



Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)

Date: Monday, 1 December 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 & Governance 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	5 - 8
To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 15 September 2025.	
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 26 November 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 26 November 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. | DCOE - REPORT OF THE CHAIR OF THE BOARD | 19 - 30 |
| | To consider a report of the Chair of the Board. | |
| 9. | COOMBE HOUSE ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT 2025 | 31 - 60 |
| | To consider the Annual Performance Report 2025. | |
| 10. | 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. | |
| 11. | 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 15 SEPTEMBER 2025

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

Also present: Cllr Derek Beer

Also present remotely: Cllr Jane Somper

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), Grace Evans (Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer), Andy Holder (Managing Director) and Lindsey Watson (Senior Democratic and Governance Officer)

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

Sean Cremer (Corporate Director for Finance and Commercial) and Alice Deacon (Corporate Director for Commissioning and Partnerships)

11. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 June 2025 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

12. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

13. Public Participation

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

14. Councillor Questions

There were no questions from councillors.

15. Forward Plan

The Forward Plan was noted.

16. 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. As additional points, it was noted that the report following the recent Ofsted inspection of the school had been published and it was highlighted that the council and the school were currently working together to develop reporting arrangements for performance indicators, which would be brought to the shareholder committee at future meetings.

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

- The Chair and members of the committee congratulated the school on the outcome of the Ofsted inspection which had rated the overall effectiveness of the school as Good
- The report noted an improving trend in attendance and reduction in unauthorised absence, and it was reported that it reflected a steady trajectory of improvement. There was confidence that the trend would continue to develop. The positive position regarding attendance had been identified in the Ofsted report
- A question with regard to implementation of the business plan and re-profiling associated with phases 3 and 5 would be picked up during discussion of the report from the Chair of the Board
- In response to a question, the Head of Service noted that the school was moving towards reaching the numbers stated in the commissioning agreement.

The report was NOTED.

17. 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 addition, the Chair provided a summary of the key findings of the Ofsted report and in particular noted the ‘Outstanding’ rating in respect of the Personal Development category.

The Managing Director highlighted key successes from the summer period, which included a positive open day for families and a good set of exam results. In addition, he noted that it was hoped to share performance information at the next meeting of the shareholder committee and further information was presented in respect of recent positive annual quality assurance and annual safeguarding review visits by Dorset Council and Wiltshire Council.

A discussion was held with regard to work to implement the approved Business Plan and it was noted that dialogue was ongoing with Dorset Council officers. Reference was made to work being undertaken to reprofile phases and in response to a question, further detail was provided as to the detail of phases 3 (growing site capacity) and 5 (residential proposal). Work was underway to ensure

that the next phases of the required development would best facilitate the company's planned growth and represented value for money for all stakeholders. It was noted that all procurement to date had been managed through Dorset Council, although this was being discussed.

In response to a question relating to increasing the number of children at the school, the Executive Director, People – Children, noted that Coombe House School provided a good educational facility for children that may have previously had to travel further for school, with the associated transport costs for the council. Coombe House School was part of a wider strategy in Dorset and discussions were ongoing in respect of provision at the Dorset Centre of Excellence and also meeting wider needs across the area.

It was noted that there were both children from within and outside of the Dorset Council area attending the school and a point flagged that the Teckal arrangements in place put a restriction on the number of children that could attend the school from outside the area.

Further information on GCSE subject areas provided would be brought to the next meeting of the shareholder committee.

The Executive Director congratulated the school on a very successful period.

The report was NOTED.

18. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

19. **Exempt Business**

There was no exempt business.

Duration of meeting: 10.00 - 10.24 am

Chairman

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The Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE) Forward Plan November 2025 to March 2026 (Publication date – 29 OCTOBER 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
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 (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 1 Dec 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>
DCoE - Report of the Chair of the Board Key Decision - No Public Access - Part exempt To provide an update on the	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>Chair, Dorset Centre of Excellence Executive Director, People – Children (Paul Dempsey)</i>

Subject / Decision	Decision Maker	Date the Decision is Due	Cabinet Member	Officer Contact
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.				
Annual Performance Report Key Decision - No Public Access - Open Do consider the Coombe House Annual Performance Report.	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>Chair, Dorset Centre of Excellence</i> <i>Executive Director, People - Children</i> <i>(Paul Dempsey)</i>
March 2026				

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 9 Mar 2026	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 9 Mar 2026	Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills	<i>Ross Bowell, Head of Service - Health, Education & SEND Commissioning</i> <i>ross.bowell@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk</i> <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 of 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 9 Mar 2026	Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills	<i>Chair, Dorset Centre of Excellence</i> <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>Chair, Dorset Centre of Excellence 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.

Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence

1 December 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)

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the current position in relation to delivery by the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE) against the commissioning agreement with the Council.

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 The company continues 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 with the Council.
- 4.2 Recent quarterly commissioner reports have reported positive progress in the performance of Coombe House School and this has now been externally recognised through the recent Good OFSTED report, which evidences strong performance as well as the governance to sustain high standards and continue to make further improvements.
- 4.3 The DCOE Board report to this Committee will include the Annual Performance Report. We wish to celebrate all pupils for their achievements in the year, including those who sat formal examinations and achieved passes in subjects including GCSE English, Maths, History and Science, and Entry Level and Functional Skills English and Maths qualifications.
- 4.4 Leadership in DCOE and the school is building on the maturity of the school to develop practice and the offer further, with a particular focus on developing pathways for reintegration into mainstream schools and an outcome focus on destinations for pupils.
- 4.5 The school is being innovative in developing the offer to meet the needs of pupils with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) behaviours. For example, a virtual classroom approach for EBSA is working well in first term, and commissioners will continue to monitor impact for these pupils as it becomes more established.
- 4.6 Alongside the core provision, the school has also responded to Council requests to provide personalised and cost-effective provision to meet the needs of a small number of pupils with very complex needs. As at the end of October, six pupils are currently being supported in this way.
- 4.7 Following formal recognition of the strength of practice at Coombe House School, commissioners are in discussion with the school and DCOE about how the school can share the good practice as part of Dorset's local education community, building on the proactive role the school already takes in its local community.
- 4.8 As at the end of October, there are 135 pupils on roll, with 8 placements being progressed. Fortnightly placement panels are taking place between Council practitioners and the school's leadership and this is expected to bring the school to its current commissioned capacity for Dorset pupils of 152 for the

start of next term. Attendance of pupils on roll continues to improve in the context of increasing pupil numbers.

- 4.9 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.
- 4.10 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 and on development of service to meet identified and emerging needs.

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 DCOE continues to take step to improve its environmental impact, recent developments include:
- Increasing the biodiversity of the land and forest
 - Bringing several solar arrays online
 - Biomass being operational
 - Purchase of a second hand electric van
 - Establishing an environmental committee of pupils and staff

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 None

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)

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

1 December 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 In the last Shareholder Committee meeting, the most recent Ofsted report for Coombe House School had recently been published but was not included in the papers as it had missed the deadline for inclusion. This meant that attendees were able to discuss the report informally but did not have a copy included in their papers. For that reason, the Ofsted report is attached to this report for completeness.

- 2.2 The School has begun the 2025/26 academic year positively, with new staff and pupils who joined at the start of the year settling well.
- 2.3 Further analysis of the School's examination results has now been completed and are detailed within the Company's Annual Performance Report.

3. Commercial and Community Activities

- 3.1 The team leading our community swimming pool offer has rejuvenated the environment and has ongoing plans to further enhance the guest experience for its users.
- 3.2 Following successful pilots in previous school holiday periods, the Company is exploring further bespoke swimming lessons for local children and adults.

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 Recruitment and retention leading up to the beginning of the new academic year was positive, providing ongoing stability and assurance of quality / continuity for pupils.
- 5.2 Training continues to be a priority, with a number of externally accredited courses now offered to staff for their learning and development.
- 5.3 The Company's People and Remuneration Committee meet regularly to review HR matters and scrutinise the quality of its response.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 The Company's draft financial report that followed the independent audit in June 2025 has now been finalised and published.
- 6.2 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.
- 6.3 The Company has recently completed a mid-year reforecast which reflects a positive start to the 2025/26 financial year. The reforecast is predicting the Company shall finish the financial year ahead of budget.

7. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

- 7.1 The Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) grant funding from Wiltshire Council has furthered the improvements that were planned for the site. Work to install new composting technology, progress pond restoration and the restoration of wildflower meadows has commenced at pace.
- 7.2 The ongoing work to maximise the efficiency of our biomass and solar panel portfolio continues, and the work is having significant impact, as evidenced by meter readings.

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 receive 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 Ofsted Report.

13. Background Papers

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

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Inspection of Coombe House School

Coombe House School, Donhead St Mary, Salisbury Road, Shaftesbury, Wiltshire SP7 9LP

Inspection dates: 1 to 3 July 2025

Overall effectiveness

Good

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Outstanding

Leadership and management

Good

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Requires improvement

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

Coombe House School is a vibrant place to learn. Pupils arrive each morning with enthusiasm. The atmosphere in classrooms and around corridors is calm and positive. Pupils are happy, safe and behave well. They trust staff to support and guide them.

All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities and an education, health and care plan. Many pupils have faced significant challenges in their education before joining the school. Staff take time to understand each pupil's needs well. They use this knowledge effectively to build strong and trusting relationships with pupils. Pupils feel valued and know that they are appreciated and belong.

Many pupils recognise the positive difference this school is making in their lives. Bespoke support is on hand for pupils when they need it. For example, the school provides a range of sensory spaces and quiet zones. This helps pupils develop a range of skills and practices to manage their senses.

Pupils meet staff's high expectations academically, socially and emotionally. They enjoy learning and take pride in their work. They value the rewards they receive for their perseverance and success. Pupils enjoy social times. Staff support pupils in interacting with each other and making friends.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

The proprietor board and school leaders have an ambitious vision for the school and what pupils will achieve. The school is well led and managed. This includes oversight of the growth and effectiveness of the school. Staff value the care leaders have for their workload and well-being. The decisions staff make place pupils at their heart. The school identifies and meets the needs of the range of pupils who attend.

There is a broad and ambitious curriculum in place. It meets the requirements set out in the independent school standards (the standards). It includes the essential knowledge that pupils need to learn and when they need to learn it. It is engaging and interesting, opening pupils' eyes to the world around them.

In most subjects, teaching helps pupils to build their knowledge. Staff skilfully weave pupils' interests into subjects to deepen their thinking. For example, pupils measure pollution in a local river as part of their work on geography. However, the school has not ensured that staff's expertise is fully developed in all subjects. The important information pupils need to know is not made sufficiently clear. Consequently, some pupils do not learn as well as they could.

In most subjects, the checks made on pupils' learning identify gaps and misconceptions. Staff address these before they become embedded. Pupils build on firm foundations of knowledge. However, occasionally, staff do not identify where

pupils have developed misconceptions. Consequently, some pupils do not build securely on previous learning.

The school has placed a sharp focus on reading. Pupils are supported to engage in texts in a variety of ways such as listening to adults read or audiobooks. They are exposed to a rich diet of reading materials, including novels, instructions and emails. Those who are at the early stage of learning to read, and those who have fallen behind, quickly gain the knowledge and skills they need to become confident, fluent readers. Pupils talk with interest about their favourite book or reading material. They are encouraged to publish their own books, which are then enjoyed by others in the school.

Typically, pupils behave well in lessons. Attendance is a high priority for the school. The school meticulously analyses the attendance of each pupil to find out what support it can offer pupils and their families to build positive attendance habits. This has had a demonstrable impact in individual cases.

The school's personal development offer is exceptional and worthy of being shared. It is highly effective and supports pupils to experience repeated success. Pupils develop resilience and are inspired to be aspirational about their future lives. Staff work with pupils to identify particular areas of personal development that would benefit from strengthening, as well as building on areas of interest. For example, pupils become highly knowledgeable about water and road safety. They have regular practical opportunities to build their swimming and cycling skills in a controlled environment. Visits to the locality follow purposeful learning, which builds and rehearses skills and promotes positive engagement in the wider community. The school designs bespoke and creative opportunities for work experience and gaining qualifications and accreditations to prepare pupils for their next stage of education, employment or training.

Staff know that identifying and managing risk is a barrier for many pupils. Consequently, they ensure pupils learn water and road safety skills. The carefully crafted personal, social and health education curriculum helps pupils to learn about important issues. This includes what constitutes a healthy relationship and a healthy diet. The curriculum is richly enhanced with opportunities to engage with current affairs. Pupils are knowledgeable about topical issues.

The standards and the requirements of schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010 are met. The school's buildings are kept in good order. The school engages parents and carers thoughtfully and positively in a way that supports pupils' education.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- The school has not ensured that staff's teaching expertise is fully developed in all subjects. The important information pupils need to know is not made sufficiently clear. Consequently, the teaching in some areas of the curriculum does not help some pupils learn as securely as they could. The school should ensure that all staff have the teaching expertise to deliver the curriculum as intended.
- Occasionally, the checks on pupils' understanding of new material do not identify misconceptions and gaps. This means some pupils move on before they are ready. They do not build learning securely over time. The school should ensure that staff have the knowledge and expertise to use assessment to spot gaps and then inform teaching so that it supports pupils to build their knowledge cumulatively across the curriculum.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

School details

Unique reference number	149019
DfE registration number	865/6059
Local authority	Wiltshire
Inspection number	10374883
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent day school
Age range of pupils	5 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	131
Number of part-time pupils	8
Proprietor	Dorset Centre of Excellence Limited
Chair	Ian Comfort
Headteacher	Darren Harte
Annual fees (day pupils)	£52,000.00
Telephone number	01747449820
Website	www.coombehouseschool.org.uk
Email address	office@coombehouseschool.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	20 to 22 June 2023

Information about this school

- Dorset Council is the sole shareholder for the proprietor body, Dorset Centre of Excellence. The school is in Wiltshire, close to the border of Dorset. The vast majority of pupil placements are funded by Dorset local authority. The proprietor also admits a smaller number of pupils from Wiltshire and Somerset local authorities.
- All pupils have education, health and care plans. Pupils have social, emotional or mental health needs and/or autism.
- The school uses 10 unregistered alternative provisions.
- The school is permitted to accept pupils between the ages of five and 19.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.
- The school was registered by the Department for Education on 6 May 2022. This is the school's second standard inspection.
- The proprietor conducted an emergency closure of the school one week after it opened. The school reopened on 23 June 2022 and then closed early for the summer break on 9 July 2022. The proprietor delayed opening the school to pupils until 13 September 2022.
- An emergency inspection took place in October 2022 at the request of the Department for Education.
- In November 2022, the managing director joined the school and acted as an interim headteacher. In January 2023, the headteacher joined the school.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English (with a focus on early reading), mathematics and personal, social and health education. For each deep

dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, looked at curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.

- Inspectors also looked at curriculum plans and spoke to leaders about some other subjects.
- To inspect safeguarding, the lead inspector met with the school's safeguarding team, including the designated safeguarding lead. They scrutinised the school's records, including the single central record of adults working in the school. Inspectors spoke with staff about their training and their use of the school's safeguarding systems. They also held discussions with pupils to consider whether they felt safe in school.
- Inspectors checked the premises, including the arrangements for fire safety, health and safety and site maintenance.
- Inspectors considered comments from parents submitted via Ofsted's online survey for parents, Ofsted Parent View. They also took into account the responses to the survey for staff.

Inspection team

Liz Geller, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

David New

Ofsted Inspector

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

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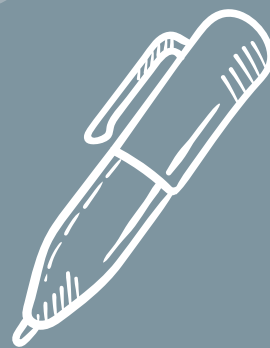


Coombe House

Annual Performance Report 2025

Introduction

We're doing things a little differently this year and letting the pupils of Coombe House School introduce our Annual Report. We invited them to tell us about the highlights of their year, and they said.....



I have really enjoyed being able to go to breakfast club for toast, it helps me start the day. I also think PE is great and I like having time with my friends.

Charlie

Being able to play badminton!

Josh



Sports Day – I really liked it, and I haven't been able to do a sports day since I was little too, I think that was really good. Also, I use the gym all the time and it is great.

James



I really like our community visits. Enrichment is really good especially on a Friday afternoon, going to see the chickens at the farm every week and making friends are also my favourites.

Edison



When I passed my first exams ever in English and maths. It made me feel like a could achieve anything.

David

Going swimming in the pool at school each week.

Dolcie



The Longleat trip was good – my favourite thing was that we didn't see the monkeys – they would have pulled the bus apart!!!

Mason

My first singing lesson was the most amazing experience when I thought I was talented at something. It was me singing accompanied with the grand piano and it sounded awesome.

Ollie

My highlight was being in my class – I have a lot of good memories in there with my classmates.

Teddi

Summary of the Last Year



What a year! The past twelve months are best summarised by the word 'progress'. From the Company's breadth of community offer, growth in pupil numbers within the School, the development of our curriculum and relational approach, expansion of our leadership team, the development of our personalised support packages, and our new Ofsted report, we've progressed significantly.

Within this report, we have articulated a summary of our new School curriculum. This is an amalgamation of the work that has gone into innovation and improvement since the current leadership team have been in post, and the final articulation and presentation of this is a real milestone.

The approach sets out how important it is to have a well-rounded holistic education, and that to progress to a happy and fulfilled adulthood, where pupils can aspire to have meaningful relationships, be independent and employed in line with their potential, keep themselves and others safe, and contribute positively towards society means they need to learn a much wider range of skills that the typical educational offer in this country provides.

We're proud that we are pushing boundaries and challenging norms, and the progress being made by our community is already yielding results. It is, by design, inclusive. All pupils, whatever level of personalisation they require can learn and have their progress measured within the same framework – it meets the needs of all.

We know that our commitment to continually develop our offer means that there is much more to come but we know that the model will provide the foundations for all future improvements is strong and research based .

Embracing 'Therapeutic Thinking' as the overarching structure supporting our relational approach has also been a highlight. Again, built on the foundations of careful research-based practice, this approach, which has long been supported by Dorset Council and others, is now fully embedded into our culture. Put simply, we're all in!

Collating this performance report provides a helpful reminder of why we are here, and why Dorset Council took the bold decision to invest in a new and innovative way of doing things; to offer both excellent quality and excellent value for money.

Every school placement makes a significant saving compared to the fees that are charged by other independent special schools, and the culmination of these savings continue to increase over time and are now highly significant. We believe that our model is part of the solution for Dorset, and other authorities facing similar challenges of ensuring all children and young people get an education that meets their needs, sustainably and equitably.

Leaders within the Company and School are united in the belief that we do not do what we do to please the regulator! It would be remis however, to miss the excellent Ofsted result from this opening summary. To receive such positive feedback, including being judged as Outstanding in certain aspects, marks a significant improvement in a short period of time.

None of this would have been possible without the partnership working with Dorset Council, the exceptional efforts of our Directors, leaders and staff, and of course the incredible resilience and support shown by the families of our pupils and the pupils themselves, who got the opening page of this report handed over to show their views for a reason!

We close by sharing our optimism for the future. We are keen to grow further, to do more, to provide excellent value for money for the next phase of investment, and to continue making a difference to the children and families of Dorset.

With thanks

A stylized, handwritten signature in white ink.

Andy Holder
Managing Director



Key Headlines



100%

pass rate for
GCSE English
and maths

16

pupils earned
qualifications in
English and maths

1

pupil graduated
with 6 GCSE's at
Grade 5 and above

6

pupils transitioned to
independent study at
mainstream colleges

152

pupil roll
places

9

subject options
now available at
Key Stage 4

25%

saving per place compared
to average cost of 'other'
independent special schools*

£2.7m

savings for Dorset Council per
annum compared to 'other'
independent special schools*

* According to National Audit Office

Horizons class launched to help pupils
where attendance is a barrier

Pupils engaging with MPs

Excellent Community Engagement

Improved Green Credentials

Outstanding Ofsted judgement for
Personal Development

Strong financial performance – ahead of business
plan, budget and in-year forecast – and an
unqualified independent financial audit

A local employer of choice – staff wellbeing
and support leading to excellent recruitment
and retention

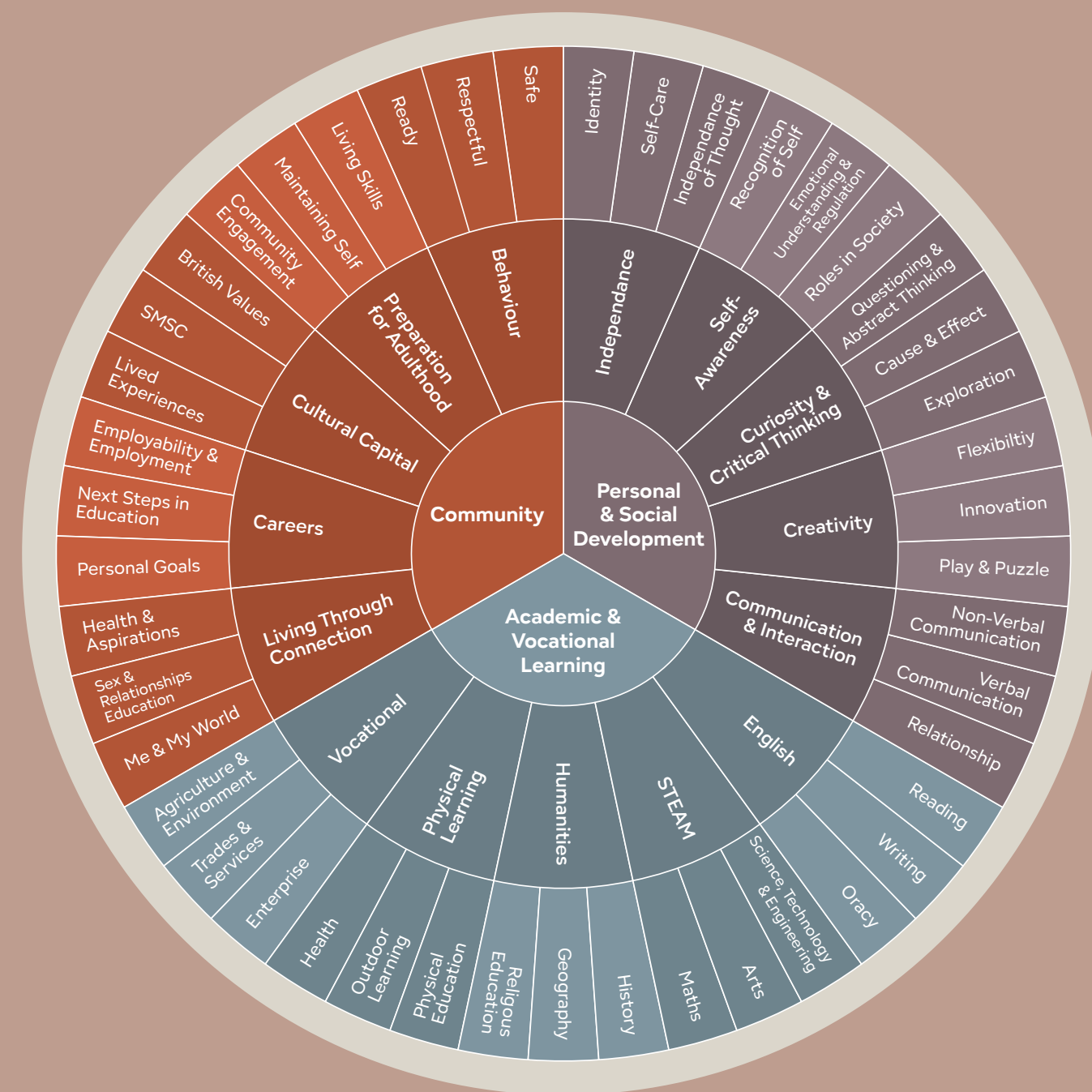
Curriculum Improvements

We've been on an ongoing journey of development regarding our curriculum offer but in the last year, we finalised our modelling and the associated policy.

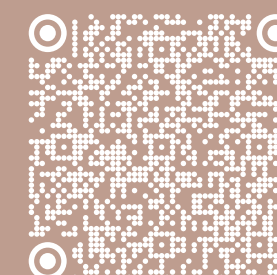
Our 'Curriculum Wheel' represents our holistic curriculum that acknowledges the School is not just about academic outcomes, and that progression to a happy and fulfilled adulthood is about a rounded education where you also learn about resilience, social skills, emotional intelligence and working with others (to name a few).

To ensure we are able to deliver our curriculum as intended, we have invested in our resources to ensure we are able to meet all needs. The development of our therapeutic farm, forest skills area, art and cookery spaces continued alongside the opening of a brand-new hair and beauty suite, which has been a huge hit with our pupils.

Having an ever-increasing range of personalised options for our pupils means we are often able to reduce the spend on external Alternative Provision as we are increasingly able to do this 'in house'. We have more plans too – we'd love to add more, with mechanics and construction areas near the top of the list.



To read more about our curriculum approach see here:



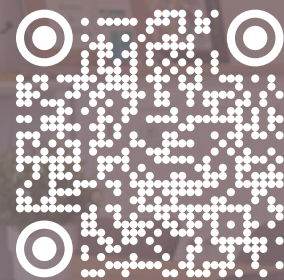
Ofsted Summary



Our focus is to meet the needs of each child so that they can experience a transformational educational experience and meet their potential. This is what drives our practice and provides our motivation every day.

However, we were also pleased to welcome Ofsted in July 2025 when they undertook a full standard inspection. Their feedback validated the progress we knew had been made since their last visit and led to a report being published detailing that all the Independent School Standards had been met, and that the School had "Good" and "Outstanding" practice.

Follow the QR Code to view our report



A selection of our favourite quotes from their report are shown on the opposite page.



Coombe House School is a vibrant place to learn.

Staff take time to understand each pupil's needs well. They use this knowledge effectively to build strong and trusting relationships with pupils.

Pupils feel valued and know that they are appreciated and belong.

Pupils meet staff's high expectations academically, socially and emotionally. They enjoy learning and take pride in their work.

The school has placed a sharp focus on reading. Pupils are supported to engage in texts in a variety of ways such as listening to adults read or audiobooks. They are exposed to a rich diet of reading materials, including novels, instructions and emails.

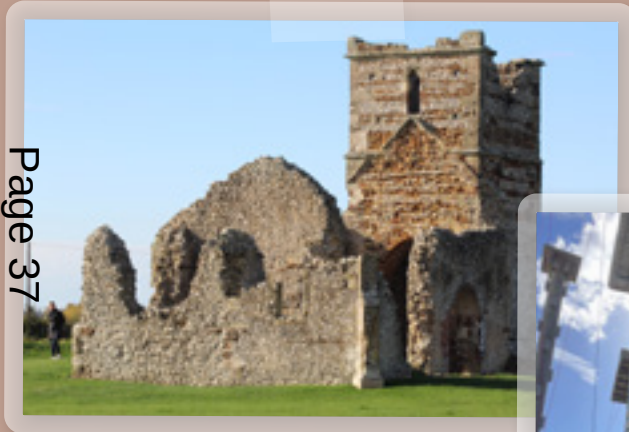
The school meticulously analyses the attendance of each pupil to find out what support it can offer pupils and their families to build positive attendance habits. This has had a demonstrable impact in individual cases.

The school's personal development offer is exceptional and worthy of being shared. It is highly effective and supports pupils to experience repeated success.

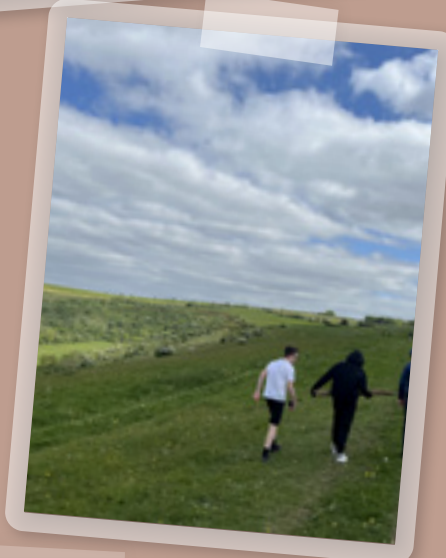
Personal Development



We were very pleased that the School's broad and personalised curriculum was celebrated by Ofsted during their recent visit.



Page 37



The experiences on offer are broad and challenging. Some of the highlights of the year have been:

- » A whole-school trip to Longleat Safari Park, supported by the Rotary Club – an amazing day where many of our pupils went on a 'proper school coach trip' for the first time ever!
- » Visits to castles, abbeys, museums and galleries and learning more about different religions and cultures.
- » Learning to use public transport through real-world experiences, using buses and trains - importantly making sure you get on the right one going to the right place!
- » Producing and sharing artwork with the community, including having an exhibition at Shaftesbury Lido.
- » Amazing expeditions, volunteering and learning experiences as part of the Duke of Edinburgh scheme.
- » A number of successful fundraising events, including non-uniform days, sponsored challenges and shoebox appeal.
- » Our amazing sports day – in some cases the first sports day attended by our pupils – determination and success seen throughout!
- » Supplementing our careers lessons by visiting a variety of local employers, and local further education colleges.
- » Collecting and donating much needed supplies to local food banks, including some grown on the farm!
- » Life Skills – we have embedded budgeting, money handling, planning and practical shopping trip experiences to ensure that our pupils are ready to manage themselves financially, now and in the future.

We are excited that we are adding to our personal development offer by partnering with PEDALL Inclusive Cycling, meaning that our pupils have the opportunity to learn safe riding and road safety skills with expert cycle leaders within the New Forest National Park.

Academic Outcomes



The number and breadth of our externally accredited academic qualifications really stepped up this year, with some of the headlines being:

100%

Pass rate for pupils entered for English GCSE

100%

Pass rate for pupils entered for Maths GCSE

22

Functional Skills qualifications earned in English

11

Functional Skills qualifications earned in Maths

16

Pupils earning qualifications in both English and Maths

There were several notable individual success stories, ranging from pupils earning qualifications despite missing up to two years of school prior to enrolling at Coombe House, others who experienced particularly significant barriers to learning but achieved anyway, to one individual who graduated with six GCSEs, all at Grade 5 and above!

Some of these qualifications were taken by those in Year 11, whereas others were taken as 'confidence-building stepping stones' towards more and higher qualifications for those lower down in the School.

Alongside the more academic qualifications earned, pupils also have the opportunities to earn Duke of Edinburgh accreditations, ASDAN Unit Awards and qualifications from Swim England.

The range of courses on offer is already impressive for such a young school but there's more choice and a wider range still to come!



Destinations

We are very proud of our Year 11 and Year 12 leavers. Although some continue to learn with us in our sixth form, continuing to make leaps with their development, others progressed onto new challenges elsewhere.

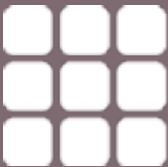
Six leavers progressed to study in a variety of college environments, applying the skills they learned with us in a much larger, busier, less supported setting – what an achievement!



Gillingham School
Est. 1516

Bournemouth
& Poole College

Coastland
College



SWRAC



DORSET
TRADE SKILLS
(SW) Limited
Construction Training Centre

Key Stage 4 Options



For the first time since opening, our pupils have been provided with the opportunity to choose their Key Stage 4 'options' in line with their peers nationally.

After a focus on embedding English and maths accreditation, pupils are now able to opt into two further choices. Following an 'options fayre' where pupils could find out more and explore what was available, they were asked to make their preferred choices.

The options available to pupils were:

- Art led by Holly Gatrell
- Citizenship led by Jane Smith
- Thinking as a Coder led by Sam Akhurst
- Duke of Edinburgh led by Rich Moore
- Food Technology led by Holly Gatrell
- Hair and beauty led by Ali Clare
- Land Based studies led by Nigel Benjamin
- Media Studies led by Tom Chazot
- Sports Leaders led by Mark Stocker



EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance)



Horizons Class – A New Offer at Coombe House

This year has marked the exciting launch of Horizons Class, a new provision designed to support pupils who face barriers to school attendance, including those experiencing EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance).

Horizons provides a safe, flexible, and nurturing environment where pupils can reconnect with education at their own pace, supported by strong relationships, therapeutic input, and personalised learning.

Horizon's offer is wide-ranging. Pupils can access virtual afternoon sessions and weekly assemblies that focus on connection, belonging, and gentle re-engagement. One-to-one tutoring support ensures that learning is tailored to individual needs, while a focus on family partnerships provides parents and carers with practical strategies and ongoing communication.

Alongside this, pupils are encouraged to stay active through online PE sessions and develop curiosity and awareness of the world through resources such as Picture News.

Strategically, Horizons represents a whole-school commitment to flexible and creative pathways. The curriculum blends academic, vocational, and therapeutic learning, with opportunities for mindfulness, nature-based activities, and creative projects.

Through this innovative provision, Horizons aims not only to re-establish positive routines around learning but also to foster resilience, confidence, and a genuine sense of belonging. Regular reviews and multi-agency collaboration will ensure the offer continues to evolve, placing pupil voice and family partnership at the heart of every step forward.

Promoting wellbeing with PE

The introduction of virtual PE classes has been particularly well received. Pupils have reported that they enjoy the accessible and engaging nature of these sessions, which are helping to promote a balanced approach to wellbeing – integrating physical activity with mental health support in a sustainable and enjoyable way.



Elliot Smith, teacher for Horizons

Engagement and Reconnection

Virtual afternoon sessions are offered three times weekly and have been effective in re-engaging pupils. These sessions combine emotional support with light academic content, and attendance has remained consistently strong. There has been a marked increase in pupil confidence and enthusiasm, with several requesting additional personalised sessions – an encouraging indicator of trust and motivation.

Pupils who were previously reluctant to engage had started attending regularly and actively participating in discussions. This gradual reintroduction to learning has helped create a safe, positive environment that has supported both academic and emotional development.



Individualised Tutoring

Our one-to-one tutoring provision is also showing positive outcomes. Feedback from pupils and parents has been very encouraging, with three pupils already demonstrating increased confidence in their learning and presentation skills. Notably, our first Horizons pupil successfully accessed and used the Century platform, signalling growing independence and digital engagement.

Family Partnerships and Emotional Support

Strong relationships with families remain central to our approach. Regular communication has enabled us to tailor support to individual needs, and parents have expressed appreciation for the consistent check-ins and practical strategies provided to support their child's emotional wellbeing.

Financial Position & Value for money

The Company has had another successful year with, once more, strong financial performance against budget.

The better-than-budget-year-end figures have further reduced the losses incurred during the first two years of operation and have meant that no further draw down on the working capital loan facility provided by the Shareholder has been necessary.

Having kept the placement fee unchanged since inception in summer 2022, the Company applied an unavoidable increase effective 1 April 2025. Factors that drove the decision included an unexpected plateau in capital investment to the site, inflationary pressures on running costs, changes to the business rates and council tax charges due for unoccupied parts of the site and the increase to pay costs borne from the Government's changes to employers' National Insurance.

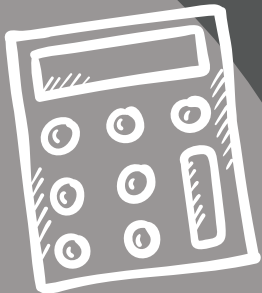
The Company continues to meet the Shareholder's expectation that it will provide high quality places at a significantly lower cost than other independent special schools, in order both to meet the needs of children and to alleviate pressure on the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant.

The Company recognises the increasing cost pressures that the Shareholder also faces, as well as the rising High Needs funding pressure and is particularly glad that careful partnership working with the Shareholder has ensured the School's current fee remains highly competitive and continues to offer significant value compared to other independent SEN providers.

Finances continue to be very well managed. Wherever possible we have sought cost savings, always with a focus that they do not impact on the delivery of the quality of school experience for our pupils. Investment is carefully planned. For example, efforts have been made to ensure all solar arrays and both of our biomass boilers are fully operational. These assets not only reduce electricity costs but are also generating additional income through solar energy feed-in-tariffs and renewable heat incentive payments.

To further control our costs, a firm of chartered surveyors has been engaged to challenge our business rates and Council Tax liabilities, an ongoing effort which, to date, has successfully mitigated our Council Tax charges going forward.

Based on current pupil enrolment, the Company is in a better financial position to support itself, make repayments against the Shareholder's loan, and invest in projects to enhance the experience of the cohort.



Audit / Governance



In line with the Shareholder Agreement, the Board commissioned an independent financial audit to provide valuable assurance over the accuracy and integrity of our financial records to all stakeholders.

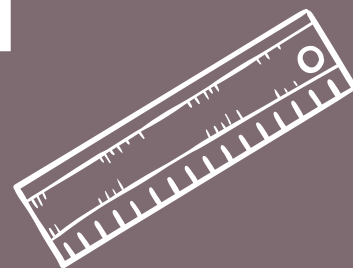
The external auditor conducted a detailed review of the accounts, examining financial records, assessing compliance with internal policies and relevant accounting standards, identifying risks, and confirming that the financial statements present a true and fair view of the Company's financial position.

The year ending 31 March 2025 was our second year of external audit, and once again the financial statements received an unqualified opinion, meaning the auditor was fully satisfied with their findings.

As part of the process, the auditor reports their conclusions to management and the Board of Directors, including any recommendations for further improvement. For the second consecutive year, no weaknesses were identified in our financial systems - an exceptionally positive outcome that reflects the strength and robustness of our controls and governance.



Staff Growth, Strengthened Teams



Over the past three years, we have seen substantial growth in headcount, with average staff numbers more than doubling, rising steadily from around 50 in late 2022 to over 100 by mid-2025. This reflects the successful expansion of the Company and its linked recruitment activity.

To support our continued growth and to ensure we deliver the highest quality support and education, we have invested in several key new roles over the past year. These include the appointment of a dedicated Farm Manager and two Farm Assistants (Education Workers) to enhance the learning opportunities provided through our therapeutic farm provision.

We have strengthened leadership capacity with the recruitment of an additional Assistant Headteacher and created a combined Safeguarding, Alternative Provision & Behaviour Coordinator role to provide focused support in these critical areas.

To meet the needs of a growing pupil population, we have expanded operational support with additional Housekeepers and increased administrative capacity with an additional Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) Co-ordinator to manage our EHCPs more effectively.

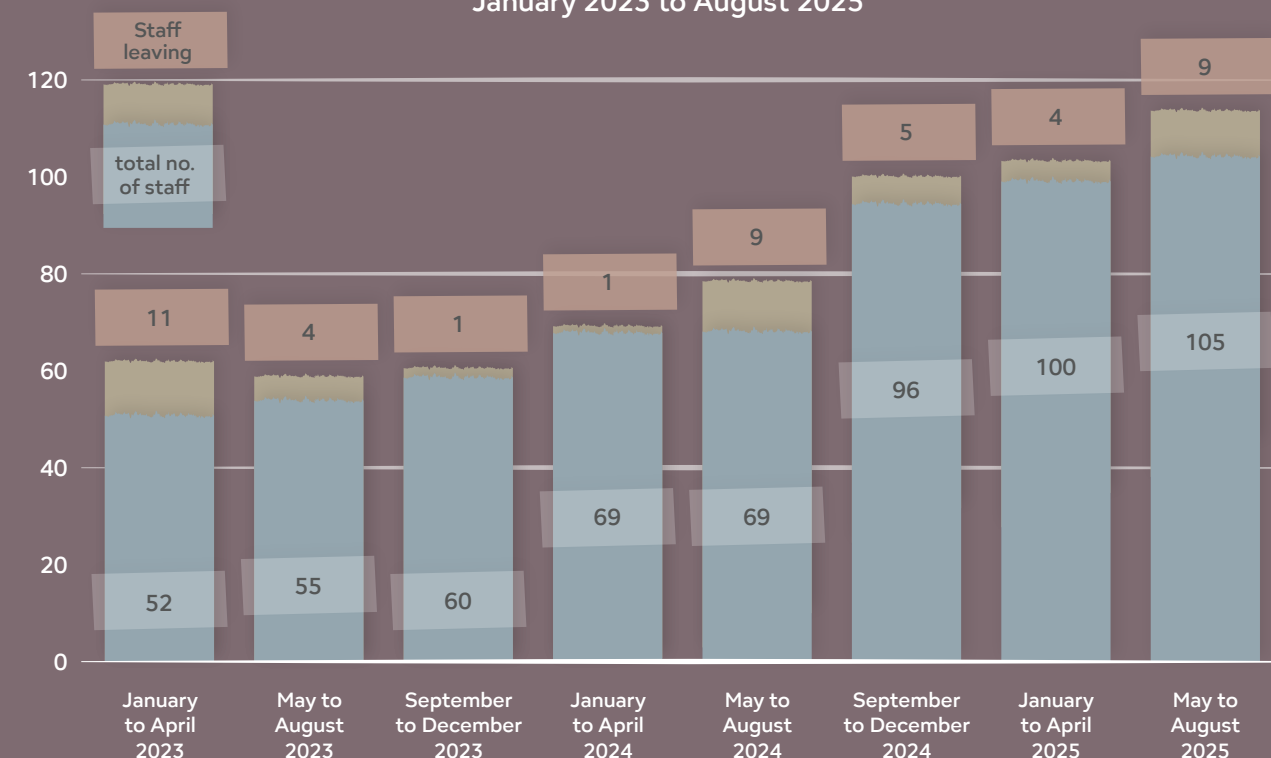
Together, these roles demonstrate our commitment to strengthening teams, improving provision, and ensuring our School can meet the needs of every pupil as we continue to grow.

Alongside this expansion, we have improved retention. This combination of workforce growth and greater stability demonstrates that we are confident in moving beyond the 'start-up' phase into a more mature and sustainable Company.

It reflects a stronger employer brand, improved employee experience, and a culture where people choose to stay. This stability helps ensure we have the capacity to deliver on our strategic goals while maintaining an engaged team capable of supporting our continued success.

Total Number of Staff and Staff Leaving

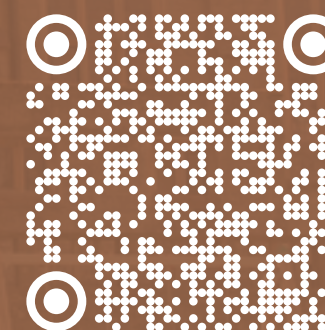
January 2023 to August 2025



The video highlights real staff and facilities, fostering trust and transparency to appeal to candidates aligned with the School's values, culture, vision, and supportive environment. The recruitment video offers a chance to promote the School's culture, setting it apart in a competitive job market, reaching a broader pool of candidates.

In October 2024 the HR team collaborated with a videographer to create a promotional recruitment video aimed at creating a compelling, informed and personal connection with prospective applicants, inspiring their interest and commitment before applying.

This initiative is part of our Recruitment and Retention Strategy leveraging social media and digital platforms to reach a wider audience, promote the School in a visually engaging way, and to attract and engage high-quality candidates in a competitive job market.



Scan the QR code for the Recruitment Video

Staff Training & Development



This year has seen significant investment in professional development of our staff team.

Our Deputy Headteacher (Social Emotional Mental Health) has commenced the National Professional Qualification for Senior Leadership (NPQSL), further strengthening leadership capacity. We have successfully promoted staff into Deputy Headteacher and Assistant Headteacher roles, demonstrating our commitment to internal professional development and creating clear career pathways.

We secured levy transfer funding for two Level 7 Postgraduate Teacher Apprenticeships with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), offered to existing Learning Support Assistants. These colleagues will specialise in 5–11 SEND Teacher QTS and Maths QTS respectively, supporting both individual career progression and our strategic workforce planning.

Our inset programme has been wide-ranging and impactful, including sessions on relational and therapeutic practice, curriculum and community engagement, and creative approaches to reading. Keynote speakers included Childhood Trauma and Behaviour Specialist Shahana Knight, who delivered practical strategies for therapeutic and trauma-informed practice, and Dean Beadle, who offered insight into understanding and celebrating autistic pupils.

Ongoing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has included autism training through the Autism Education Trust, phonics fundamentals for Key Stages 3–5, and workshops covering dyscalculia awareness, sensory integration, social skills development, and demand avoidance.

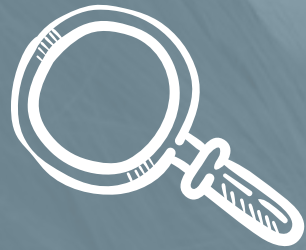
A focus in the latter part of this year has been embedding Therapeutic Thinking as a whole-school approach to behaviour and emotional regulation. Our Headteacher and Managing Director completed the three-day Therapeutic Thinking course, equipping them to strategically lead this work. 20 additional staff members have completed a two-day course, and all school staff attended a full day of training at the start of this academic year.

This investment ensures staff have a shared language and consistent framework for responding to the needs of our pupils. The approach emphasises dignity, safety, and long-term positive change for pupils, helping to reduce exclusions, build emotional resilience, and increase access to learning.

In addition, our HR team led the implementation of a new Prevention of Sexual Harassment Policy in line with legislative changes, with whole-staff training completed to ensure a safe and supportive working environment.



Spotlight on Internal Promotions



We are proud to celebrate the career journey of our newly appointed Deputy Headteacher (SEMH). Jenny joined Coombe House School in September 2023 as a class Teacher after moving from mainstream primary education, motivated by a desire to “provide pupils with what they truly needed in order to thrive.”

Jenny’s passion for supporting pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), particularly those with SEMH needs quickly became clear as she took on extra responsibilities, contributing to projects such as the development of the primary curriculum and the design of Willow, our new primary classroom block.

In 2024, Jenny became an Assistant Headteacher (SEMH), combining leadership responsibilities with teaching to further deepen her understanding of the pupils’ needs.

Reflecting on this step, she shared:

“During this time, I developed my skills and knowledge regarding people management, strategic decision making and project design and implementation.”

This year, Jenny took the next step to Deputy Headteacher/Head of Education (SEMH). Her motivation is clear:

“I am most excited about the positive impact that Coombe House School can have on every pupil and the part that I would play in that as a school leader. I relish the challenge and strive to be the best I can possibly be by inspiring staff and pupils to live our value of belonging, ambition and kindness.”

Jenny’s story is a great example of how professional growth and leadership development are nurtured at Coombe House School, creating clear pathways for progression and impact.



We are pleased to celebrate the journey of our newly appointed Assistant Headteacher.

Dave joined Coombe House School in February 2024 as our first Maths Specialist, motivated by a desire to

“Develop a curriculum that better met the needs of our pupils and gave staff the skills and confidence to deliver it.”

He also supported the development of pathways for pupils preparing for Functional Skills and GCSE examinations.

In September 2024, Dave became a Class Tutor, enabling him to form a closer relationships with a group of pupils and gain valuable experience in pastoral work, EHCPs and working closely with parents. Moving from a mainstream background, he reflects that he has learnt “an incredible amount about working with SEND,” and is now preparing to begin his NPQSL to strengthen his leadership practice.

Dave’s leadership potential grew as he took on wider curriculum development, working closely with senior leaders. A highlight for him was the recent Ofsted inspection, which he describes as “a meaningful recognition of the team’s hard work”.

Appointed Assistant Headteacher in April 2025, Dave is excited to support the School’s continued growth, sharing:

“I love working on strategic projects... I’m excited to learn from those around me as the School continues to develop.”

His journey reflects the strong culture of professional progression at Coombe House School.

Staff Feedback, Engagement and Wellbeing

We believe that the growth in our staff numbers, and further improvements with retention is partly due to the investment we make in their wellbeing.

Regular wellbeing and engagement events help support mental health, team morale, and a positive workplace culture. Over the year, we have continued to prioritise opportunities for staff to connect, recharge, and feel valued. We have delivered a wide range of initiatives focused on engagement, connection, and personal wellbeing.

Initiatives have included the introduction of Wellbeing Wednesdays each half term, giving staff the option to take part in mindfulness, sporting, or social activities.

Seasonal engagement events including an Easter celebration and a pet-themed competition further encouraged a sense of community and team spirit.

We offered a Women's Self-Defence Workshop to build confidence and awareness outside of the workplace. Our Mental Health Awareness Week 2025 programme ran over two weeks, featuring physical and wellbeing activities such as rounders, a treasure hunt, and gong healing sessions, alongside daily snack baskets in staff rooms.

As part of our Employee Engagement, Recognition, and Reward Strategy, we continue to celebrate service anniversaries, recognise contributions through our popular Hug in a Mug initiative, and bring colleagues together through termly staff breakfasts, social events, and bake-off competitions.

This year also saw a review and renewal of our Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), offering tailored mental health and wellbeing resources for our staff.

Feedback from our engagement surveys shows that staff value open communication, professional growth, and feeling supported by leadership. This year we have increased opportunities for two-way feedback between staff and leadership, including structured listening exercises, 1:1 meetings, and surveys.

This has strengthened communication, enabled staff to share insights and suggestions, and provided leadership with actionable information to identify areas for improvement and implement meaningful changes.



"It's without question the best job within education that I've ever had."

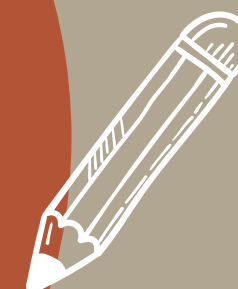
(Teacher, May 2025)

"Staff are dedicated to giving the pupils the best support and experience."

(Support Staff, March 2025)

"I feel very supported and valued by the whole school team."

(Teacher, May 2025)



Policy Strategy and Development

We remain aware of significant recruitment and retention challenges in the education sector, particularly for Teachers and Learning Support Assistants with SEND experience. Nationally, vacancies in secondary and special schools are rising.



Across the UK, teacher shortages are increasing pressures on both mainstream and SEND schools.

Small class sizes at Coombe House School mean higher staff-to-pupil ratios, placing additional challenges for recruitment to ensure our pupils receive the highest quality support.

In response, we have focussed our People Strategy on the individual, targeting those with a passion for SEND education and a commitment to making a positive impact on pupils' lives.

By developing policies and strategic frameworks - such as the Recruitment and Retention Strategy – we are creating a structured, supportive environment aimed at attracting, engaging, and retaining talented staff.

During the last year, several new policies were introduced to enhance compliance, staff welfare, and operational clarity:

- » Neonatal Care Leave, (April 2025) to support staff during early stages of parenthood.

- » Prevention of Sexual Harassment Policy, (October 2024) to reinforce a safe and respectful workplace.

- » Working in Hot Weather, Protective Clothing, and Damage to Personal Property were all implemented to ensure staff safety and clear guidance around workplace risks and responsibilities.

In addition, we have reviewed and updated key policies to reflect best practice, legislative changes, and evolving staff needs:

- » Menopause/Perimenopause Policy; Strengthened guidance and support for staff experiencing menopause-related health issues.
- » Remuneration Policy; Revised to align with broader pay and progression frameworks and ensure equity and transparency.

A key focus this year has been the development and refinement of our strategic HR frameworks to support organisational growth, staff welfare, and retention.



Incremental Pay Progression (IPP) Framework

A significant strategic initiative was the development of the IPP Framework for non-teaching staff, aligned with the Remuneration Policy, Recruitment & Retention Strategy (2025–2027), and organisational values.

Key features include:

- » Clear eligibility criteria linked to performance and professional development.
- » Structured governance and moderation processes ensuring fairness and consistency.
- » A transparent approach to reward and progression that supports retention and recognises contributions in roles that are often under-recognised in educational settings.
- » Alignment with the broader HR strategy, providing a framework for career development and reinforcing our commitment to valuing all staff.

Recruitment and Retention Strategy (2025-2027)

This critical document has been revised to address key challenges, including recruiting experienced Teachers and Learning Support Assistants, retaining employees during periods of change, and meeting resource needs to support business growth.

Through these initiatives, we have demonstrated a proactive, strategic approach to policy and HR development. Policies, progression frameworks, and people strategies work cohesively to attract, engage, and retain talented staff, mitigate sector-wide recruitment pressures, and deliver high-quality services to children and families. This integrated approach ensures fairness, transparency, and staff well-being, reinforcing the Company's values and long-term sustainability.



Impact of Therapy



The Therapy Team have been working hard over the past year to deliver an effective service at Universal, Targeted and Specialist levels of intervention.

Through close collaboration with teaching staff, specific strategies and approaches have been incorporated into curriculum delivery and classroom practice to ensure that all pupils have an appropriate level of support.

Our Educational Psychologist has carried out a wide range of consultations with teaching staff in order to support specific pupils both directly and indirectly, as well as working in conjunction with the Music Therapist to deliver class based Reflective Supervision sessions.

Teaching staff have access to a weekly 'Therapy Clinic' where they can meet with a member of the Therapy Team to discuss specific issues and get advice.

Through these sessions, teaching staff are given the opportunity to problem solve and reflect on how they can support pupils more effectively.

At a Universal and Targeted level, our Therapy Assistant has delivered a range of group interventions such as Sensory Explorers, Sensory Swimming and Construction Groups.

Communication and sensory environment audits continue to be carried out in classrooms to ensure that the School environment is appropriately modified for the needs of the pupils.

At a Specialist level, our Occupational Therapist and Speech and Language Therapist provide advice and support to teaching staff alongside carrying out assessments with those pupils who require specialist support.

There is a robust outcome measures system in place to monitor the effectiveness of intervention. This has been reviewed and analysed at regular intervals.

Over the past year, the Therapy Team have continued to work closely with parents / carers to ensure that they feel empowered to support their children whilst they are not in school. Online parent / carer training sessions are planned for the coming school year.



Estates Development



Our Estates team have worked tirelessly to ensure that our efforts to continuously improve and develop our buildings and grounds have had impact.

As well as the extensive ongoing proactive and preventative maintenance projects, such as redecorating and replacing carpets, they have also led on:

- » Creating additional classroom spaces by redeveloping our library spaces.
- » Adding a Hair and Beauty studio, to allow our new BTEC course to launch successfully.
- » Alterations to our offices, to allow for more confidential working spaces.
- » Overseeing significant improvements to our farm buildings.
- » Continuing the rollout of our therapeutic classroom model.



Solar / Environmental

Our commitment to producing as much green energy as possible continues, with improvements made this year to our solar panel efficiency, and improvements to our biomass boiler.

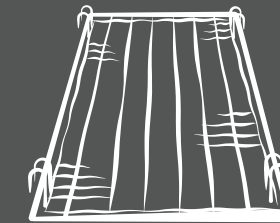
This has financial benefits that go along with the environmental impact, with continuing revenue from the renewable heat incentive and feed-in-tariff payment schemes.

Work to improve our biodiversity has been prioritised, with the installation of wildflower meadows, and efforts to increase the health and quality of our woodland environments.

A new Environmental Committee has been set up with teaching staff, support staff and pupils, who are determined to make Coombe House as environmentally friendly as it can be.



Leisure



We continue to offer our swimming facilities to the local community. For much of the year, a local primary school has visited for weekly swimming lessons, that have been funded by Sports England. We have also started a new arrangement with 'Baby Squids' who offer high quality swimming lessons to local families, saving the commute to nearby Gillingham.

Our community swim club continues to be popular and based on feedback, is now offered during some early evenings, as well as in the original morning slots. During the summer holidays in 2025, the leisure team piloted our own swimming lessons, which were very well received. Local families, and adults, signed up and fed back very positively about their experiences.

Our pool is excellent quality and has received further investment this year, with new technology now installed to reduce the amount of chemicals needed to maintain our exceptional water quality at its current standards.



Progression of our Therapeutic Farm

This year has been an exceptionally busy and transformative period for the farm, laying the groundwork for exciting developments for the next phase. Our focus continues to be on creating a rich, hands-on learning environment while enhancing therapeutic and educational outcomes for pupils.

Infrastructure Developments

- » **Farm Building & Facilities:** The farm building has undergone significant improvements this year. Pupils and staff now benefit from a fully installed lavatory, an outdoor handwashing facility, electricity, hot water, and a fire alarm system. While work is still ongoing, these upgrades represent a major step forward in creating a safe, functional, and welcoming space for both learning and farm activities.
- » **Duck Enclosure:** Pupils were involved in every stage of this project, from building the structure and digging out the pond, to constructing the small duck house and planting surrounding flowers. This project offered practical learning in teamwork, problem-solving, and animal care.
- » **Polytunnel Expansion:** An additional polytunnel was installed to extend our growing areas, enabling the future introduction of flower propagation and cultivation, giving pupils experience with seasonal planting cycles and horticultural techniques.

- » **Wooden Lodge (upcoming):** Funding has been secured for a dedicated indoor teaching space for EBSA pupils, providing a calm and flexible learning environment in all weathers.

Animal Enclosures and Care

- » **Chickens:** Chickens have now been introduced into the care aspect of the farm, allowing pupils to learn about daily care routines, egg collection, and animal wellbeing.
- » **Guinea Pig Enclosure:** A new, large enclosure has been built to maximise animal welfare and enrich the learning experience for pupils.
- » **Duck Enclosure:** Fully functional, supporting hands-on learning in duck care and habitat management.
- » **Sheep Partnership:** A collaboration with a local farmer has brought 19 sheep onto site. They are used for grazing and interactive learning sessions, supporting practical lessons in animal husbandry.



Land-Based Studies

This year saw the introduction of a BTEC land-based studies programme, delivering the Maintaining the Health of Animals unit to over five individual pupils. Pupils gain practical skills and formal qualifications while engaging directly with the farm environment.



School Engagement

The School continues to be our primary user and this year we implemented a new referral form process to better link pupils with farm activities and programmes. This ensures a more coordinated approach to learning and therapeutic interventions, helping to maximise the benefits for each individual.

A new online farm page has been created, designed like a website for pupils to access every day. This interactive resource includes educational farm-related games and activities, a photo gallery, farm news, and much more, allowing pupils to engage with the farm both on-site and remotely.

Farm Team Development

The farm team has expanded to four staff members, bringing a mix of skills and expertise that strengthen both educational delivery and therapeutic outcomes. This growth allows for more personalised support and broader development of the farm.



Funding and Grants

We are delighted to have secured over £30,000 through the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, funded by Cranborne Chase National Landscape, which has funded much of our recent development. This funding will enable major further improvements across the farm, helping us to enhance both our facilities and educational opportunities, including:

- » Pond restoration.
- » Planting of espalier fruit trees around the walled garden.
- » Creation of a four-acre wildflower meadow.
- » Fencing enhancements.
- » Installation of a large Ridan composting system.
- » Construction of the wooden lodge teaching space for EBSA pupils.

Summary

Through improvements to infrastructure, the introduction of new animal enclosures, the launch of land-based studies, and enhanced engagement with pupils via our 'website' and referral process, we have laid strong foundations for the future. These developments not only support the educational and therapeutic outcomes of our pupils but also ensure the farm continues to grow as a vibrant, hands-on learning environment that connects children with the natural world.



Bespoke Packages

This year, in partnership with Dorset Council, we have developed a new offer to ensure we are meeting local commissioning needs.



As well as offering high value for money places to a large cohort of pupils, we are also now offering highly bespoke packages for a smaller number of pupils that need packages of support that are far more personalised.

Examples of provision put in place including outreach, learning in the home, partnerships with alternative provision and a range of off-site pastoral and therapeutic provision in the community. For some of the children and young people being supported, their needs mean that initially they are unlikely to be able to physically attend any school site unless extensive work occurs before to help them to build the skills they need to do so successfully.

We've already had feedback that the packages on offer have provided high quality education to children and young people who otherwise would have had no provision at all – i.e. all other providers, at whatever cost, were unable to offer a place.

We are proud that we are developing the capacity to help a more diverse range of children and meeting the clearly stated needs of our Shareholder in doing so.

The New Plan for Growth



As we reach our temporary capacity on pupil numbers, whilst plans for the further capital investment that will unlock further places are considered by the Council, we are keen to work in solution-focussed and creative ways to ensure we are able to help the maximum number of children and young people.

We are looking at options that mean potential pupils could attend a specialist setting closer to their homes and are seeing if there are any initial steps that could be taken by the Company, to open up some of the 'easier to convert' areas on our main campus in a cost effective and efficient way.

Supplementing this with ideas about outreach and support means we have no intention of standing still!



Work with other Local Schools

At the top of our values diagram, we have “so every child can thrive” and in our induction sessions, we explain to new colleagues that this is about all children and young people, including those who do not attend our School.

To this end, we always look for ways to learn from and share with others, so that as many children as possible have a positive experience at their school.

We are working increasingly closely with other local Headteachers, from other specialist and mainstream settings. Where there are ideas about how we could help each other, we quickly engage and are keen to grow this area of our work.

We have also taken an active role with national consultations about upcoming reforms. We want to be part of the solution for the wider SEND system, which is routinely reported as needing improvement.

Where we can help,
we do all we can to do so.



**So every
child can
thrive**

Our Fundamentals

“A culture of kindness”
“A sense of belonging”
“A belief in ambition”

Our Mission

Creating nurturing environments to enable each unique child and young person to overcome challenges, learn and live a healthy fulfilling life.

Our Strategic Priorities

Safety First – being safe, feeling safe
People and Culture – compassionate communities
Transforming Lives – life changing outcomes
The Ripple Effect – sharing what works with others



Dorset Transport



We know how challenging it is to manage the transport needs of our pupils, and to do so where there are budgetary pressures.

To that end, we have prioritised supporting the Dorset Council team to make efficiencies wherever possible. By us supporting pupils to develop the skills to share vehicles and use learned strategies to manage these journeys, we've reduced the number of journeys that need to be commissioned.



Member of Parliament



"A belief in ambition" is one of our three fundamental values and we do all we can to put this into action. We have high expectations of our pupils and want to expose them to rich and challenging experiences.

As an example, as part of the School's Citizenship lessons, pupils welcomed Simon Hoare MP, Member of Parliament for North Dorset to school for a question-and-answer session.

The pupils asked excellent questions on lots of topics including inheritance tax, funding for schools, the tax on family farms and immigration.

Mr Hoare was generous with his replies and for the way he interacted so engagingly with the pupils.



question = Are schools like this one, Sage with funding?
Why did you become MP?
How long did it take to get where you are now?

Shoebox Project

This year, the staff have been taking part in the Rotary Shoebox Scheme. Our teams, from the Farm, Human Resources, Therapies, Teaching staff, Leisure staff and Shared Services have been filling shoeboxes to be distributed to disadvantaged families abroad.

The shoeboxes have contained items such as toys, games, clothes, toiletries, candles, writing materials, and much more and are promised to make a real difference to those who receive them.

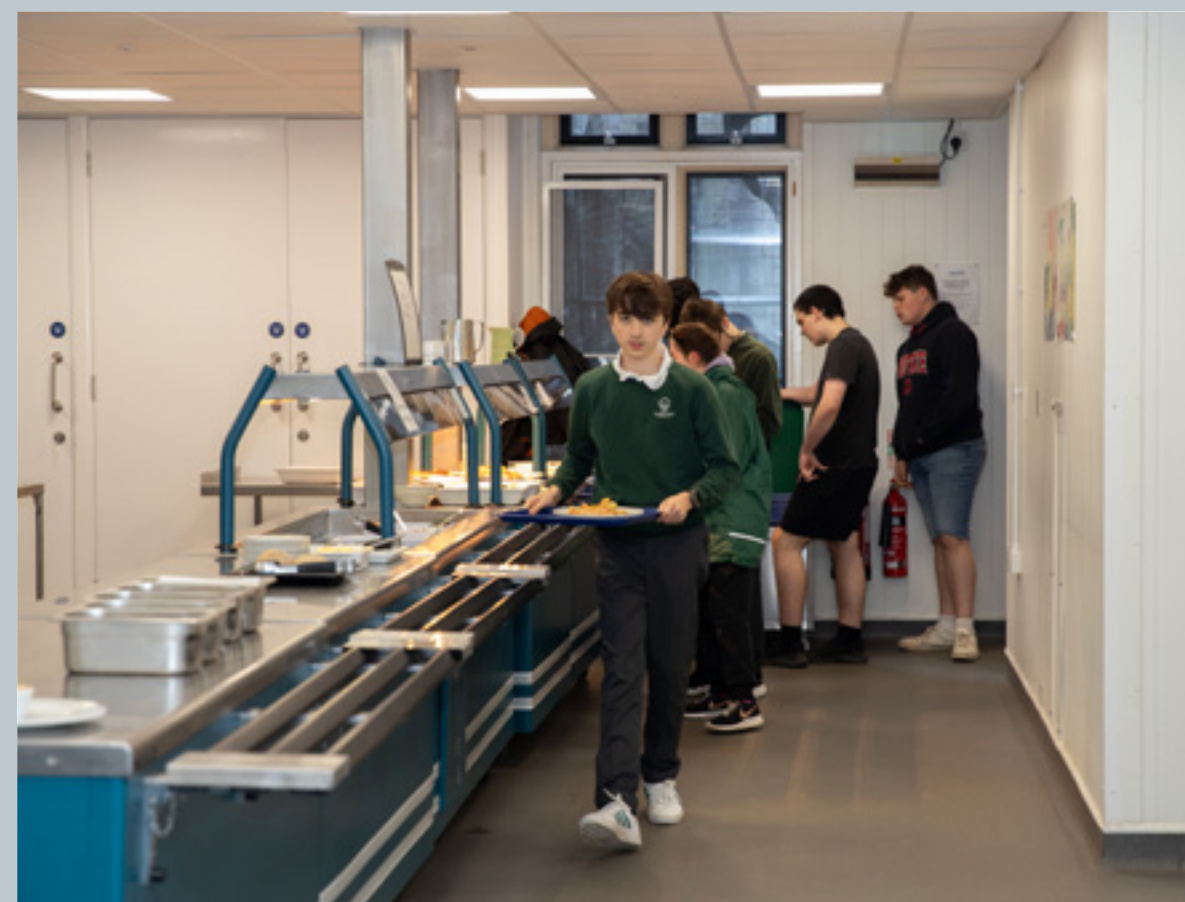


Catering

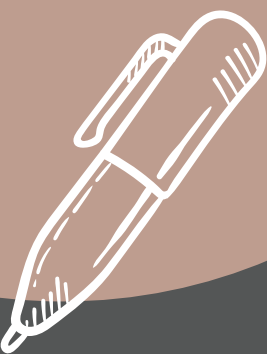
At the end of the current three-year catering contract, we took the opportunity to review arrangements to ensure that we were providing our pupils with the very best quality food at good value for money.

We are passionate that food and nutrition should play a positive role in the learning of our community and so re-evaluating with this in mind has really focussed the mind.

Our new chosen catering partner will join us in January 2026 and our pupils, particularly those who had a preview during the tasting day, are very much looking forward to it!



Parent Feedback



“ The professionalism, wisdom, clarity of information and support we have been afforded by you all has been outstanding and we wanted to say a huge, heartfelt THANK YOU. She was squealing with excitement on Friday, relieved that she doesn't have to leave her lovely school! Have a terrific week; we shall – safe in the knowledge that she can stay put. ”

“ He has never managed anything outside the home unless accompanied by mum. Before Easter he managed a Burger King Trip with me and ate in front of me, he has managed a McDonalds trip and eaten in front of me and last week he got in the swimming pool for the first time. Mum is so grateful for everything and the fact that even though he won't admit it, he is happy at school. ”

“ What made this even was speaking to their teachers and LSAs and a lot of other staff that had nothing but positive things to say about my boy. ”

“ It was an absolutely gorgeous evening. The staff are and were amazing. Still mesmerised by everything! Thank you! ”

“ Was such a lovely evening, always blown away by the lovely grounds and facilities for our children. Staff are always so friendly, thank you ”

“ Just a quick message to say thank you to all of the wonderful staff at Coombe House School for giving her a wonderful, nurturing and fun filled 2 years during her time here. ”

“ Last nights open evening was just wonderful. In fact, the vibe felt more like a party – to celebrate the achievements of the young people and the top team that have enabled a barrel load of wins! Huge thanks and a shouty round of applause to the Coombe House Crew! ”

“ He's had a really good 3 weeks back-to-back, and I'm especially proud of him participating in sports day as it's been something he has refused to do since a very early age, so keep doing what you're doing! ”

“ It just feels that the 10 years' worth of fighting with LA's [Local Authorities] and everyone in between it was so worth it! I just feel incredibly proud for him to attend such a lovely place ”

“ Thank you for your email, we are obviously bursting with pride. She is becoming more herself day by day because of attending Coombe House; yourself and your amazing team really deserve to take all the credit for that. There's no words to describe how grateful and happy the whole family is for her being there. ”

Sports Day

“ Thank you so much. I had a very proud boy come home after winning his first proper trophy. He's blessed to have such a wonderful school. ”

“ Well done boys and girls and thank you to all the teachers for organising. ”

Longleat Trip

“ Thank you so much to all the staff at Coombe (House) and to the rotary club. My son had the best time and didn't stop talking about it, it was a beautiful moment seeing him so happy. Thank you xxx ”

“ Our grandson had a lovely day thank you Coombe House for being amazing and also to the Rotary Club. ”

“ Thank you Coombe House School and to the Rotary Club, both of our boys said they had a fantastic time x ”

MP Visit

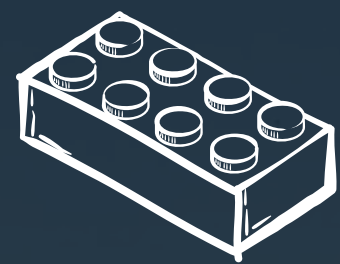
“ She really enjoyed this... which I'm delighted about ”

“ It was a great pleasure. Let's get you up to Westminster soon ”



Contributors

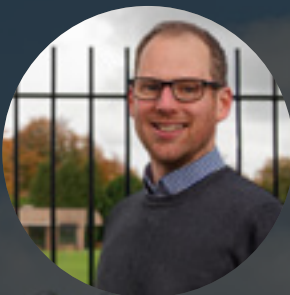
Thank you to everyone that contributed to this year's Annual Performance Report:



Elliot Smith
Horizons Teacher



Jenny Young
Deputy Headteacher



Andy Holder
Managing Director



Bex Smith
Deputy Headteacher



Louise Hughes
Senior Finance Manager



Michelle Heywood
HR Manager



Darren Harte
Headteacher



Elle Lomas
Farm Manager



Phil Van Gorph
Facilities & Health & Safety Manager



Therapy Team

Coombe House



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