

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

19 October 2022

Commissioner's Report

For Decision

Portfolio Holder: Cllr A Parry, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

Local Councillor(s): Cllr

Executive Director: T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

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Report Status: Part Exempt

Brief Summary:

This report provides an overview of the position related to the Dorset Centre of Excellence. It outlines progress made in the areas of contract management and quality assurance and further works to the site. At the time of writing, building works are progressing with sufficient confidence to enable the school to reopen. There have recently been some challenges with the water supply and a significant leak in the old part of the building which requires intervention. However, this can be safely undertaken without disruption to the school's function.

The Chair of the Company has confirmed, following a Board meeting on 7th September that the school opened to pupils on the 13th September 2022 with a phased approach to the integration of the 36 students currently on roll. Growth of the school roll has slowed, with fewer children attending in September than initially forecast in the original business plan. Progress on making alternative education arrangements for these children is included in an exempt appendix to this report.

Recommendation:

Shareholders are asked to note the contents of the report and support the approach outlined within.

Reason for Recommendation:

The initial opening period for the school has been challenging and significant effort is underway to ensure recovery is swift and sustainable to avoid any further disruption to children and their education and mitigate any reputational damage to Dorset Council.

1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Following the challenges associated with the initial opening of the school, outlined at the last Shareholder Committee, the Dorset Centre of Excellence Commissioning Group (DCOEG), Chaired by the Chief Executive, has continued to meet regularly to oversee progress on the delivery of a recovery plan and the planned building works.
- 1.2 A joint scrutiny committee, held in private, in July 2022 enabled elected members to understand the ambition for the Dorset Centre of Excellence, contribution to the SEND Sufficiency Strategy and to ask questions about implementation of the project.
- 1.3 Two sessions were offered to all elected members to visit the Dorset Centre of Excellence site over the summer and were well attended.

2. Coombe House School Re-opening

- 2.1 The school re-opened on 6th June 2022, taking a phased approach to the reintroduction of children. By the end of term 33 children had been attending part-time, with alternative education arranged for the 16 children that were not able to return.
- 2.2 Term ended in line with other independent schools.

3. Contract Monitoring and Quality Assurance

- 3.1 At the last Shareholder Committee, shareholders agreed to the suggestion of Enhanced Co-operation between the Dorset Centre of Excellence Board and the council, in line with the terms of the service contract. The areas for Enhanced Co-operation were agreed by the Chair of the Board and enabled us to work more closely than originally intended in the original commissioning agreement. These contractual levers that can be used

when there are challenges in service delivery and was most appropriate for the current circumstances.

- 3.2 This section provides an update on action taken to date by the council in its role as commissioner and through this period of enhanced cooperation. The Chair of the Board of Directors will provide a separate report.
- 3.3 There has been good engagement by both Dorset Council and Dorset Centre of Excellence employees in the run up to the end of the school term and during the summer, with the support offered being accepted and well received.
- 3.4 The agreed areas of enhanced co-operation and progress against these are described below:
 - a) **Increasing frequency of contract reviews to fortnightly:** these have commenced between the Chair of DCOE Board and DCOE project manager (PM) with Corporate Director for Commissioning and Strategic Commissioner. There is more frequent engagement between Strategic Commissioner and DCOE Project Manager to monitor progress. These are ensuring progress is continuing at the pace that we expect.
 - b) **Increasing frequency of management meetings about the school to weekly:** Regular meetings have taken place and will be in place for September and beyond. There have been regular meetings to support school development including the completion of a school development plan, recruitment activity and planning for re-opening
 - c) **Admissions process** – child transition plans are jointly produced and owned by DC and the school: Regular meetings have taken place to review progress of children on roll and will continue through the Autumn term.
 - d) **Securing new placements for children not returning to Coombe House:** Families had access to a flexible personal budget to support their learning through to the end of the school term and we have worked together on managed moves. Further detail is provided in Appendix 1 which is exempt.
 - e) **Increased on-site presence of DC officers:** this continued while the school was open, with less frequent presence over the summer, there are plans in place to create office space for DC officers from September.

- f) **Commissioner attendance at DCOE Board:** Three board meetings have taken place over the summer and there has been commissioner attendance at each.
 - g) **Joint Complaints log:** this was implemented, and all complaints have been responded to.
 - h) **Joint Communications:** all communications have been agreed in advance, a media protocol has been drafted and is awaiting agreement, communications about the school will be led by the company with support from DC communications team to support.
 - i) **Recruitment activity:** this has been the area of greatest joint work. A new people structure has been agreed and recruitment activity has continued at pace most notably resulting in the appointment of an Interim Managing Director/Head Teacher; 6 interim teachers and 6 learning coaches – all designed to support a September start and a growth plan. Back-office support and capacity has also been strengthened with some new appointments following some leavers and a reshaping of the team. A permanent recruitment plan has been agreed and is the focus moving forward. Two new non-Executive Directors have been appointed to the Board and a recruitment campaign is planned for a third with finance experience to replace the departed board member.
 - j) **Support offered:** A South West Audit Partnership audit has been completed, and results shared with the company. A DC caretaker has been seconded and is on site. Safeguarding Advisor visits have continued, and progress is being made across all areas.
- 3.5 Commissioners continue to monitor the DCOE recovery plan and will commence monitoring the school in line with the service specification as it reopens.
- 3.6 Further development of services on the site, including the residential children's home and short breaks provision as provided for in the service specification are paused to enable the company to focus on reopening the school.
4. **Progress on completion of building works**
- 4.1 The commissioning group met on 9th June 2022 to understand the building works requirement to enable the school to open successfully in September. A programme of works was agreed on and this has been tracked fortnightly by the DCOE Commissioning Group.

4.2 At the time of writing, programme works is due to be fully completed by the 23rd September. The delay in the programme is associated with the completion of the kitchen works. The Company has been informed and are making contingency arrangements.

4.3 The following works have been or are due to be completed:

- a) Designated playground for key stage one children
- b) Adventure playground on the Great Field
- c) Completion of the kitchen
- d) Completion of snagging works
- e) Compliance and remodelling of Oak House
- f) Completion of landscape works including installation of play equipment and outside space for early years provision
- g) Fencing works – due to be completed by 12th September
- h) Relocation of main school gates
- i) Safety film installation to windows
- j) Hoarding around demolition area
- k) Chlorination of water tanks
- l) Fire Compliance Review
- m) Further work has been agreed to install a water main and the timescale for this is not yet known
- n) Kitchen installed in the old Music Block for the use of DCOE and DC staff

4.4 There was an issue with water supply in late August resulting in water being turned off. Bottled drinking water was supplied for staff and water testing has since been carried out. The water has been turned back on and work is ongoing to address the issue.

5. **Financial Implications**

5.1 The delay in full opening had an impact on the date on which responsibility for payment could be assigned to the High Needs Block (HNB) of the Designated Schools Grant, however it can be confirmed that charging from the HNB commenced from 1st May 2022.

5.2 The council intended to block purchase 100 places at Coombe House school from September 22, however in discussion with the school has reduced this to 36 children, to enable a phased approach to re-opening and provision of a solid foundation for growth. A review of the business

plan to review growth projections is underway and will be completed in mid-September.

- 5.3 The delay in growth of the school will result in an elongation to the timeline for planned savings to the HNB.

6 Climate Implications

- 6.1 None identified as relevant to this report.

7 Well-being and Health Implications

- 7.1 The health, safety and wellbeing of children and employees is of paramount importance so close collaboration between Dorset Council and the Dorset Centre of Excellence will continue.

8. Other Implications

- 8.1 None identified

9. Risk Assessment

- 9.1 The risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: High

Residual Risk: **Medium** – there is a recovery plan in place which is being closely monitored by the Commissioning Group and the Children's Services Leadership Team.

10. Equalities Impact Assessment

- 10.1 Not required for this report

11. Appendices

- 11.1 Exempt Appendix 1: By virtue of paragraphs 1 & 2 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

12. Background Papers

- 12.1 None included