Slough Children First Review

High level review of progress and performance

June 2025

Contents

Context for this review

Slough has experienced a uniquely long period of government intervention, dating back to 2015.

In April 2021, the then Children's Trust's articles were amended to convert it into a wholly-owned local authority company, renamed Slough Children First (SCF). In 2023, the Ofsted inspection in Slough rated the overall effectiveness of children's services to be "requires improvement to be good" and the impact of leaders on social work practice was rated as "inadequate".

Despite considerable leadership turnover between 2021 and 2023 – and Slough Borough Council (SBC) needing to issue a Section 114 notice to trigger MHCLG intervention in 2021 – significant improvements have been made since 2023, including improved relationships between SBC and SCF, new performance indicators, budget management, and leadership stability.

In light of recent improvements, questions around reintegration and convergence timing have been raised, in line with SBC's longstanding ambition to reintegrate the Company into the Council.

As the current service delivery contract ends on 1 September 2026, this review was commissioned to address some of these questions, specifically:

▼ Reviewing SCF's business improvement plan and wider improvement programme in SCF.

▼ Reviewing SCF's immediate and longer-term financial plans to provide an independent assessment of whether SCF is providing value for money services.

▼ Reviewing the governance structure, including considering the direction of travel for convergence with SBC and evaluating the potential timing of any re-integration of services into SBC.

This report provides a high-level summary of changes from 2022 to now, followed by a more detailed review of the three key areas and an outline assessment of convergence.

An Annex containing evidence to support the findings and recommendations of this review has been provided separately.

Approach

Mutual Ventures (MV) were previously commissioned by the DfE to independently review SCF's business plan in June 2022. We were re-commissioned to undertake this subsequent review from May to mid-June 2025. The 2022 report served as an initial starting point around which conclusions have been drawn, and is referred to throughout.

This short, sharp review was focused around a **high-level document review**, and a series of **stakeholder interviews** and conversations. Due to the time available, we have not carried out a full and detailed Value for Money (VfM) assessment. We have analysed the high-level assumptions informing the budget and business plan, including changes implemented since the 2022 review. Conclusions and assertions in this report combine both stakeholder views and documentary evidence, and seek to reconcile the two or highlight gaps where appropriate.

Interviews were held with the following individuals:

- ▼ Sue Butcher, Chief Executive of SCF / Director of Children's Services
- ▼ Simon Baker, Chairman of the SCF Board
- ▼ Andrew Nankivell, SCF Company Secretary
- ▼ Alexandra Pilgerstorfer, SCF Director of Finance
- ▼ Benjamin Short, SCF Director of Operations
- ▼ Will Tuckley, SBC Chief Executive Officer
- ▼ Annabel Scholes, SBC Executive Director of Corporate Resources (Section 151 Officer)
- ▼ Councillor Puja Bedi, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Lifelong Learning and Skills
- ▼ Councillor Dexter Smith, Leader of the Council
- ▼ Sarah Wilson, Assistant Director of Legal and Governance
- ▼ Gavin Jones, Lead Commissioner (MHCLG)
- ▼ Gerard Curran, Commissioner (MHCLG)
- ▼ Denise Murray, Commissioner (MHCLG)
- ▼ Debbie Jones, Non-Executive Director on SCF Board
- ▼ Dan Hendrie, Intervention Lead (South East Vulnerable Children's Unit), Department for Education

Unfortunately, due to personal reasons, Paul Moffat (DfE Commissioner) could not be consulted in the time available. We have therefore referred more prominently to his most recent Commissioner's report.

Executive summary

Slough Children First (SCF) has made considerable progress in its performance with a steady trajectory of improvement since 2022. This progress is largely attributed to stable leadership and workforce, and enhanced collaboration with Slough Borough Council (SBC). SCF has successfully addressed many areas identified in the 2022 Mutual Ventures (MV) report, including workforce stability and reduced reliance on agency workforce.

SCF has achieved a more sustainable financial position, demonstrating cost reductions and delivering within its financial envelope. The company is actively focusing on value for money through various initiatives like the External Placement Panel and strategic commissioning.

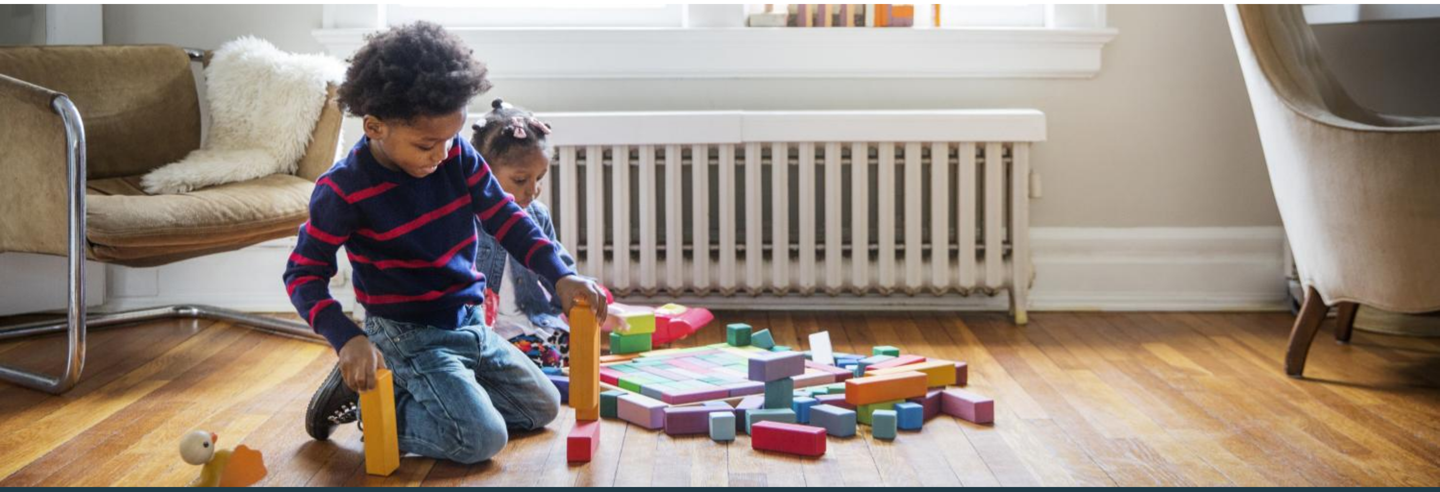
The governance structure has seen significant improvements, with enhanced board stability, clear contractual key performance indicators (KPIs), and better working relationships between SCF and SBC. However, opportunities remain to streamline board size and ensure consistent reporting.

With the improvements that have been made, discussion has naturally turned to reintegration and convergence. For this, context is critical.

SCF and SBC are in the process of adapting to national social care reforms; however, the pace of these reforms, the added complexity of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), and impending major inspections, present capacity challenges.

The convergence of SCF back into SBC would lead to normalisation in organisational structure, deeper strategic alignment and some cost efficiencies; however, what we have consistently heard from stakeholders is that progress at present is fragile, and SCF does not yet have the requisite service maturity in place to prepare it to effectively reintegrate into SBC. Additionally, rushing the process could disrupt and destabilise the children's services improvement journey, and therefore risk slipping further from removal of intervention.If convergence is pursued, we would recommend a phased approach which is contingent on upcoming inspection outcomes and the removal of the MHCLG intervention in SBC.

It is clear that the Company is no longer in ‘survival mode’ – its status is now widely described as “good, but fragile”. It now has the degree of stability necessary to shore up what’s working, and focus on what still needs to be improved, but the challenge will be whether multiple reform priorities can be managed simultaneously.



The view from 2022 to now (1/2)

The independent review of Slough Children First's (SCF) business plan was carried out by Mutual Ventures (MV) between July and December 2022, with an Interim Report issued in August 2022 and a Final Report in December 2022. The review aimed to assess the appropriateness of SCF's proposals for service improvement, its financial sustainability and value for money, the reasonableness of its assumptions, its capacity to deliver savings, and the identified risks.

A series of recommendations were provided, and have been largely adopted as part of the Business Improvement Plan. This 2025 review has carried out an initial assessment on what has been implemented and addressed. This is broadly positive, although some gaps remain.

Positive developments

- The 2022 report noted that SCF's interim business plan was "overly optimistic" regarding savings and projected a cumulative deterioration of £21m over four years.
    - The revised business plan demonstrates a more realistic baseline position. SCF has made "significant progress" in setting a more realistic budget and achieving tighter budget management, leading to a surplus that allowed £2.8m to be returned to SBC in 2024/25, and was in addition to the expected year-end surplus of £409k,
- The 2022 report concluded that 'Invest to save' proposals, while necessary, underestimated the required investment and that SCF would not be sustainable on current funding levels.
    - SCF has since implemented several of these proposals, with evidence of positive net impact particularly in Edge of Care, Family Assessment, and Family Hubs.
- The 2022 report identified workforce stability as a key challenge and a prerequisite for improving financial and operational effectiveness. The 2022 report had also expressed concern over the continued use of Innovate teams and recommended concerted efforts to reduce children in the system to decommission these teams faster.
    - SCF has achieved significant progress in workforce stabilisation, being much less reliant on agency workers.
    - SCF has since successfully phased out the Innovate teams. Permanent staff increased to 83% (with 17% agency staff) in 2023/24 which is not unreasonable compared to other LAs, and staff absenteeism has reduced. In 2023, the staff sickness absence rate was 1.5%, less than half the English average (3.2%).
- The 2022 report highlighted a significant challenge with leadership stability and a "negative dynamic" in the relationship between SCF and SBC.
    - Since then, relationships have improved significantly, with effective collaboration at officer, board, and member levels.
    - The Chief Executive’s letter to DfE in January 2025 indicates that there is a much better relationship between SCF and SBC, and there is joint working and some shared functions; the Commissioner’s report covering 2024-25 confirms this view.
    - Stakeholders felt governance arrangements had become clearer, and the board is viewed as showing a "stronger grip".

The view from 2022 to now (2/2)

- MV previously recommended proactive demand management to reduce the number of children in the system, focusing on throughput of work and closing low-risk cases.
  - SCF's 'Invest to save' proposals, particularly Family Help and Edge of Care, are designed to address this by preventing escalation of needs and reducing the volume of contacts at the front door.
  - The Edge of Care team is noted as having a positive impact on the number of children in care, and this has tracked through to the decline in average care proceedings duration (down from 65 weeks at year-end 2022/23 to 38 weeks at year-end 2024/25).
  - SCF have launched a new practice approach, the 'Slough Approach' (later referred to as "STAR"), based on Strengths-based, Trauma-informed, Attachment-aware, Restorative practice principles.
  - SCF has also developed a "grow our own" social worker programme with the Slough Academy. This is seen as an important step to improve outcomes and retention – however, without reviewing casework in more detail we are unable to comment on quality of the practice in action.

Areas for further development

- MV highlighted the need to strengthen leadership capacity, potentially through a single post focused on quality improvements and service transformation.
  - This is partially covered by Debbie Jones as a Non-Executive Director with experience and expertise in children's social care leadership, but is not occupied by a post in the Executive Team.
  - This will be critical in light of capacity demands to implement the national social care reforms to a restricted timeline, alongside LGR.
  - It was noted in interviews that the main worry for implementing the national reforms currently is not capability, but capacity – described as "insufficient capacity in the core establishment".
- Partnership working with external partners has not progressed as desired. The 2022 report had suggested reviewing and streamlining partnership governance arrangements and strengthening multi-agency collaboration, including joint commissioning arrangements.
  - The Safeguarding Partnership suspended its regular programme of multi-agency audits in early 2023, and this has not yet fully recommenced.
  - While there is positive feedback on improving partnerships, and some joint initiatives, police and health partner engagement in the Improvement Board has been limited and there is a sense that SCF should be more proactive and outward-facing in this space.
  - Additionally, we found no plans in relation to multi-agency child protection teams, which form a critical element of the national reforms.

Business improvement, practice quality, and performance (1/3)

Slough Children First is generally performing well and has demonstrated significant improvements over the last 12 months. The progress has been at pace and provided assurance of a "steady trajectory of improvement". Overall, SCF is concentrating on the right areas for improvement: workforce stability, quality assurance frameworks, developing their front door arrangements, building on the progress made in reducing entries to care through the edge of care team and work to improve the service for young people leaving care.

Maturity of leadership

The stabilisation, visibility and maturity of the leadership team has made perhaps the biggest and most visible difference, contrasting with historical turnover at Director-level. The appointment of Sue Butcher as Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services, alongside Ben Short and Alex Pilgerstorfer, has brought consistency and coherence to the leadership team.

There is now more depth and coherence in relationships between layers within the company; Heads of Service have been described as capable and engaged, with Paul Moffat reporting that he has been impressed by their leadership capacity. The leadership team is described as collaborative, and proudly operate a "high support, high challenge" ethos. This has helped align financial and operational priorities and foster a shared sense of purpose.

Workforce stability

The creation of the Slough Academy has embedded a culture of professional development and practice improvement, to support career progression and help embed the STAR model.

There has been a steady increase in permanent staffing, and the workforce is described as more confident and consistent in practice. Staff morale is reported as having improved considerably, and the workforce is seen as motivated and engaged, which is critical for sustaining improvement. SCF has also become much less reliant on agency workers, and there are no plans for further international recruitment campaigns as vacancy levels no longer warrant it. The workforce ratio is modelled at 89% permanent and 4% agency though this has not yet been met in practice – of the planned budget in the Annual report for 2023/24, final staff numbers confirmed 79% permanent and 13.7% agency staff (and vacancies at 8.3%), with an average of 83% permanent and 17% agency staff over the year.

Changing practice

The new STAR practice approach is reported as becoming well-embedded and having positive impacts within the service. SCF received a "Good" Ofsted rating for its fostering service, and Breakaway also maintained a "Good" Ofsted rating.

A November 2024 audit of disability assessments found that most children had good quality assessments tailored to their needs, and 80% of parents consulted during the audit reported a good level of service and support. A task and finish group was later established to scope the development of in-house residential accommodation for children with complex needs. These assessments and audits reflect a broader effort to improve practice quality and sufficiency planning. The development of in-house residential provision will also help reduce reliance on external placements and improve continuity of care for children with complex needs.

Business improvement, practice quality, and performance (2/3)

Front door arrangements

In 2024 the front door service received the highest level of assurance in an internal audit, indicating strong foundational processes are in place.

Timeliness of response and quality of intervention is viewed as progressing towards being consistent, coordinated, and stable. Aligned with this, the 'Child's Journey' project provides valuable strategic focus within the improvement plan, to examine the child's experience through services by focusing on conversion rates, thresholds and tolerances.

While the services are performing well overall, SCF is clearly actively working to address the remaining gaps in referral pathways and capacity.

Quality assurance and management oversight

There is good evidence of greater rigour and management grip across the service. New contractual Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were approved in December 2023, covering political ownership, governance, partnership working, business and improvement, cultural shift, participation, sufficiency, workforce, and quality of practice. These are designed to shift the focus from simple monitoring to demonstrating impact; the KPIs are monitored through the Contract Monitoring Group and strategic contract meetings, and are embedded in SCF's performance framework.

SCF is doing well against the actions in their Improvement Plan, with the implementation of transparent BRAG (Blue, Red, Amber, Green) ratings.

There have also been good developments with commissioning in both the Council and the Company. The External Placement Panel has been successful in driving down spending on placements, ensuring high quality while reducing the overall cost base.

Reducing entries to care

SCF has successfully reduced demand in key areas safely and appropriately. The "Invest to save" proposals are designed to address issues impeding service improvement, with a focus on prevention and early help. The Edge of Care team is having a positive impact on reducing the number of children in care.

This is further reinforced by the positive decrease in average duration of care proceedings since 2023. Although still above the statutory limit of 26 weeks, it is now below the national average (40 weeks).

Performance year	Average duration of proceedings
2022/23	65 weeks
2023/24	47 weeks
2024/25	38 weeks

Business improvement, practice quality, and performance (3/3)

The rapid decrease in duration since suggests that SCF's approach ensures that fewer children and families are being escalated into proceedings, which in turn allows more disposals of live cases to pull through and permanence arrangements to be completed. This is reinforced by additional data analysis under 'Financial management and planning' (p.14).

Areas to monitor

As SCF continues in its improvement journey, it is essential that this does not happen in silo to better integrate and align high-quality service provision. In January 2025 the Slough Youth Justice Service received an overall rating of 'Inadequate' following an inspection by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. While stakeholders reflected in interviews that the inspection findings were disappointing, they also felt that the Youth Justice Service Board had responded positively to the outlined recommendations in the inspection report. The service is undergoing a redesign into a new Adolescent Support Service, bringing together Youth Justice, Contextual Safeguarding, Serious Youth Violence Prevention, and Edge of Care.

The action plans linked to SCF's improvement journey are, at times, viewed by leads as a one-off set of tasks to do – tasks are completed, but "not documented, or documented but not evidenced, or evidenced but not evaluated" as part of a continuous improvement journey.

Additionally, despite overall positive progress, we understand that some basic social work requirements, visits, and direct work with children were still deemed as areas for improvement in the Ofsted Focused Visit in 2024 (though the overall feedback from the visit was positive). Reporting from 2024 highlighted that the number of complaints made about children's services in in Slough in 2023/24 had increased, with 176 complaints being made (compared against 152 being made in 2021/22 and 131 in 2022/23). Of the 176 complaints made 23 (13%) were made by children and young people, and a number of the complaints focused on the attitudes and behaviours of staff, such as poor communication between social workers and the young people or families, and staff not being accessible to contact.

While visit feedback and interviews showed that organisational culture and quality of practice are changing, several stakeholders also feel inconsistency in practice is still present in places. Although the 2023/24 Annual Report notes that turnover in the workforce has remained relatively stable with permanent staff retention ranging between 77-85% each month, stakeholders felt that some churn in the workforce has occurred where the level and standard of practice required has no longer been sufficient (such as in February 2024 where it was noted that several case officers left following the increased focus on performance using the Case Tracking System, and the perception shared in interviews was that increasing the level of individual scrutiny contributed to these exits). This may explain some of this feedback about poor practice lingering.

Business intelligence for performance management requires further attention. SCF lacks a reliable business intelligence tool and/or real-time dashboards informed by its case management systems. There have been protracted discussions between the Council and SCF over rolling out the PowerBI system that would support this, but stakeholder interviews suggest that IT systems and management have been a consistent and ongoing point of disagreement.

Financial management and planning (1/5)

SCF's financial position has significantly improved since the 2022 review, and is viewed as being considerably stronger across stakeholder groups. Stakeholders were extremely positive about current Director oversight, and highlighted the Company returning a £2.8m reduction in core contract funding to the Council in 2024/25, with operating costs coming in at £2.2m under budget and £600,000 of additional income generation. The improved cash flow position has enabled the company to repay a £5m loan received from SBC by the end of financial year 2024/25.

The financial review and analysis focused on two areas:

1) A comparison with the modelling in 2022 to understand how trends have changed since then;
2) SCF's forward projections and their impact on planned net expenditure (before inflation) from 2025/26 to 2029/30.

Outlined below is our analysis of how the trends anticipated have changed since the 2022 review, and a separate table assessing the assumptions and projections in the 2025/26 business plan, with an overall conclusion following.

Accompanying graphs for the below analysis are available in the separate Annex.

Case volumes

Targeted Early Help

Targeted Early Help cases were projected in 2022 to reduce (after a short term increase in the first year due to a backlog of cases). This reduction has happened faster than expected. SCF have suggested the main reasons for this are more stable leadership of the service (permanent rather than agency managers) and a more confident and less risk-averse workforce with regard to closing cases.

Child Protection (CP)

A reduction in CP numbers was expected in the 2022 modelling. This has materialised but numbers fell faster and sooner than expected. SCF suggest that this is related to the arrival of a new head of service, and some focused work to ensure that children are being given the right level of support.

Children Looked After (CLA)

As with CP, CLA numbers fell faster and sooner than expected since 2022. This is in part due to a reduction in Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) CLA, thought by SCF to be related to some asylum seeker hotels in Slough no longer being used for that purpose.

Care Leavers

Care leaver numbers rose sharply in 2022/23 from the 2021/22 baseline. SCF cite Home Office delays in processing applications (70% of those in placement are ex-UASC), and support offers being kept open for longer as the main reasons for the increase.

Financial management and planning (2/5)

Average caseloads

Referral and Assessment

Average referral and assessment caseloads have reduced from a planned 25 per caseholder in the 2022 modelling to about 14 in the 2025/26 business plan. SCF reported that this is partly due to the creation of a new specialist team (Harms Outside the Home) and new Practice Improvement Mentors. It was noted that in 2024, less than 30% of contacts progressed to referral, but 99% of referrals led to assessments – of which over 60% did not result in further social work intervention. This suggests potential over-assessment and a need to refine threshold application.

Children Looked After (CLA)

The latest SCF modelling suggests projections in future years will result in an average caseload of 20-21 CLA cases per caseholder, compared to 17 assumed in the 2022 modelling.

Placement volumes

Residential

Residential placement numbers have fallen faster than was expected in 2022. This is perhaps partly explained by the reduction in UASC, and SCF also tell us that a new pre-birth assessment tool has reduced the number of mother and baby placements required.

IFAs

IFA placement numbers have broadly followed the expected trajectory in 2022, although there was initially a rise in 2022/23. SCF reported having more difficulty than expected in recruiting foster carers, particularly the resilience foster carers for children with complex needs.

SGOs

SGO volumes have not grown as was expected in 2022. The difference in allowances between fostering and SGO rates may have made it difficult to incentivise foster carers to move to an SGO arrangement.

Adoption

Adoption numbers have fallen, with SCF citing a (national) shortage of adopters as being a key reason.

Placement rates

Average placement rates by placement type have broadly followed the expected trajectories (including inflation) to 2024/25. Specifically:

- Residential, 16-18 Semi Independent Living and SGO rates have increased slightly more than expected;
- IFA rates have followed expectations quite closely;
- In-house fostering rates have increased less than expected.

Financial management and planning (3/5)

The business plan for 2025/26 to 2029/30 incorporates the following future projected changes - Our assessment is that the assumptions made based on demographic trends, children in care numbers and placement patterns are logical and appropriate for the budget planning approach.

Demographic growth

The core of the demographic growth calculation in the 2025 business plan follows the same method that was proposed in 2022.

This method applies an adjustment that compensates for a difference between the ONS 2018-based population projection and the figures reported in the 2021 census. New ONS projections (rebased at 2021) are due to be released in June 2025; we recommend switching to these when they are available as this should remove the need for this adjustment.

The latest SCF Business Plan modelling also includes one additional (and new) adjustment of an additional 1% child population growth per year from 2025/26 to 2029/30. This has been included by SCF to allow for additional upward pressures on the Slough's child population that they do not believe are reflected in the ONS projections.

The 1% assumption would depend on the strength of the evidence used. The 1% figure is also additive year-on-year, resulting in the modelled child population being 5% higher by 2029/30 than it would be without this adjustment.

***Cost impact:* The annual impact of the additional 1% uplift is an increase in annual net expenditure of £60,000 in 2025/26, rising to £500,000 per annum in 2029/30.**

UASC growth

UASC CLA is assumed to increase to 43 over 2025/26 and then remain at that level thereafter. This is Slough's current threshold level (0.07% of child population). The modelled rise to 43 is gradual over 2025/26, therefore there is only a part-year impact for the additional places. The full year impact is felt from 26/27 onwards.

***Cost impact:* The annual impact of this is an approximate £25,000 per annum increase in net expenditure (i.e. after offsetting an increase in Home Office income) relative to 2024/25.**

Cumulative Edge of Care impact

The 2022 modelling included an Edge of Care initiative that was assumed at the time will have an increasing cumulative impact on CLA volumes over at least 7 years.

The latest SCF modelling accordingly includes increasing impacts in 2025/26 (a reduction of 8 CLA) and 2026/27 (a further reduction of 4 CLA). Whilst the exact numbers and the timeframe have changed slightly, including this assumption is directionally consistent with the 2022 modelling.

***Cost impact:* The annual impact of this projected change is a reduction in annual net expenditure of £350,000 in 2025/26, rising to £1.2m per annum in 2029/30.**

Financial management and planning (4/5)

Reductions in Care Leavers volumes

A net reduction of 22 is modelled in 2025/26 (and beyond) related to housing applications (10 of the 22), and UASC being given leave to remain (12 of the 22).

***Cost impact:* The annual impact of these reductions is a reduction in annual net expenditure of £420,000 in 2025/26, rising to £720,000 per annum in 2029/30.**

Shift from IFAs to In-house fostering and SGOs

The latest modelling assumes a future shift of placements from IFAs to in-house fostering and SGOs (a shift of 9 CLA by the end of 2025/26, rising to a cumulative 27 CLA by the end of 2029/30). This is ambitious given what SCF have reported about difficulties in recruiting foster carers and incentivising foster carers to switch to an SGO arrangement with lower payment rates.

***Cost impact:* The annual impact of these projected shifts is a reduction in annual net expenditure of £180,000 in 2025/26, rising to £950,000 per annum in 2029/30.**

It was also noted that anticipated fostering income would be £110,000 per annum in 2025/26 rising to £170,000 in 2029/30, following growth of foster carer volumes and being able to "sell" placements to other LAs. This may also be ambitious considering the above recruitment issues.

A reduction in UASC CLA and care leaver weekly rates

The latest SCF modelling assumes a modest reduction in rates for a relatively small number of UASC residential and care leaver placements.

***Cost impact:* The annual impact of this projected change is a reduction in annual net expenditure of £120,000 in 2025/26, rising to £160,000 per annum in 2029/30.**

Additional points

- There is anticipated to be additional savings of around £340,000 per annum related to a tender process for packages of care for children with disabilities, by re-commissioning the offer of short breaks to children with additional needs – promoting more direct payments and fewer packages of care provided by 3rd parties.
- There is a £190,000 per annum saving in Legal fees following reduced numbers of children in proceedings (27 per month to end December 2024 compared to 54 in the nine months to December 2023), alongside robust decision making around issuing proceedings, the use of counsel and specialist assessments. If the average duration of proceedings continues to decrease there is an opportunity for additional savings, though this is vulnerable to fluctuations.
- There has been an increase in recruitment costs (£120,000 per annum): this includes international social worker recruitment. Around 30 social workers will need visa renewals funded, at approximately £30,000 each per year total.

Financial management and planning (5/5)

Our overall conclusion is that the business plan is more grounded than in 2022, with better alignment between operational trends and financial modelling. It now demonstrates:

- A strong link between operational strategy and financial planning. For instance, the reduction in legal fees is tied to fewer children in proceedings and better decision-making at legal gateway panels, and placement cost reductions are linked to specific commissioning strategies and service redesigns, such as the recommissioning of disability care packages.
- A shift from reactive budgeting to proactive, scenario-based modelling. For example, the Edge of Care savings and care leaver reductions are now better aligned with observed trends.
- A culture of transparency and shared ownership of financial performance across leadership. It is critical that SCF maintains the discipline of linking financial forecasts to measurable operational outcomes.

However, as noted some assumptions are optimistic or do not have robust enough evidence to support them. We therefore conclude that there are targeted areas requiring further assurance, as outlined below.

Areas to monitor

Some projections, such as 1% annual uplift to child population growth, compounding to 5% by 2029/30, could inflate cost baselines by £500k/year if not validated with more robust evidence.

Additionally, external factors such as UASC volumes, Home Office funding, and housing availability for care leavers are all dependencies that could disrupt financial plans, and must therefore be monitored closely.

A shift from IFAs to in-house fostering/SGOs could save £950k/year, but SCF itself acknowledges recruitment and conversion challenges, making this assumption ambitious and requiring further validation.

Finally, visa renewals for international social workers and increased recruitment costs are acknowledged but represent a growing cost pressure that needs to be managed proactively.

Value for money (1/2)

Due to the time available, our review of value for money is not a full VfM assessment but draws conclusions from current modelling assumptions and perceptions of budget management, and high-level comparison with the 2022 position.

SCF is increasingly demonstrating that it provides value for money for its services, with some caveats, and SCF's financial modelling now shows a balanced position, with income matching expenditure year on year. The perception from stakeholders across the Council and the Company is that it is 'better, but not quite' providing best value.

Key points

- For 2023/24, SCF managed within its financial envelope and made no additional requests for funding.
- Stakeholders were extremely positive about current Director oversight, and highlighted the Company returning a £2.8m reduction in core contract funding to the Council in 2024/25, with operating costs coming in at £2.2m under budget and £600,000 of additional income generation.
- The improved cash flow position has enabled the company to repay a £5m loan received from SBC by the end of financial year 2024/25.
- The Company has significantly reduced spend on placements for children in care through an External Placement Panel (EPP), which regularly reviews placements to ensure suitability and appropriate pricing.
    - The EPP achieved approximately £1m in cost reductions in the previous budget year through robust commissioning and contract management practices, and identified a further £560k in annual cost reductions in Q1 2024/25.
    - Comparisons against national benchmarking data suggests that SCF is "bucking the trend on placement costs" and is on a downward trajectory for residential costs, contrary to trends in statistical neighbours and on a national footprint.
- SCF has also aimed to reduce legal fees by using a legal gateway panel to decide whether to issue care proceedings – and delivering 'creative' support packages to families to avoid care proceedings and placement costs.
- Additionally, the focus on growing its permanent workforce through international recruitment, ASYE, and apprenticeship programmes, along with regular review of agency workers, is contributes to staff resource delivering value for money through improved recruitment and retention.
- Value for money now appears to be a consideration in all spending decisions, with processes in place for commissioned and non-commissioned activities. The finance committee monitors financial performance and scrutinises value for money at Board level. Additionally, the SBC Chief Executive's report from January 2025 states clearly that '*[...] the services are lean and even if merged, there are not significant savings to be made from simply transferring the staff across.*'

Value for money (2/2)

Areas to monitor

SCF's business improvement plan for 2025-28 had assumed a significant reduction in DfE grant funding from 2023/24: in 2024/25 the grant was £779,000, in 2025/26 it is £513,000, and the DfE has confirmed that further funding will not be available in 2026/27.

While current forecasts are balanced, longer-term sustainability still requires vigilance. SCF has made efforts to reduce the base costs, or absorb some of the costs, to manage this tapering: however, SCF will still need to continue finding savings to mitigate the 2026/27 removal, despite Slough being awarded ~£650,000 under the Children’s Social Care Prevention Grant to aid national social care reforms.

Additionally, while SCF's finances have improved, SBC continues to face extraordinary financial challenges. It has been agreed that the MHCLG Commissioner’s intervention will continue until the end of November 2026. While SCF has demonstrated a strong capability to manage its finances effectively and achieve a balanced budget, its long-term financial sustainability is intertwined with SBC's broader financial recovery.

Governance (1/2)

The governance structure of Slough Children First (SCF) has undergone significant improvements and is much more effective than in previous years. Our assessment is that this is the area that requires further attention in light of convergence ambitions and national reform commitments.

Board stability

- The SCF Board is described by stakeholders as "stable" and showing increasing signs of stronger grip on financial management and oversight.
- It retained its membership largely unchanged from May 2021 to November 2024, with Non-Executive Director (NED) Debbie Jones bringing significant leadership in social care, which provides valuable strategic input and experience needed to manage the national social care reforms.
- There is positive feedback about the Chair's management of the Board, and the greatly improved relationships between the Board, the Company at large, and the Council.
- Efforts to streamline have yielded positive results, including the recent merging of the Audit and Governance Committee and the Finance Committee into a single Audit and Finance Committee (leaving three subcommittees in total: Audit and Finance, Remuneration, Nominations and Appointments, and People and Practice).

Corporate parenting

- The Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee (CISC) has a work programme focused on children's services and scrutinises SCF's performance.
- SCF's improvement plan is monitored bi-monthly by the Children's Improvement Group.
- The DfE Commissioner chairs a monthly Improvement Board that scrutinises the plan's progress.
- SCF's risk register is aligned with SBC's, and the Company Secretary attends the Council's Risk Board to ensure SCF's risks are captured and reported appropriately via Council systems.

Dual structures

- Governance structures, while comprehensive, are not universally viewed by stakeholders as 'cumbersome' or 'formal' but as 'structured and necessary' for the current operating model.
- While stakeholders acknowledge that there is naturally more time spent on scrutiny through the dual governance arrangements, the Company is improving at managing the sequencing of these arrangements.
- Additionally, there is a desire across stakeholders to explore reducing the amount of oversight meetings for a more streamlined approach, and to focus more closely on outcomes and outcomes-based improvements.

Governance (2/2)

Areas to monitor

Dual structures

There is an inherent complexity of the governance model - especially the dual accountability of the Director of Children's Services (DCS), who must serve both the company and the Council. This dual role creates tension and ambiguity, which is recognised but not yet fully resolved.

While necessary for the dual-running of the Company and the Council, there is considerable cut-across with the number of forums, scrutiny and oversight meetings in place (see Annex).

Board structure and composition

While some stakeholders feel that the Board has the right size and skill set presently and has slimmed down considerably, there is a split in that others hold strong views that the Board is still too large and that some current roles are not necessary. It was noted that having the three executive directors (the Chief Executive, Director of Operations and Director of Finance) on the Board required a larger Board to keep independents in majority.

However as regards the Board's functionality, multiple stakeholders fed back that NEDs often work far more than their allocated days, and there is a perception that the Board functions on the 'goodwill' of these NEDs.

Some stakeholders also commented that NEDs become "overly involved in operational matters" or "too in the weeds" – which may be driven by the three subcommittees being chaired by the NEDs – and that does not allow them the capacity to operate more strategically.

This current practice is unsustainable, and must be reviewed immediately to ensure NED time is used proportionately and targeted appropriately.

It was also noted that there are currently no additional Board improvement plans; following a recent Board self-evaluation, it was concluded that no further reform is required at present. This is not aligned with overall efficiency ambitions held elsewhere in the Company and Council, and is not optimal for convergence planning.

As a priority, the Board should revisit rationalising its structure, and that of its subcommittees. This should at the very least to ensure that Board members operate at the time and level expected, and explore streamlining the above forums further.

A few stakeholders suggesting reducing down to two subcommittees (Finance, and Practice), and two NEDs.

Convergence assessment (1/3)

SCF has demonstrated good progress in its improvement journey since the 2022 review. In light of improvements, discussions have started to consider reintegration of the Company into the Council.

It has been the longstanding ambition – and underlying metric – for SBC that SCF should converge and reintegrate on receiving an Ofsted rating of 'Good'. Discussion has also raised the question of whether reintegrating the Company into the Council would enable the improvement journey for children's services to be more effective.

The timing of convergence has been a consistent pressure; with the previous inspection having been completed in 2023, the next Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) will be due in mid-to-late 2026, when the current contract is due to end. With the DfE indicating it will take the first steps to de-escalate intervention in Slough, the question has arisen on whether this convergence could be done in line with this contract date.

Comparable scenarios

The decision to reintegrate is heavily context-specific; to better illustrate this, we have provided a series of case studies outlining reintegration actions taken in specific scenarios.

Reintegration following improvements and increased stability

Case study: Worcestershire Children First (WCF)

Background
In 2016, Worcestershire County Council's children's services received an 'inadequate' rating from Ofsted. Following this, in 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) appointed a commissioner who recommended that the council cede control of its children's services. Consequently, Worcestershire Children First (WCF), a wholly owned company, was established in 2019 to manage early help, children's social care, and education services.

Improvement
Under WCF's management, services improved, achieving a 'good' rating from Ofsted in 2023. The senior leadership team was commended for working effectively with political leaders and partners to enhance children's experiences.

Reintegration
The council decided to bring services back in-house in October 2024, citing financial sustainability and the benefits of integrating children's services into the wider authority. Approximately 942 staff members were transferred from WCF to the council.

Convergence assessment (2/3)

Reintegration after progress stalls

Case study: Reading Borough Council – Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC)

Background
In 2016, following an 'inadequate' Ofsted rating, Reading's children's services were placed under government intervention. To address the issues, the council established Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC), a not-for-profit company wholly owned by the council, which began operating in December 2018.

Improvement
By 2021, significant progress had been made, leading to the lifting of the government's statutory direction. However, as of September 2024, Ofsted rated the services as 'requires improvement,' indicating that while progress had been made, further enhancements were necessary. Stakeholders comments also flagged that the alternative delivery model was no longer a 'popular' model.

Reintegration
In January 2025, the council unanimously decided not to renew BFfC's contract beyond its March 2026 expiration, and planned to bring children's services back in-house by autumn 2025. This decision was influenced by a review from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), which highlighted benefits such as improved direct control, streamlined governance, and potential cost savings of £200,000–£300,000 annually. The transition will cost £600,000 to implement, and involves transferring approximately 550 staff members from BFfC to the council. It is too early to say whether this transition will have a positive impact on service performance.

Reintegration after slipping backwards

Case study: Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council – Doncaster Children's Services Trust (DCST)

Background
Doncaster was the first council in England to have its children's social care services removed and placed into an independent trust in response to failings in the department. Doncaster Children's Services Trust (DCST) was established in 2014 following a series of serious case reviews and an 'inadequate' Ofsted rating.

Improvement
Initially, DCST made progress, but by 2022 Ofsted had downgraded services from 'good' to 'requires improvement,' with leadership rated as 'inadequate.' The council and trust agreed that the current model was hindering progress.

Reintegration
In September 2022, children's social care services were transferred back to council control. By March 2025, Ofsted rated Doncaster's children's services as 'good'.

MUTUAL VENTURES

Convergence assessment (3/3)

In terms of stakeholder will, convergence is clearly the overarching goal, whether perceived as shared aspiration or an eventual inevitability. There is a shared view across stakeholders that reintegration would:

- Support SBC's corporate plan and target operating model;
- Enable more cohesive commissioning across children's and adult services;
- Restore full political oversight of children's services to the Council, especially as DfE intervention winds down;
- Reduce duplication in back-office functions (e.g. HR, legal, finance); exact savings have not been quantified, but are expected to be modest (as the current DfE grant of £513k covers the Chair, NEDs, the Finance Director, audit and insurance costs, the Company Secretary, executive support, a financial accountant and an element of HR); and
- Remove what is felt by stakeholders to be the "exceptional" status of SCF, and align Slough with standard local authority models.

At present, our assessment is that **full convergence of SCF into SBC at the end of the current contract in August 2026 would be premature**.

There are five key factors feeding this conclusion, which we have outlined overleaf in more detail:

Balancing capacity with current commitments

Sustained confidence in practice

Service maturity

Parent organisation readiness

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

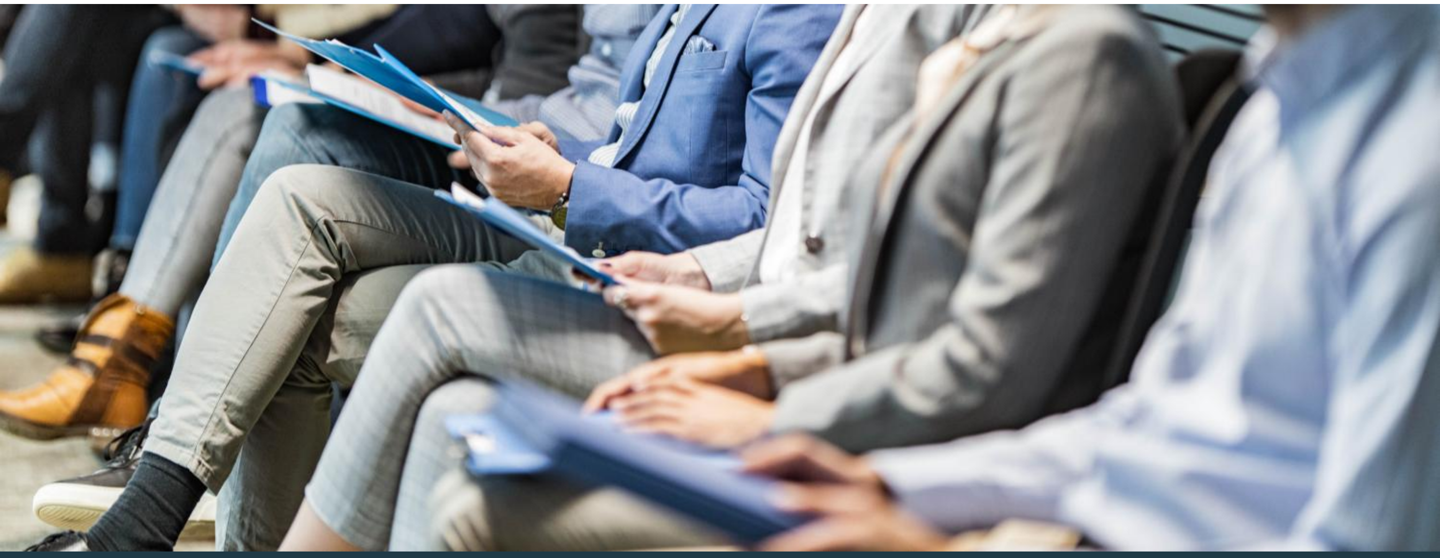
1 Balancing capacity with other commitments

There is an ‘imminent’ Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) inspection due, and SCF are aware that their full ILACS is also expected by mid-2026. Alongside this, SCF and SBC are in the process of adapting to national social care reforms under the Families First Partnership Programme, which require fully costed delivery plans to be completed by December 2025 and implementation to be underway by March 2026.

Balancing two major inspections and national reform will demand significant leadership resource and operational capacity to prepare and deliver; capacity, not capability, has already been flagged as a key gap by stakeholders, which is supported in the documentary evidence that not enough resource has been allocated to transformation work.

Transitioning back to SBC will also demand capacity and careful management from leaders in SBC and SCF, and will require sufficient time to develop a roadmap to reintegration. Based on the information available, there is no clear evidence demonstrating that there is suitably well-developed planning, or risk management, for developing and delivering a transition plan for reintegration (were convergence to be delivered within 14 months). This assessment would change if these plans are available.

While it may be possible to achieve convergence within this period, doing so alongside preparations for two major inspections and delivery of national reform would carry considerable risk of overburdening the system and performance impact.



2 Sustained confidence in practice

While SCF has made substantial improvements in performance through the new practice approach, the current improved status of children's services in Slough is relatively young and it is still consolidating gains in practice quality.

Improvement must be more sustainably bedded in over a longer period to give SCF, SBC and the DfE THE confidence that reintegrating will not cause performance in children's services to slip backwards; there is considerable nervousness across stakeholders that progress in service delivery and performance is 'fragile' and vulnerable to destabilisation.

Confidence would increase with positive outcomes from both the SEND and ILACS inspections. There is a view that a "high" 'Requires Improvement' would be sufficient to indicate service stabilisation and the ability to converge successfully, but it would be a dilution of initial commitments to achieve 'Good' before reintegrating the service.

If convergence is not sufficiently planned, managed or executed, this could also unsettle SCF's workforce, and impact performance if permanent staff choose to leave.

It is also worth noting that even in some cases where children's trusts achieve sustained positive performance, reintegration is not always necessary.

Case study: Sunderland City Council – Together for Children (TfC)

Background
Sunderland's children's services were rated 'inadequate' by Ofsted in both 2015 and 2018. In response, the Department for Education directed the establishment of Together for Children (TfC), an independent trust, which began operating in April 2017.

Improvement
TfC achieved remarkable progress, with Ofsted rating the services as 'outstanding' in 2021. This rapid improvement was attributed to strong leadership, a committed workforce, and a focus on early intervention and prevention strategies.

Reintegration
Sunderland's children's services remain under the management of TfC. There has been no indication of plans to reintegrate these services back into direct council control, owing to the strong performance of TfC under its current model – in March 2025, TfC sustained its 'Outstanding' rating from its Ofsted inspection.

3 Service maturity (1/2)

We were asked to consider the Children's Services Maturity Matrix (Foster, University of Nottingham, 2025) as part of our review, as the themes covered in this review also map to this matrix.

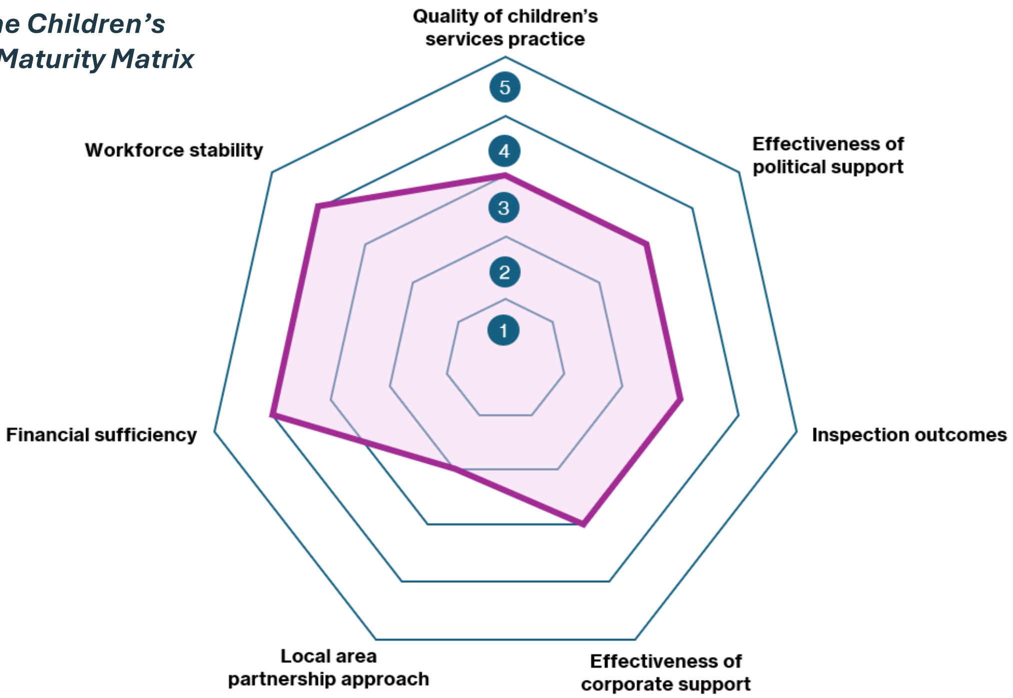
The matrix provides a useful starting point for a self-assessment of whether a service is 'mature', or providing stable and high-quality children's social care.

By extension, service stability and quality can also be viewed as 'resilience', which in turn provides an indication of how resilient and ready a service may be to undergo a significant transition (such as reintegration into a local authority), without disrupting progress or slipping backwards. Children's services maturity and resilience can be viewed through these seven lenses:

- Inspection outcomes
- Quality of children's services practice
- Workforce stability
- Local area partnership approach
- Financial sufficiency
- Effectiveness of corporate support
- Effectiveness of political support

Based on the information gathered during the document review and the stakeholder interviews, we have applied a high-level set of scores to these seven lenses, as seen below (a score of 1 being the lowest and least ready, and 5 the highest and most ready).

Fig. 1 High level map for Slough Children First against the Children's Services Maturity Matrix



Based on the information available, SCF does not yet demonstrate sufficient service maturity, stability and quality. A fuller self-assessment should be conducted for a more comprehensive view of SCF's service maturity, quality and stability, to provide greater confidence of its readiness for reintegration.

3 Service maturity (2/2)

While SCF has made commendable progress in areas such as leadership stability, financial control, and workforce development, the matrix emphasises the need for sustained excellence across domains like:

- Integrated strategic commissioning
- Consistently high-quality frontline practice
- Embedded learning culture and performance management
- Strong multi-agency safeguarding and partnership working

Current information from Ofsted's most recent feedback from the April 2024 focused visit, views shared during stakeholder interviews, and documentary evidence, suggests that SCF still in the 'developing' or 'emerging' stages in these domains.

Therefore, SCF is not yet in a position that would support effective reintegration into SBC without risking disruption to its improvement trajectory.

4 Parent organisation readiness

The MHCLG intervention in SBC is a critical factor in assessing the timing and viability of convergence, particularly as the MHCLG Commissioner's intervention in SBC has been extended until at least November 2026, reflecting ongoing concerns about the Council's leadership and governance stability.

The Commissioner reports are not positive about the stability of leadership in SBC, suggesting that the Council has not yet demonstrated the consistency or resilience required to reabsorb SCF. This is a significant concern, as stable leadership is a prerequisite for safely absorbing a complex and still-improving service like children's services.

Additionally, while SCF has achieved a degree of financial stability, there is recognition that it has operated with a degree of protection as a separate entity sitting outside of the Council's broader fiscal position. Reintegration would expose it to the Council's wider financial constraints, requiring a more pronounced shift toward cashable savings and leaner operations.

Reintegration of SCF into SBC while the Council remains under MHCLG intervention could risk diluting the focus on children's services improvement, as it would create pressure to implement additional budget reductions that could affect service quality.

Additionally, interview feedback has highlighted that although work has been done to treat wider children's services as one service rather than two, cultural differences between SCF and SBC are still present – stakeholders voiced concerns that not managing these differences during reintegration could risk losing the progress SCF has made in leadership, workforce stability, and service delivery.

There are ways to work around this: in Doncaster, upon reintegration the delivery model shifted from being an arms-length organisation to an in-house 'ring fenced' operation, in order to maintain and protect what worked, especially around the unique identity, culture and brand of its children's services.

5 Local Government Reorganisation

LGR is a significant contextual factor that could further complicate – or even reverse – any structural changes made now. There are live discussions being held on Local Government Reorganisation bids, which are due later this year – as yet there is no additional clarity on required implementation timelines for LGR.

Although arrangements are not yet clear, proposals are due in November 2026 and MHCLG moderation could result in the aggregation of SBC into a larger unitary authority or a reconfiguration of local government boundaries in Berkshire or the wider Thames Valley, amongst other options.

Reintegration of SCF into SBC shortly before such a change could lead to double disruption (first into SBC, then into a new authority) undermining continuity and stability.

LGR case study: Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council merger

Background
Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole (BCP) merged to create a single unitary covering a diverse and densely populated area. BCP pursued a full integration model for Children's Services but encountered significant challenges in aligning different operating models, data systems, and organisational cultures.

Lessons learned

- Prioritise cultural alignment, not just structures. Differences in practice and thresholds across legacy organisations can create post-merger friction. Investing in shared values and culture is just as vital as structural change.
- Don't underestimate the risk to performance and safeguarding. Leadership instability and poor change management can impact service quality. Bringing in change management expertise and maintaining focus on governance and safeguarding is critical throughout a transition period.
- Plan early for any digital integration. Incompatible systems can disrupt services. Early IT planning avoids costly delays.
- Early support for new political leaders is essential to set a clear vision and align the organisation around shared goals.
- Engage communities and partners early - proactive engagement ensures transformation reflects local priorities and builds early trust.

Additionally, LGR will requires councils to streamline services, consolidate systems, and harmonise governance. Reintegration of SCF would need to align with these broader transformation efforts; a premature merger could inadvertently misalign with the future operating model of a new authority.

Potential convergence timeline

To optimise successful convergence, a phased transition model that extends to at least March 2027 is recommended, in order to protect the progress made in children's services while aligning with broader reform and governance timelines.

The suggested timeline below is **indicative**, and incorporates high-level and approximate timelines for upcoming external commitments and national reforms.

The key underlying caveat is that reintegration should be deferred until the LGR direction is clearer, and should be combined with delivering the national social care reforms. This will avoid a 'double transition' and misalignment with future governance models.

June – August 2025
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) inspection
- DfE Commissioner may continue in a Commissioner capacity if ongoing concerns persist

July – August 2025
- DfE Commissioner to step down to advisory role for social care in Slough
- Trigger extension of SCF contract to March 2027

December 2025
- Costed delivery plans for national social care reforms due

March 2026
- Implementation of social care reform delivery plans underway

March – August 2026
- Develop phased transition plan for convergence

February – August 2026
- Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services
- Reassess convergence based on inspection outcomes

September 2026
- Subject to a satisfactory outcome from ILACs, begin phased formal transition to reintegration

November 2026
- Reassess/pause formal reintegration based on MHCLG intervention status

Mar 2027 – April 2027
- End of extended contract and fiscal year
- Full reintegration of SCF into SBC complete