

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

13 March 2023

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 affected the successful opening of the School. It has looked 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 the ongoing support through enhanced cooperation with the Council is ensuring the viability of the Company.

1. Background

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

2. **Governance**

- 2.1 The Board has welcomed three additional Non-Executive Directors, who were appointed following a robust recruitment campaign. Their backgrounds and expertise complement those already present and their impact has been positive.
- 2.2 Board activity has been significant, with the formation of new/re-established committees overseeing 'commercial and community' and 'financial' activities.
- 2.3 Board members have visited the site regularly as part of their duties, which has included engaging in new routines developed to enhance levels of quality assurance.
- 2.4 The Chair has accepted resignations from two Board members, who have found themselves unable to continue with the commitment for various reasons.
- 2.5 The Board is considered complete and there are no current efforts to undertake further recruitment.

3. **Executive Leadership**

- 3.1 The Managing Director, who was in their first fortnight in post at the last committee meeting, is now well established in their role. Until 30 January 2023 they focussed primarily on the development needs of the School, including acting as Interim Head during January 2023.
- 3.2 Since the commencement of the new Headteacher on 30 January 2023, the Managing Director has transitioned into his substantive strategic leadership role for the Company.
- 3.3 Other substantive new leaders, overseeing finance, HR, health & safety and estates. who joined between October 2022 and December 2022 continue to establish themselves and are having a strong impact on the strength, depth and effectiveness of the Executive.
- 3.4 The Interim Managing Director/Headteacher, the Interim Projects Officer and the Operations Manager have left the Company since the last committee meeting.
- 3.5 The Company considers its Executive Leadership Team to be complete and there are no current efforts to undertake further recruitment.

4. **Coombe House School**

School Staffing

- 4.1 The School's new Headteacher took up post on 30 January 2023. The Managing Director continues to offer additional leadership capacity during this important time.
- 4.2 An experienced Deputy Headteacher has been appointed, who is expected to join in June 2023.
- 4.3 Careful planning is underway to ensure that suitable leadership capacity shall be available to the School as it grows
- 4.4 The Company has noted that data suggests that morale, engagement, retention and sickness/general absence have all improved as the new leadership structure has become more established.
- 4.5 A staff survey (along with a pupil and parent version) is being undertaken during February 2023, with the intention of sharing findings with the Council upon completion.
- 4.6 Recruitment continues to be challenging with a combination of factors, including those impacting the wider economy and the teaching profession as a whole, with some legacy reputational issues from the School's initial months and the character and density of the local population contributing.
- 4.7 A 'People Strategy' is being developed to overcome these barriers and to ensure the School is not limited in its ambitions to grow by its ability to recruit and retain staff.

Ofsted

- 4.8 On 9 December 2022, the Department for Education wrote to Coombe House School formally requesting the completion and sharing of an action plan by 9 January 2023, following a visit to the School on 18 October 2022 that had found that some Independent School Standards had not been met.
- 4.9 The visit was an unannounced inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

- 4.10 It was requested that all necessary actions required to ensure that all Independent School Standards are met should have completion dates no later than 7 March 2023.
- 4.11 Upon appointment, the Managing Director finalised the action plan to ensure it met requirements.
- 4.12 The action plan was submitted on 9 January 2023. The Department for Education has acknowledged receipt.
- 4.13 Ofsted has said that it will re-inspect to assess progress against the action plan at 'an appropriate point'.
- 4.14 Ofsted commit to undertaking a full inspection within a year of the registration date for newly registered independent schools.
- 4.15 The registration date for Coombe House School is 6 May 2022.
- 4.16 The two inspection processes (the monitoring inspection and the full inspection) may be carried out jointly.

Growth

- 4.17 Careful but ambitious planning is underway in partnership with the Council to ensure that the School grows safely from Summer term 2023.
- 4.18 Identification of appropriate pupils is being undertaken in partnership with the Council and is proportionate to the School's current operational capacity, given its stage of recovery and development.
- 4.19 Longer term plans for growth are being developed as part of the wider business planning processes that are ongoing in preparation for the next Shareholder Committee.

Quality Assurance

- 4.20 The Company has developed its quality assurance processes to ensure it remains compliant with all relevant standards, regulations and expectations.
- 4.21 The Curriculum and Quality Committee is carefully scrutinising the work of the School and is offering effective support and challenge. The committee undertook a detailed review of the Ofsted action plan that was submitted to the Department of Education on 9 January 2023.

4.22 The School is welcoming external validation of its development work. For example, a Dorset Council Safeguarding and Standards Advisor reviewed the School's safeguarding audit and development plan in January 2023 and noted significant progress. The School has also commissioned an external audit of its Single Central Record. The Curriculum and Quality Committee has commissioned an independent 'School Improvement Advisor' visit in Spring 2023 to aid its work.

5. **Commercial and Community Use**

5.1 A Commercial and Community Committee has been set up and is focussed upon the peripheral (non-School) activities of the Company.

5.2 There has been some excellent collaborative work with colleagues from the Council, who are outlining their commissioning needs.

5.3 The drafting of a new Business Plan, for consideration by the Shareholder Committee in June 2023, is being developed based on the above, and includes provision for day and residential short breaks, residential care, commercial use of leisure facilities and training/conferencing.

5.4 Local community partnerships continue to develop. Liaison with a local Town Council has progressed and firmer plans are now being made for some community focussed initiatives that are aimed to improve the health and wellbeing of the local community.

5.5 A partnership with a local Rotary Club has been developed through the organisation of a family bike ride for charity at the site in May 2023.

6. **Finance**

6.1 The Company submitted its statutory accounts for the financial year 2021/22 in December 2022.

6.2 The Company has re-established its Finance Committee, which is providing suitable and effective support and challenge to the Executive. All three of the newly appointed Non-Executive Directors sit on this committee.

6.3 The new Finance Manager is providing effective capacity for financial management and scrutiny that is aiding the Company in its reporting and forward planning.

6.4 The Board is now receiving monthly management accounts and is able to have much better oversight of the Company finances. The Company is

working closely with the Council to review and revise the business plan and develop appropriate budget estimates.

Capital Investment/Forward Planning

6.5 The Company has welcomed opportunities to plan for further development of the Dorset Centre of Excellence site through potential capital investment.

6.6 Work to scope growth opportunities is being carried out in partnership with the Council.

6.7 The Company is undertaking careful due diligence of the proposed opportunities in order to maximise its confidence in the proposals within its business plan.

7. Financial Implications

7.1 The Company is working with the Council on financial modelling and business planning to reach a financial position that allows it to securely continue with plans to grow.

8. Climate Implications

8.1 There are no climate implications associated with this report.

9. Well-being and Health Implications

9.1 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.

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: High

Residual Risk: Medium.

12. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

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

13. **Appendices**

13.1 There are no appendices to this report

14. **Background Papers**

14.1 There are no background papers included with this report.