

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

5 December 2022

Report from Chair of Board

For Decision

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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, with the significant support of colleagues from Dorset Council, has looked to address the issues that impacted on the successful opening of the School. It has sought to swiftly and systematically recover the position to ensure that it can deliver a safe and rewarding learning experience for its pupils. The Board is mindful that without the ongoing support of the Council as its shareholder the Company is not viable.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Shareholder is aware of the background to opening of the School in May this year and the issues and challenges that arose.

2. **Governance**

- 2.1 The Board has been further strengthened following the recruitment for additional non-executive directors (“NEDs”). Interviews were undertaken by members of the Board and Council colleagues. The selection panel has recommended that the shareholder appoint three additional NEDs. Council colleagues are taking appointments forward with the shareholder.
- 2.2 A Quality and Curriculum committee is in place and is chaired by Dame Susan Jowett. The committee is responsible for overseeing the delivery of education at the School.
- 2.3 The Finance committee has not been operational since June due to insufficiently experienced NEDs and the lack of a finance manager for the Company. Subject to the appointment of the new NEDs, the committee will lead on reforecasting the budget and realigning the business plan.

3. **Leadership**

- 3.1 At its last meeting, the Committee was advised of the appointment of Dr Sharina Klaasens as interim headteacher. Dr Klaasens has focussed on creating and sustaining a safe, sustainable and effective learning environment for children and staff. She has put in place systems and practices that are starting to become imbedded and will provide a strong platform for further development.
- 3.2 A successful recruitment exercise was undertaken for the posts of Managing Director and Headteacher. Interviews were undertaken by members of the Board and Council colleagues. Andy Holder has been appointed as Managing Director and took up post on 18 November 2022. Mr Holder has significant experience in work with children with special educational needs and disabilities (“SEND”) both as a headteacher and as Director of Operations for an education provider. Darren Harte has been appointed as Headteacher and will take up post in January 2023. Mr Harte also has considerable experience in SEND. Dr Klaasens will continue to support the school during the period of handover.

4. **Staffing**

- 4.1 This term saw the appointment of further permanent teachers, which has resulted in all classes having fulltime, permanent teachers. This has contributed to greater levels of consistency, structure and routines for classes and reduced the number of agency staff. Staff turnover has

reduced since the end of the summer term. The School continues to experience challenges in recruiting further permanent teaching assistants. There is currently a recruitment drive underway for teaching assistants and for more teachers. Support from agencies has been sought whilst the recruitment drive is being conducted.

- 4.2 Key members of the central services staff have been appointed (facilities manager, HR manager, finance manager) many have already commenced, with the final one to due to commence in December 2022.
- 4.3 The Board is monitoring staff absence and turnover. Exit interviews are being conducted to establish reasons for this. These will be analysed and plans executed to address any consistent themes.

5. **Pupils**

- 5.1 There are currently 37 pupils on roll. The transition programme for the phased re-introduction of pupils to the school in the autumn term has been largely successful. The number of pupils attending Alternative Provisions has been reduced. The School is now registered with Asdan (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network), the Duke of Edinburgh's Award programme and with AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance) to deliver a Unit Award Scheme. The School is currently in the process of registration with the AQA Examinations Board for the delivery of Functional Skills and GCSE's. Pupil engagement has increased substantially with some pupils already having completed several AQA Unit Awards. Pupil attendance has increased, and pupil behaviour has improved with a significant reduction in major incidents. There have been no suspensions (fixed term exclusions) or permanent exclusions. The School's adoption of a therapeutic approach embedded in a tri-partite curriculum has contributed to greater and sustained levels of re-engagement. The tri-partite curriculum comprises academic, vocational and therapeutic strands. Parent partnerships have grown stronger.

6. **Progress on completion of building works.**

- 6.1 The Council has advised that the acoustic works to Damson Hall will not be completed as planned due to the supplier experiencing a delay in the material required. The work is rescheduled for the Christmas break, but is still subject to materials being available due to very long lead times. This has no new ongoing impact on the pupils; those able to use the facility will continue to do so.

- 6.2 Works are completed on the walled garden and pupils are now beginning to use the facilities.
- 6.3 The Council handed over the kitchen and dining room at the end of October. The catering contract has been awarded and pupils have been provided hot meals for lunch since 14 November.
- 6.4 The last of the perimeter fencing is due to be completed by the end of November. This is a secondary fence to enhance the safety of the pupils once Oak House becomes operational.

7. **Community Use**

- 7.1 The Board has considered and approved the community use of the dry leisure facilities. Terms and conditions of use and charges are currently being agreed.
- 7.2 The Chair has met with the Town Clerk for Shaftsbury to discuss how the Company and the Town Council can work together in the interests of the local community. The Town Council has its own advisory committee for its leisure facilities and specifically for the use of its swimming provision. By working together, it should be possible to have our swimming facilities operational for the community early in the new year.
- 7.3 The Board has been clear that community use: cannot be subsidised from money allocated to the School; must operate on a minimum of cost recovery; and must at all times take into account the safeguarding of children attending the school and using the leisure facilities.
- 7.4 The Board has agreed to establish a community and leisure committee, which will have places for representatives of the local community and the Town Council

8. **Financial Implications**

- 8.1 At its last meeting the committee was advised that there are significant financial implications arising from the delay in the full opening of the School and the associated delays in the development of the Centre.
- 8.2 The situation has not improved since that meeting. The lack of a finance manager for the Company has meant that it has been very difficult to get a clear financial picture. That is being resolved. A qualified finance manager is now in post and additional NEDs have been recruited with finance experience. The first priority for the finance manager will be to prepare the

end of year accounts for submission to Companies House by 31 December. The Board anticipates having management accounts on a monthly basis from January 2023 onwards.

9. Climate Implications

9.1 There are no climate implications associated with this report.

10. Well-being and Health Implications

10.1 The Board has a duty to ensure the health, safety and well-being of its staff and the children attending the School. It has been mindful of this when considering the transition of children into the School; how it builds numbers; and how it provides community use of facilities

11. Other Implications

11.1 No other implications have been identified.

12. Risk Assessment

12.1 **HAVING CONSIDERED:** 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 Board and Council officers.

13. Equalities Impact Assessment

13.1 The Board has not conducted an Equalities Impact Assessment for this report. The specific needs of each child have been considered when developing transition plans.

14. Appendices

14.1 There are no appendices to this report

15. Background Papers

15.1 There are no background papers included with this report.