



Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)

Date: Monday, 15 September 2025
Time: 10.00 am
Venue: Meeting Room 1, County Hall, Dorchester, DT1 1XJ

Members (Quorum: 3)

Cllrs Nick Ireland (Chair), Richard Biggs (Vice-Chair), Ryan Hope, Clare Sutton and Gill Taylor

Chief Executive: Catherine Howe, County Hall, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 1XJ

For more information about this agenda please contact Democratic Services
Meeting Contact lindsey.watson@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Members of the public are welcome to attend this meeting, apart from any items listed in the exempt part of this agenda. If you would like to attend this meeting and have any specific requirements please contact the Democratic Services Officer named above.

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Agenda

Item		Pages
1.	APOLOGIES To receive any apologies for absence.	
2.	MINUTES To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 9 June 2025.	5 - 8
3.	DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST To disclose any pecuniary, other registrable or non-registrable interest as set out in the adopted Code of Conduct. In making their disclosure councillors are asked to state the agenda item, the nature of the interest and any action they propose to take as part of their declaration.	

If required, further advice should be sought from the Monitoring Officer in advance of the meeting.

4. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Representatives of town or parish councils and members of the public who live, work, or represent an organisation within the Dorset Council area are welcome to submit either 1 question or 1 statement for each meeting. You are welcome to attend the meeting in person or via MS Teams to read out your question and to receive the response. If you submit a statement for the committee this will be circulated to all members of the committee in advance of the meeting as a supplement to the agenda and appended to the minutes for the formal record but will not be read out at the meeting. **The first 8 questions and the first 8 statements received from members of the public or organisations for each meeting will be accepted on a first come first served basis in accordance with the deadline set out below.**

Further information read [Public Participation - Dorset Council](#)

All submissions must be emailed in full to lindsey.watson@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk by 8.30am on 10 September 2025.

When submitting your question or statement please note that:

- You can submit 1 question or 1 statement.
- a question may include a short pre-amble to set the context.
- It must be a single question and any sub-divided questions will not be permitted.
- Each question will consist of no more than 450 words, and you will be given up to 3 minutes to present your question.
- when submitting a question please indicate who the question is for (e.g., the name of the committee or Portfolio Holder)
- Include your name, address, and contact details. Only your name will be published but we may need your other details to contact you about your question or statement in advance of the meeting.
- questions and statements received in line with the council's rules for public participation will be published as a supplement to the agenda.
- all questions, statements and responses will be published in full within the minutes of the meeting.

5. COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS

To receive questions submitted by councillors.

Councillors can submit up to two valid questions at each meeting and sub divided questions count towards this total. Questions and statements received will be published as a supplement to the agenda and all questions, statements and responses will be published in full

within the minutes of the meeting.

The submissions must be emailed in full to lindsey.watson@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk by 8.30am on 10 September 2025.

[Dorset Council Constitution](#) – Procedure Rule 13

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|------------|--|---------|
| 6. | FORWARD PLAN | 9 - 14 |
| | To consider the Forward Plan. | |
| 7. | DORSET COUNCIL COMMISSIONER'S REPORT | 15 - 18 |
| | To consider a report of the Head of Service – Health, Education and SEND Commissioning. | |
| 8. | REPORT FROM THE CHAIR OF THE BOARD | 19 - 22 |
| | To consider a report of the Chair of the Board. | |
| 9. | URGENT ITEMS | |
| | To consider any items of business which the Chair has had prior notification and considers to be urgent pursuant to section 100B (4) (b) of the Local Government Act 1972. The reason for the urgency shall be recorded in the minutes. | |
| 10. | EXEMPT BUSINESS | |
| | To move the exclusion of the press and the public for the following item in view of the likely disclosure of exempt information within the meaning of paragraph x of schedule 12 A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended). The public and the press will be asked to leave the meeting whilst the item of business is considered. | |

There are no exempt items scheduled for this meeting.

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SHAREHOLDER COMMITTEE FOR THE DORSET CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE (DCOE)

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 9 JUNE 2025

Present: Cllrs Nick Ireland (Chair), Richard Biggs (Vice-Chair), Clare Sutton and Gill Taylor

Apologies: Cllrs Ryan Hope

Officers present (for all or part of the meeting):

Ross Bowell (Head of Service - Health, Education & SEND Commissioning), Ian Comfort (Chair of the Dorset Centre of Excellence Board), Paul Dempsey (Executive Director of People - Children), Aidan Dunn (Executive Director - Corporate Development S151), Grace Evans (Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer), Andy Holder (Managing Director), Lesley Mellor (Dorset Centre of Excellence Board Director), Frances Nicholson (Dorset Centre of Excellence Board Director), Lindsey Watson (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and Beth Whittaker (Interim Corporate Director for Education and Learning)

1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 March 2025 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Public Participation

There were no questions or statements from members of the public or local organisations.

4. Councillor Questions

There were no questions from councillors.

5. Forward Plan

The Forward Plan was noted.

6. Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for the shareholder committee were noted.

7. Dorset Council Commissioner's Report

The Shareholder Committee received a report of the Head of Service – Health, Education and SEND Commissioning, which provided an overview of the position in relation to delivery by the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCoE) against the commissioning agreement.

Councillors considered the issues arising from the report and during discussion, points were raised in the following areas:

- Good progress was being made in a number of areas and a question was raised as to how progress was measured. In response, it was noted that there were a range of key performance indicators in place, including measures around teaching, attainment, safeguarding, health and safety, finance and corporate. Some of these could be brought forward to the shareholder committee moving forward
- Reference was made in the report to pupils earning valued qualifications and further information was provided at the meeting on how this was being progressed including through the provision of a widening range of subjects
- The school continued to focus on children within the Dorset Council area although there had been interest from neighbouring local authorities, which could be explored further in the future
- There was a discussion around the number of children that could potentially attend the school moving forward, although it was noted that a level of capital investment would be required and that this would need to be carefully managed. Further work was required in this area
- Consideration was given to commercial opportunities in relation to the wider use of the site. Although it was recognised that the priority for the site was for the school and the provision of SEND services, the site needed to be looked at as a wider asset, including longer term plans to generate additional income from the site
- The Executive Director Corporate Development and S151 Officer provided an overview of the key considerations for the council in respect of potential additional capital expenditure at Coombe House and at other locations
- A request was made for a report on the longer-term intentions for the site.

The report was NOTED.

8. Report from the Chair of the Board

The Chair of the Board introduced the report, which provided an update on the current situation at the Dorset Centre of Excellence (“the Company”) and the Coombe House School (“the School”). The report included progress made in relation to governance, leadership, staffing, estate, community use and finance.

In presenting the report it was noted that work was being undertaken with the children to choose subjects to assist with life beyond school, noted that bespoke solutions could be put in place where required, links being made with parents and the local community and thought being given to the creation of a group of schools with similar characteristics, for the purpose of making comparisons in areas such as attendance and key performance indicators.

Councillors considered the report and discussion was focused on the following areas:

- Recruitment issues were considered and there was confidence in the position with staffing levels for September
- It was noted that there had been no use of agency staff and that cover was being provided by teachers
- In response to a question regarding the potential use of part of a building on site as a gym, it was noted that there was a current issue with regard to the application of business rates and that the board was engaging with Dorset Council and relevant professionals to consider the issues and options.

The report was NOTED.

9. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

10. **Exempt Business**

There was no exempt business.

Duration of meeting: 10.00 - 10.40 am

Chairman

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The Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE) Forward Plan September 2025 to January 2026 (Publication date – 14 AUGUST 2025)

Explanatory Note:

This Forward Plan contains future items to be considered by the Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence. It is published 28 days before the next meeting of the Committee. The plan includes items for the meeting including key decisions. Each item shows if it is 'open' to the public or to be considered in a private part of the meeting.

Definition of Key Decisions

Key decisions are defined in Dorset Council's Constitution as decisions which are likely to -

- (a) to result in the relevant local authority incurring expenditure which is, or the making of savings which are, significant having regard to the relevant local authority's budget for the service or function to which the decision relates (**Thresholds - £500k**); or
- (b) to be significant in terms of its effects on communities living or working in an area comprising two or more wards or electoral divisions in the area of the relevant local authority."

In determining the meaning of "*significant*" for these purposes the Council will have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State in accordance with section 9Q of the Local Government Act 2000 Act. Officers will consult with lead members to determine significance and sensitivity.

Committee Membership 2025/26

Cllr Nick Ireland – Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Climate, Performance and Safeguarding
Cllr Richard Biggs – Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Property & Assets and Economic Growth
Cllr Ryan Hope – Cabinet Member for Customer, Culture and Community Engagement
Cllr Clare Sutton – Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education & Skills
Cllr Gill Taylor – Cabinet Member for Health and Housing

Subject / Decision	Decision Maker	Date the Decision is Due	Cabinet Member	Officer Contact
September 2025				

Dorset Council Delegated Decisions (if required) Key Decision - No Public Access - Open To note any decisions taken under delegation.	Decision Maker Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)	Decision Date 15 Sep 2025	Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills	<i>Executive Director, People - Children (Paul Dempsey)</i>
Dorset Council Commissioner's Report Key Decision - No Public Access - Part exempt To provide an overview of the current position in relation to delivery by the Dorset Centre of Excellence against the commissioning agreement.	Decision Maker Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)	Decision Date 15 Sep 2025	Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills	<i>Ross Bowell, Head of Service - Health, Education & SEND Commissioning ross.bowell@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk Executive Director, People - Children (Paul Dempsey)</i>

OT 2025

Subject / Decision	Decision Maker	Date the Decision is Due	Cabinet Member	Officer Contact
DCoE - Report of the Chair of the Board Key Decision - No Public Access - Part exempt To provide an update on the current situation at the Dorset Centre of Excellence and the Coombe House School, including progress made in relation to governance, leadership, staffing, estate, community use and finance.	Decision Maker Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)	Decision Date 15 Sep 2025	Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills	<i>Executive Director, People - Children</i> <i>(Paul Dempsey)</i>
December 2025				

Dorset Council Delegated Decisions (if required) Key Decision - No Public Access - Open To note any decisions taken under delegation.	Decision Maker Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)	Decision Date 1 Dec 2025	Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills	<i>Executive Director, People - Children</i> <i>(Paul Dempsey)</i>
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Subject / Decision	Decision Maker	Date the Decision is Due	Cabinet Member	Officer Contact
Dorset Council Commissioner's Report Key Decision - No Public Access - Part exempt To provide an overview of the current position in relation to delivery by the Dorset Centre of Excellence against the commissioning agreement.	Decision Maker Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)	Decision Date 1 Dec 2025	Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills	<i>Ross Bowell, Head of Service - Health, Education & SEND Commissioning</i> ross.bowell@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk <i>Executive Director, People - Children (Paul Dempsey)</i>
DCoE - Report of the Chair of the Board Key Decision - No Public Access - Part exempt To provide an update on the current situation at the Dorset Centre of Excellence and the Coombe House School, including progress made in relation to governance, leadership, staffing, estate, community use and finance.	Decision Maker Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)	Decision Date 1 Dec 2025	Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills	<i>Executive Director, People - Children (Paul Dempsey)</i>

Subject / Decision	Decision Maker	Date the Decision is Due	Cabinet Member	Officer Contact
Annual Reports				
Review of Terms of Reference (June) Key Decision - No Public Access - Open To note the shareholder committee terms of reference.	Decision Maker Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)	Decision Date	Leader and Cabinet Member for Climate, Performance and Safeguarding	<i>Grace Evans, Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer</i> <i>grace.evans@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk</i>
Annual Performance Report (December) Key Decision - No Public Access - Open To consider the Coombe House Annual Performance Report.	Decision Maker Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)	Decision Date	Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills	<i>Executive Director, People - Children (Paul Dempsey)</i>

Private/Exempt Items for Decision

Each item in the plan above marked as 'private' will refer to one of the following paragraphs.

1. Information relating to any individual.
2. Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).
4. Information relating to any consultations or negotiations, or contemplated consultations or negotiations, in connection with any labour relations matter arising between the authority or a Minister of the Crown and employees of, or office holders under, the authority.
5. Information in respect of which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings.
6. Information which reveals that the shadow council proposes:-
 - (a) to give under any enactment a notice under or by virtue of which requirements are imposed on a person; or
 - (b) to make an order or direction under any enactment.
7. Information relating to any action taken or to be taken in connection with the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime.

The Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence

15 September 2025

Dorset Council Commissioner's Report

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:

Cllr C Sutton, Children's Services, Education & Skills

Local Councillor(s):

Senior Leadership Team:

P Dempsey, Executive Director of People - Children

Report author and job title: Ross Bowell, Head of Service – Health, Education and SEND Commissioning

Email: ross.bowell@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Statutory Authority: N/A

Report status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

Executive summary (maximum of 500 words)

1. This report provides an overview of the current position in relation delivery by the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE) against the commissioning agreement.
2. **Recommendation(s)**
 - 2.1 Shareholders are asked to note the progress made and support the continued cooperation between the Council and the Dorset Centre of Excellence.
3. **Reason for the recommendation(s)**
 - 3.1 Progress continues to be sustained enabling the company to focus on delivering high quality education and preparing for further growth.
4. **The report**
 - 4.1 This report provides an overview of the current position in relation to delivery by the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE) against the commissioning agreement and an update on Dorset Council activity required to realise the delivery of the Dorset Centre of Excellence Business Plan.

- 4.2 Coombe House School had an OFSTED inspection at the end of June/start of July. The final report is due for publication in early September and the outcome is confidential until publication. We expect that publication will be before the Shareholder Committee which will allow a discussion of performance in the meeting which is informed by the OFSTED outcome.
- 4.3 The commissioning relationship continues to develop and strengthen. At the invitation of the DCOE Board, the Head of Service – Health, Education & SEND Commissioning attends the DCOE Board meetings. Regular contract review meetings continue between the Managing Director of DCOE and the Strategic Commissioner for Education, focused on the performance of the school. The meetings are informed by a range of performance indicators and reporting by exception we do not have any operational concerns to report. Working with the DCOE leadership in this academic year we will review performance reporting arrangements for the Shareholder Committee.
- 4.4 Notable areas of performance in recent contract reviews include strong development of reading and phonics delivery underpinned by teacher CPD, the multi-term improving trend in attendance and reduction in unauthorised absence, and consistently compliant engagement with local authority SEND practitioners including the completion of timely, high-quality annual reviews, individual education plans and preparation for adulthood plans for children in year 9 and above.
- 4.5 Regular operational meetings also take place to support conversations about individual children and to plan admissions. There were 131 pupils on roll in the summer term with a commissioned capacity of 152.
- 4.6 The Dorset Centre of Excellence Commissioning Group, which includes senior officers from Corporate Development, Place as well as Children's Services, continues to oversee Council activity in relation to DCOE including taking forward the action from the June Shareholder Committee for a report on the longer-term intentions for the site. This work is underway and a report will come to a future Shareholder Committee meeting.
5. **Alternative options considered**
- 5.1 Not applicable.
6. **Legal considerations**
- 6.1 No decisions are requested from this report. As such, there are no specific legal considerations arising from this report.

7. Financial implications

7.1 There are no specific financial implications arising from this report.

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

8.1 There are no specific environmental implications arising from this report.

9. Well-being and health implications

9.1 There are no specific wellbeing and health implications arising from this report.

10. Other implications

10.1 There are no other implications arising from this report.

11. Risk implications

11.1 There are no specific risk implications arising from this report.

12. Equalities

12.1 No decisions are requested from this report. As such, an Equality Impact Assessment is not required.

13. Appendices

13.1 N/A

14. Background papers

14.1 N/A

15. Report sign-off

15.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)

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Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

15 September 2025

Report from Chair of Board

For Review and Consultation

Report Author: Ian Comfort

Title: Director and Chair, Dorset Centre of Excellence Ltd

Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

This report provides an update on the current situation at the Dorset Centre of Excellence (“the Company”) and the Coombe House School (“the School”). It considers progress made in relation to governance, leadership, staffing, estate, community use and finance.

The Shareholder is asked to note the content of this report and to continue its support for the Company.

Reason for Recommendation:

The Board, in collaboration with colleagues from Dorset Council, continues to make progress towards its objectives. The Board is mindful that the ongoing support of Dorset Council to deliver the next phases of growth required to deliver the business plan through cooperation with the Council is ensuring the viability of the Company.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Company continues to perform well against its business plan, growing the pupil roll of Coombe House School, improving its quality and developing its wider commercial and community offer.

2. Coombe House School

- 2.1 The School continued to experience a positive final period of the summer term following the previous meeting with the Shareholder Committee.
- 2.2 Particular highlights were the sports day and the parent / carer open evening. Both were well supported and led to significant positive feedback from stakeholders.

- 2.3 The summer exam period was a success with the school reporting a significant increase in the number of pupils sitting and passing all external examinations, including an increase in the number of pupils sitting and passing an improved range of GCSE external examinations.
- 2.4 In the final weeks of the summer term, the School received an expected but unannounced standard inspection from Ofsted. The verbal feedback was overwhelmingly positive with the report likely to be published early in the new academic year (Ofsted do not typically publish inspection reports during the summer holidays).
- 2.5 Alongside the Ofsted report, the School also welcomed colleagues from both Dorset Council and Wiltshire Council who completed their respective annual quality assurance and annual safeguarding review visits. Their reports were positive and praised the robust safeguarding and governance practices seen, as well as elements of innovation that may benefit other schools who are seeking to develop their inclusive practice.

3. Commercial and Community Activities

- 3.1 Following the end of the contract with our previous swim school provider, a partnership with a new alternative provider has now begun and is going well.
- 3.2 In addition, our leisure team used the summer holiday to pilot 1:1 swimming lessons for local families, which were well attended and received positive feedback.
- 3.3 The community swimming continues to be popular and has maintained steady attendance despite the local Shaftesbury Lido offering its seasonal alternative to our users.

4. Business Plan Implementation

- 4.1 The Company is engaging with Council colleagues regarding the next steps around the implementation of the approved Business Plan.
- 4.2 Work is underway to ensure that the next phases of the required development will best facilitate the Company's planned growth and represent value for money for all stakeholders.

5. HR

- 5.1 The Company has continued to have strong recruitment processes to ensure it is able to meet the growth expectations of its business plan.
- 5.2 Turnover for the School at the end of the 2024/25 was 'sector-typical' within normal expectations and so was comfortably managed.

5.3 The Company continues to provide stability of leadership and governance.

6. Financial Implications

6.1 The Company has received a draft report following its financial audit of the 2024/25 which took place in late June 2025.

6.2 The audit process was successful with praise being given for the way the Company has conducted and governed its financial affairs.

6.3 The Company's accounts shall be given an unqualified report. The Company will share these with the Shareholder at the appropriate point in line with the Shareholder Agreement and they shall be submitted to Companies House by the auditors once signed off by the Board of Directors.

7. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

7.1 The Company has prioritised work on its natural environment, climate and ecology projects since the last Shareholder Committee meeting.

7.2 Work to maximise the energy generated by our solar panel portfolio has increased efficiency and work to improve the reliability of our biomass boiler has been planned.

7.3 Work to develop Coombe House Farm has led to a positive impact beyond the boundaries of the farm. In taking a broader view of the management approaches used in the estate, the Company is looking to improve the biodiversity of our woodlands and grasslands.

7.4 To support the Company in the above, it has successfully sought external grant funding to aid its investment into a number of regeneration projects.

8. Well-being and Health Implications

8.1 The Company continues to prioritise the health and wellbeing of the members of its community and carefully monitors the feedback we get in this regard.

9. Other Implications

9.1 No other implications have been identified.

10. Risk Assessment

10.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Medium

Residual Risk: Low.

11. Equalities Impact Assessment

11.1 The Board has not conducted an Equalities Impact Assessment for this report.

12. Appendices

12.1 None

13. Background Papers

13.1 There are no background papers to be included with this report.