

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

18 September 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 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 2022 and of the improvement trajectory since.

2. Coombe House School

- 2.1 Coombe House School (the “School”) continues to make strong progress in all areas.
- 2.2 From 20-23 June 2023, Ofsted visited to undertake a three-day unannounced joint inspection, combining the first standard inspection with a monitoring inspection.
- 2.3 Inspectors were complimentary about the progress that had been made since their last visit and gave positive verbal feedback to the leadership and governance teams. Inspection activities included consultation with colleagues from the Council.
- 2.4 There was significant scrutiny of the progress that had been made to ensure that the Independent School Standards that had been found to be unmet during their visit October 2022 were now met.
- 2.5 A detailed account of the verbal feedback provided by inspectors has been shared with the Council and the report shall be published imminently. It is hoped that by the time of the Shareholder Committee, the report will be finalised and therefore can be discussed. Inspectors advised caution about sharing the inspection outcome publicly prior to it being published.
- 2.6 Growth has been a priority, and the school has met its targets for both pupil and staff numbers that it set out for the new academic year in its recent business plan.
- 2.7 As part of the recent growth, the School has started to use additional buildings that were completed within the initial phases of development, which had been left unused until this time.
- 2.8 School leadership continues to be a strength. Since the last committee meeting, a new Deputy Head, who was appointed in December 2022 has taken up their post.
- 2.9 Governance and oversight of the School continues to develop, with new processes in place for the new academic year.

3. Commercial and Community Activities

- 3.1 Since the approval of the new business plan in June 2023, the Company has made significant progress with the development of its ‘non-School’ commercial and community activities.

- 3.2 During the summer holidays, its campus hosted two weeks of short break day provision for local children, including those with additional needs and those who were eligible for funding from the Holiday activities and Food programme (HAF) 2023.
- 3.3 The Company was also pleased to offer its campus for the Council's 'Family Fun Day', which was very well attended. Meals were provided to those who were eligible for free school meals and a range of activities were provided. The Company was able to open its swimming pool to the families who attended, which was greatly enjoyed. Two members of the DCOE Board were in attendance to engage with families and young people about the work of the Company and its future intentions.
- 3.4 The efforts to offer the leisure facilities for local community use have moved on considerably.
 - 3.4.1 Through partnership with Shaftesbury Town Council and the Friends of Shaftesbury Swimming, regular community swimming sessions are now bookable to those who have joined our membership scheme. A new membership and booking portal has been developed by the Company to ensure this is efficiently managed.
 - 3.4.2 Arrangements with a high-quality, local swimming lesson provider, who will rent our pool facilities at commercial rates, are nearly finalised. This arrangement will offer a range of benefits to local children and other community groups.
 - 3.4.3 During the new academic year, a local primary school has also agreed to rent our pool facilities to help them deliver swimming lessons to their pupils.
 - 3.4.4 Plans are developing to further extend our efforts to ensure that the all-weather pitch and sports hall are also fully utilised.
- 3.5 The Company has begun the development of its conferencing and training offer. Since the last committee meeting, it has hosted a conference for Dorset Council's Educational Psychologist's and a group of local Youth Workers. In the future, we have bookings to host a 'Children's Services Strategy Day' and are hosting a 'Mental Health First Aid' course. These activities are bringing in nominal commercial benefits so far, but it is anticipated that this will change as this arm of our work grows.

- 3.6 The Company has made progress with its plans to register the proposed residential social care settings. The Managing Director has engaged with Ofsted to get preliminary feedback about the proposed operating model, with feedback being encouraging. In addition, there have been reciprocal visits with the Council's social care teams to ensure our respective provisions work in a helpful, symbiotic way.
- 3.7 The Company is grateful for the Council's commitment to fund a master planning exercise to fully explore the opportunities that exist. This exercise has not yet begun but the Company is liaising with the Council about the most effective way to do this.

4. **Business Plan Implementation**

- 4.1 Following the approval of the business plan in June 2023, the Council has undertaken to provide a loan facility to the Company to allow it to implement the plan. At present, the Company has not drawn any funds down from this facility but has gained significant security from the arrangement being in place.
- 4.2 Also implicit within the business plan was a need to review the commissioning agreement and lease agreement that are in place between the Council and Company. Work has begun to progress both, but neither are yet complete. The Council and Company will continue to work together to finalise these important documents as a priority in the coming weeks.
- 4.3 The Company has welcomed the opportunity to work with the Council to plan the development of further classrooms for the School. There has been significant activity. The Council has made a firm commitment to this investment and for the new accommodation to be ready for use for an intake in September 2024. All understand that this milestone is pivotal to the School's growth intentions.
- 4.4 The Company can report that it is performing ahead of its scheduled position stated within its business plan. Pupil enrolment targets have been met and the additional commercial activity, which was not forecast to have had a positive commercial impact in this financial year has been progressed. The Company is ahead of the financial projections stated within its plan.

5. **HR Update**

- 5.1 The Company has made strides with its recruitment and retention efforts and is fully staffed for the beginning of the new academic year. 13 new recruits joined the team at the beginning of September 2023 and are engaging in high quality induction programmes.
- 5.2 Work has already begun to ensure the recruitment that is required for our January 2024 pupil intake happens as successfully.
- 5.3 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. **Financial Implications**

- 6.1 The Company is performing ahead of its budget and business plan and has enhanced financial security following the arrangement of a loan facility with the Council.

7. **Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications**

- 7.1 There are no climate implications associated with this report.

8. **Well-being and Health Implications**

- 8.1 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.

9. **Other Implications**

- 9.1 No other implications have been identified.

10. **Risk Assessment**

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

Current Risk: Medium

Residual Risk: Low.

11. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

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

12. **Appendices**

12.1 There are no appendices to this report

13. **Background Papers**

13.1 There are no background papers included with this report.