we faced greater competition for both customers and delivery drivers to pick up orders.

Whilst extensive lockdowns boosted the online takeaway market overall (Just Eat processed 17 million transactions in October 2020 compared to 10 million in January 2020), our target customers – families living on low incomes – were feeling even more squeezed and financially vulnerable as a result of the pandemic. We began to sell our takeaway meals through Too Good To Go at heavily discounted rates to help meet growing demand for affordable food, alongside business-as-usual sales through the dominant online aggregators. All the while, we continued to struggle with clearly measuring and understanding the social impact of our takeaway sales. This challenge, and the dramatic changes wrought by Covid, catalysed a key shift in our approach to a more community-embedded model described in the second half of this report.

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The impact and viability of our iterated takeaway

We began to see a fundamental challenge in achieving the necessary scale and margins for sustainability in the highly competitive takeaway space. We were committed to paying a London living wage, keeping calories down and using high-quality ingredients, so pushing down unit costs and investing adequately in marketing to compete was extremely difficult. As a result, differentiating by our price point in order to reach our target audience became harder and harder: McDonald’s was selling a triple cheeseburger for less than half the price of a Box Chicken meal. We were also facing 35% commission per order to sell via Deliveroo, which put even more pressure on our margins.

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Our original financial modelling made some assumptions about possible margins that proved inaccurate. We underestimated the input cost associated with healthier food and the amount of money needed to acquire customers through marketing and promotional activity. This meant that the volume that was needed for us to break even and be sustainable was higher than we thought and beyond that of the best-performing commercial brands in the market who didn't have the financial headwind of trying to deliver social impact as well. So, despite increased sales and growing brand recognition for Box Chicken and Peso, we were still far off the scale we needed for sustainability, with no clear view of how we'd achieve this.

This posed a further problem in terms of our social impact hypothesis. We intended for the venture to become financially viable through significant scale, which allowed for sales outside our target customer on the basis that this would help us cover core costs and allow us to subsidise costs for families living on low incomes. At the same time, we continued to have limited information about who exactly we were reaching with healthier takeaway meals when selling through the online aggregators. On Deliveroo in particular we had no way to track customer locations and map these to indices of multiple deprivation to extrapolate estimated target audience reach. On Just Eat, the process was time consuming and unsustainable if sales increased further.

We ended 2020 having given the better everyday takeaway concept a concerted push, but still landing far from our targets for financial viability, growth and impact. These learnings, as well as our experimentation catalysed by Covid, led to a decision to close up takeaway operations at the start of 2021 to focus on a community-embedded offer.

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03 Responding to Covid in more detail

Crisis operations

To suit the high volume orders and asynchronous distribution required for the pandemic response, we shifted to cold, pre-prepared meals. This changed some logistical elements of our operations compared to hot, delivered takeaway, such as the time of day we needed the kitchen and requiring lots of space to portion up hundreds of meals at once. We quickly experimented with packaging better suited to high-volume distribution in crates as well as making sure people could reheat the meals later in their own homes.

The pandemic also magnified staffing challenges and we had to work quickly to put measures in place to make sure our team was safe and supported. However, we were extremely lucky to benefit from the availability of chefs and kitchen workers who had been furloughed

from closed restaurants in the first months of Covid, as well as our ongoing community outreach roles.

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Adapting our product and brand

Whilst we were still running takeaway in parallel, there was no need for customer-facing marketing for the Covid response meals. We dialled down branding to the bare minimum and focused on the practical and legal requirements of listing allergens and heating instructions on packaging. However, we did use the opportunity to start to build some visibility and recognition for the newest brand in our portfolio – Mama Leys, a warm, home-style brand developed with us by Nas, a local student at the London College of Communications.

We used tried-and-tested recipes from our existing takeaway menus and adapted them for high volumes and the requirements of the community groups we partnered with. Faster feedback loops through these partners helped us quickly hone in on what was and wasn't working for the people heating and eating our meals, and we adapted our dishes to suit.

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Reaching a new customer

For the pandemic response, we worked with partners who had existing community networks and relationships with our target customers, such as tenant and resident associations (TRAs) and local food pantries. As such, our 'customer' shifted from families themselves (who were able to buy our takeaway meals directly) to local groups and organisations seeking food providers to supply meals to their networks at low or no cost. We focused on quickly forging local partnerships with this new 'customer' and began working initially with [Chefs in Schools](#) and [Mission Meals](#).

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04 Community food provision in more detail

A community-led menu and brand

The warm and homely Mama Leys brand was originated by Nas, a local student at the London College of Communications, and developed with support from [Natural Selection Design](#) and input from local families. Through groups like Oasis, our community outreach team brought parents together and set up at-home meal testing with children to develop the Mama Leys menus and recipes. These included more authentic and culturally relevant dishes to reflect the local tastes and cultures of Southwark and Lambeth, including Colombian, Caribbean and West African meals.

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Appendix

Larger-scale operations and multi-channel distribution

The small, shared 'dark kitchens' that we initially cooked in were generally rented by catering companies to create an income when their businesses ran dry during the pandemic. They were not set up for multiple businesses to occupy simultaneously. Mission Kitchen was the perfect solution for us, being a new, purpose-built, shared-use commercial kitchen in Wandsworth. We were able to efficiently make, store and deliver hundreds of meals daily and were also working above our wholesalers in New Covent Garden Market so any supply issues were ironed out. Mission Kitchen was full of small food businesses from caterers to food innovators which enabled us to learn, share and build connections.

Experimentation and agility were fundamental to Mama Leys. We worked with our community connectors Heidi and Massai to understand which access points were best for parents to collect food, including schools, youth clubs, community organisations and individual estates.

We worked with Southwark Council to deliver the initial Easter Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme in 2021. Through word of mouth we ended up delivering thousands of meals to organisations across seven boroughs in London. We were only able to deliver the scale of this project thanks to furloughed kitchen staff and a free, high-capacity catering kitchen. Neither of these were available for the summer HAF programme and we instead worked closely with local community organisations in Southwark and Lambeth. One key learning was the difficulty of delivering appropriate food to a spectrum of ages, preferences and diets.

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