



Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)

Date: Monday, 14 September 2026
Time: 10.00 am
Venue: Meeting Room 1, County Hall, Dorchester, DT1 1XJ

Members (Quorum: 3)

Cllrs Nick Ireland (Chair), Richard Biggs (Vice-Chair), Simon Clifford, 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 June 2026.	
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 9 September 2026.

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 9 September 2026.

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

6. FORWARD PLAN 9 - 14

To consider the Forward Plan.

7. DCOE - REPORT OF THE CHAIR OF THE BOARD 15 - 18

To consider a report of the Chair of the Board.

8. 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.

9. 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 JUNE 2026

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

Apologies: Cllrs Simon Clifford

Also present: Cllr Carole Jones

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

Ross Bowell (Head of Service - Health, Education & SEND Commissioning), Jan Britton (Executive Director - Economy and Environment), Ian Comfort (Chair of the Dorset Centre of Excellence Board), Paul Dempsey (Executive Director - Children's Services), Grace Evans (Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer), Jen Furnell (Corporate Director for Education and Learning), Andy Holder (Managing Director, Dorset Centre of Excellence), Catherine Howe (Chief Executive) and Lindsey Watson (Senior Democratic and Governance Officer)

1. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 March 2026 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

3. **Public Participation**

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

4. **Councillor Questions**

There were no questions from councillors.

5. **Review of Terms of Reference**

The terms of reference for the shareholder committee were noted.

6. **Forward Plan**

The Forward Plan was noted. Following recent changes to Cabinet member titles, these would be checked and updated on the forward plan.

7. **Dorset Council Commissioner's Report**

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

In response to a question regarding attendance levels, it was noted that attendance was at a good level in terms of expectations for specialist schools. Whilst it was difficult to make comparisons with attendance levels in mainstream schools, there was confidence that attendance at Coombe House School was moving in the right direction.

The report was NOTED.

8. **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.

Councillors considered the areas covered by the report and during discussion, points were raised in the following areas:

- In respect of attendance levels, it was acknowledged that some children found going to school challenging. The school was supporting those children affected and it was felt that the attendance profile was good at the present time
- A discussion was held on the transition of some pupils to post-16 mainstream education. There were no key performance indicators in this area as it was about ensuring that pupils took the next steps that were right for their requirement. In some cases, children were moving back to education provision closer to their home/community
- Recent activities included a successful residential trip to Hooke Court and a farm open day
- Progress was being made in the implementation of Government guidance on the use of mobile phones in school and in respect of the use of reasonable force
- The Company was ready to be an effective partner with Dorset Council in respect of the requirements of the 2026 schools' white paper
- The Coombe House farm was run as a therapeutic farm, which offered both learning facilities beyond the classroom setting and had a wider community impact, demonstrated by the good community turnout at the recent farm open day.

The report was NOTED.

9. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

10. **Exempt Business**

It was proposed by R Biggs seconded by C Sutton

Decision

That the press and the public be excluded for the following item in view of the likely disclosure of exempt information within the meaning of paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

Reason for taking the item in private

Paragraph 3 – Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

11. **Future site options**

The shareholder committee considered an exempt report regarding future site options.

Responses were provided to questions and comments raised. The shareholder committee requested that a report be brought to Cabinet on 28 July 2026 to progress consideration of the issues. As part of this, the wording of a recommendation to Cabinet was proposed by N Ireland seconded by R Biggs and agreed by the shareholder committee.

Duration of meeting: 10.00 - 11.15 am

Chairman

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Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE) Forward Plan September to December 2026 (Publication date – 12 AUGUST 2026)

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 2026/27

Cllr Nick Ireland – Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Climate, Communications, Performance and Safeguarding
Cllr Richard Biggs – Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Economic Growth and Strategic Assets
Cllr Simon Clifford – Cabinet Member for Resources and Finance
Cllr Clare Sutton – Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education
Cllr Gill Taylor – Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness

Subject / Decision	Decision Maker	Date the Decision is Due	Cabinet Member	Officer Contact
September 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 14 Sep 2026	Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education	<i>Executive Director - Children's Services (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 14 Sep 2026	Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education	<i>Ross Bowell, Head of Service - Health, Education & SEND Commissioning ross.bowell@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk Executive Director - Children's Services (Paul Dempsey)</i>
DCoE - Report of the Chair of the Board Key Decision - No Public Access - Part exempt To provide an update of the	Decision Maker Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE)	Decision Date 14 Sep 2026	Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education	<i>Chair, Dorset Centre of Excellence Executive Director - Children's Services (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.				
December 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 7 Dec 2026	Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education	<i>Executive Director - Children's Services (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 7 Dec 2026	Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education	<i>Ross Bowell, Head of Service - Health, Education & SEND Commissioning ross.bowell@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk Executive Director - Children's Services (Paul Dempsey)</i>

Subject / Decision	Decision Maker	Date the Decision is Due	Cabinet Member	Officer Contact
DCE - 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 (DCE)	Decision Date 7 Dec 2026	Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education	<i>Chair, Dorset Centre of Excellence Executive Director - Children's Services (Paul Dempsey)</i>
Annual Performance Report Key Decision - No Public Access - Open To consider the Coombe House Annual Performance Report.	Decision Maker Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCE)	Decision Date 7 Dec 2026	Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education	<i>Chair, Dorset Centre of Excellence Executive Director - Children's Services (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 June	Leader and Cabinet Member for Climate, Communications, Performance & 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 December	Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education	<i>Chair, Dorset Centre of Excellence Executive Director - Children's Services (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.

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

14 September 2026

Report from Chair of Board For Review and Consultation

Report Author: Ian Comfort

Title: Director and Chair, Dorset Centre of Excellence Ltd

Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

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

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

Reason for Recommendation:

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

1. Background

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

2. Coombe House School

- 2.1 The School continues to successfully grow its pupil roll in partnership with Council commissioners. The end of year period is one where the highest number of leavers and new starters are planned for, which has gone well.
- 2.2 On top of our typical ‘graduates’, three pre-16 pupils are transitioning back to mainstream schools for 2026/27 as a result of their hard work, the interventions they’ve received, and the progress they have made. These add to the already strong pattern of success the School is developing with

supporting post-16 pupils back to mainstream placements at the end of Key Stage Four.

2.3 During the summer holidays, the School received its external examination results for 2025/26. To avoid a sometimes-intense period of examinations 'all at the end', pupils tend to build their portfolios of qualifications over several years. This year, 14 pupils gained 26 GCSE passes in four subjects, along with various other Entry Level and Functional Skills grades.

2.4 The summer term saw a flurry of adventurous experiences being offered for pupils. Trips to Longleat, our first residential trip, and the overnight Duke of Edinburgh expeditions were all greatly enjoyed and hugely impactful.

3. **White Paper**

3.1 The Coombe House Managing Director attended a meeting of the Dorset Inclusive Education Alliance in July 2026 and was pleased to contribute to the discussion about how the wider educational system could serve all children in Dorset.

3.2 A subsequent planning meeting with senior colleagues at the Council was also welcomed, where opportunities for Coombe House to contribute towards the implementation of the strategic plan were explored.

4. **Commercial and Community Activities**

4.1 The swimming pool required significant maintenance over the summer, requiring it to close, empty and receive remedial works. This has been successful, with a planned re-opening for School and community use early in September 2026.

5. **Business Plan Implementation**

5.1 The Company has been pleased to engage with the Council following the previous Shareholder Committee meeting, where an onward plan was made. We have been invited to participate in sessions relating to two of the three actions from that plan in this reporting period.

6. **HR**

6.1 The period approaching a new academic year is always a busy one for recruitment and this year has been no different. The HR department has been working hard selecting and safely recruiting sufficient staff for the year ahead.

6.2 The HR team has been focussing on further developing our learning and development offer, which has been a focus for feedback during recent staff surveys. We are optimistic that our planned changes will be impactful.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1 We had been hopeful that we could give detailed feedback regarding our independent financial audit for the financial year 2025/26. However, some final queries have slightly delayed it being finalised. Verbal feedback and late drafts of the written report seen are suggesting a highly positive outcome can be expected.
- 7.2 The 2026/27 financial year is progressing broadly in line with budget with no significant variations, or unexpected costs impacting on performance so far.
- 7.3 The Company continues to be committed to representing exceptional value for money to the Dorset community, and its Shareholder.

8. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

- 8.1 Historical issues with our Feed-in Tarriff (FiT) payment processes have been resolved, meaning the financial benefits are now catching up with the environmental benefits.
- 8.2 A good summer, with plenty of sunshine has proved beneficial for our now fully operational portfolio of solar panels.
- 8.3 As we move to plan our response to future 'high temperature' weather events, we are keeping in mind the environmental implications of, for example, air conditioning.
- 8.4 The Company continues to engage with Wiltshire Council's Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) funding application process, which are being accessed to further impact the work and the environmental impact of Coombe House Farm.

9. Well-being and Health Implications

- 9.1 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.

10. Other Implications

- 10.1 No other implications have been identified.

11. Risk Assessment

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

Current Risk: Medium
Residual Risk: Low

12. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

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

13. **Appendices**

13.1 None

14. **Background Papers**

14.1 None