

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

5 June 2023

Report from Chair of Board

For Decision

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, with the support of colleagues from Dorset Council, continues to make progress towards its objectives. 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 of the improvement trajectory since.

2. Coombe House School

- 2.1 Coombe House School (the “School”) continues to improve. The new Headteacher who had only just taken up post at the last Shareholder Committee meeting is now well-embedded and having a strong impact.
- 2.2 The Managing Director and the members of the Quality and Curriculum Committee continue to hold a significant role in supporting the quality improvements that are ongoing.
- 2.3 As part of its commitment to driving improvement, the Company has commissioned significant independent external quality assurance support since the last committee meeting.
- 2.4 A two-day visit from a highly regarded ex-Ofsted inspector and former Multi-Academy Trust CEO led to a promising report that reflected the progress being made by the School. This report has been shared with the Council.
- 2.5 In addition, support from a consultant who until recently was responsible for training independent special school inspectors in the southwest has worked with the Company to provide training around the Independent School Standards and has advised on certain policy decisions.
- 2.6 In May 2023, the School participated in the TCS Mini London Marathon. With many other mainstream and specialist settings across the country, this was an attempt to break the world record for the largest number of pledges to participate in a sporting event. It involved all pupils and staff organising and completing one-mile laps of our school field, with a fun-based focus on participation and enjoyment. This first ‘whole school event’ was symptomatic of the School’s increasing stability and an improving sense of community.
- 2.7 The School is pleased to have reached a level of confidence in its stability to recommence admissions. It is working closely with the Council to ensure that it does so in line with their commissioning requirements.
- 2.8 The School continues to await its scheduled visit from Ofsted. In preparation for the visit, evidence to show the Independent School Standards are met continue to be strengthened.

3. Commercial and Community Activities

- 3.1 The Company was pleased to host local families to the site on Sunday 14 May 2023 as part of the North Dorset Cycle Ride arranged by the Shaftesbury Rotary Club. The Company provided accommodation, resources, and personnel to organisers, who arranged refreshments, obstacle courses and fun games. The event was well received by the attendees and acted as an excellent community consultation opportunity, with many new ideas coming regarding how we can reach out and support local organisations in the future.
- 3.2 There has been much progress with community use of the leisure facilities. Liaison with the 'Friends of Shaftesbury Swimming' group has been positive and a small group of members have agreed to pilot community swimming sessions in the near future to allow a model of delivery to be refined. A local SCUBA club, who previously used the pool, has agreed to recommence their booking and shall begin these before the summer holidays. A partnership agreement is nearing completion with a reputable swim school that will provide the Company with a rental income in return for providing high quality swimming tuition to local children. They have been selected partially as they have strong credentials around inclusion and supporting children with additional needs.
- 3.3 During the summer holidays in 2023, the Company is nearing an agreement with a local Short Breaks provider to offer day provision to local families for two weeks. This shall act as a pilot for future operations, where it is hoped this offer can be expanded.
- 3.4 The Company is moving on with its planning regarding its offer of training and conference facilities. In the first instance, this will occur within its existing buildings. Initial bookings have been made for a meeting of Educational Psychologists in July 2023 and for some Youth Worker training in October and November 2023. An organisation that offers short break provision has also shown interest.
- 3.5 The Company has worked with Shaftesbury Town Council regarding establishing a Park Run for the local community within the grounds. Much work has been done to apply for grants so that this could be setup efficiently. A member of a local running group, who is also a Town Councillor is assisting in scoping suitable routes.
- 3.6 The wider community and commercial opportunities at the site are being explored to ensure they are maximised through a comprehensive master

planning exercise. This will help confirm optimal uses for each area of the site and will provide clarity about how our intentions can be realised.

4. Business Planning

- 4.1 The Company welcomes the opportunity to work with the Council to plan the development of further classrooms for the School so that new accommodation shall be ready to aid growth beyond September 2024.
- 4.2 The new business plan that is due for consideration by the Shareholder Committee restates a commitment to the Company achieving its original aims. The provision of residential care and short break opportunities for local children and their families are described, as is a training facility and community access to the leisure facilities.

5. HR Update

- 5.1 The Company has made significant progress with its recruitment efforts. After a period where recruitment had been challenging, all teaching vacancies for September 2023 are filled and the small number of remaining teaching assistant vacancies for the same date are on track to be filled.
- 5.2 Improvements are thought to be linked to the general improvements that have been made in recent months, leading to a changing and improving perception of the Company as a more attractive option for those seeking employment opportunities.
- 5.3 Improvements to the nature of the messages being spread by word-of-mouth alongside some of the specific marketing efforts of the Company have had an impact. Beyond this, the Company's open day was particularly successful, with excellent attendance, very pleasing feedback and a subsequent receipt of high-quality applications. The Company continues to focus upon its People Strategy, where becoming a local employer of choice through an offer of competitive remuneration and benefits, innovative working patterns and a focus on wellbeing is the intended outcome.

6. Finance

- 6.1 The Company has started to finalise the year end accounts for financial year 2022/23. Through careful management, the Company is likely to report a financial position that exceeds its forecast.
- 6.2 The Company adopted a provision budget for 2023/24 based on those detailed within the late drafts of the proposed business plan and in April 2023 has demonstrated an ability to adhere to this budget.
- 6.3 The Company is demonstrating increasing credibility regarding its financial management, with a strengthened Board and new colleagues within the Executive having a significant impact.
- 6.4 The Company is confident that it has set out a pathway for ongoing financial security.

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. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology 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.