

SHAREHOLDER COMMITTEE FOR THE DORSET CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE (DCOE)

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 9 MARCH 2026

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

Present remotely: Cllrs Gill Taylor

Apologies: Cllrs Ryan Hope

Others 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), Jen Furnell (Corporate Director for Education and Learning), Andy Holder (Managing Director), Lesley Mellor (Board Member), Frances Nicholson (Board Member), 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)

30. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2025 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

31. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

32. Public Participation

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

33. Councillor Questions

There were no questions from councillors.

34. Forward Plan

The Forward Plan was noted.

35. 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. In addition, the report provided an update on the review of the longer-term intentions for the Coombe House School site.

In presenting the report, the Head of Service reported that the focus of the commissioning work was working with the company and the school to oversee the core operation of the contract. Performance against the contract continued to align with the good Ofsted report that had been received and Dorset Council officers continued to meet with the company around the wider operations, which included work related to the green agenda and working towards full capacity of the school. It was noted that 145 of the 152 places were currently filled, which represented a continued upward trajectory.

The Executive Director, Children reported that an options appraisal report was due to be available from the end of March and that a report would be brought to the shareholder committee at the June meeting.

The report was NOTED.

36. **DCoE - Report of the Chair of the Board**

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

In presenting the report, the Chair of the Board noted that the school was close to its target capacity and provided further information on discussions taking place with representatives from the local community regarding the provision of community facilities and how leisure facilities could be structured moving forward.

The Managing Director ran through the areas covered by the report and made particular reference to government guidance on the use of mobile phones in schools, the use of reasonable force, work being undertaken with Dorset Transport and grant funding achieved for environmental works. In addition he noted that the school welcomed opportunities to engage and work together with Dorset Council in respect of the recent Government White Paper on school reform.

Councillors reviewed the report and points were noted in the following areas:

- A discussion was held in respect of the use of mobile phones in school, following guidance published by Government and also Dorset Council, and it was noted that the school would be launching a new approach in April. Communications had been undertaken with young people and their families, and feedback could be provided at a future meeting. Early points raised were around the use of mobile phones during travel to school and the ability for children to be able to contact home during the day if required. Consideration was being given to how the new approach would be managed

- Support being provided to pupils considering their transition to Post-16 education was raised and it was noted that pupils had the opportunity to make an informed choice about whether to stay at Coombe House or transition to another college
- The significant impact of 'Therapeutic Thinking', the new framework for a relational approach to meeting individual pupil needs, was noted
- A discussion was held with regard to financial aspects and budget setting for the next financial year and how issues including travel costs and recent world events would impact on the business model. It was recognised that some of these aspects were very recent and therefore had not been factored in currently. The Managing Director provided information on work being undertaken including maximising the use of sustainable energies and ensuring there were contingencies built into budgets. The Chair of the Board noted that the finance committee would be considering all aspects of this area
- The transport of children to the school was a cost for Dorset Council, but close working continued between the company, school and Dorset Council to find efficiencies in this area
- It was recognised that there were opportunities arising from the recent Government White Paper, including how the school could provide support to other schools across the region
- The company continued to work with Wiltshire Council to maximise the environmental and broader benefit from the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FIPL) grant funding.

The report was NOTED.

37. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

38. **Exempt Business**

There was no exempt business.

Duration of meeting: 10.00 - 10.25 am

Chairman

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