

The Shareholder Committee for the Dorset Centre of Excellence

20 November 2023

Dorset Council Commissioner's Report

For Decision

Portfolio Holder: Cllr B Quayle, 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: Public

Brief Summary:

This report provides an overview of the current position in relation to the enhanced cooperation between Dorset Council and the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE) and the progress made in the recovery plan previously described in earlier meetings.

Recommendation:

Shareholders are asked to note the progress made and support the continued cooperation between the Council and the Dorset Centre of Excellence.

Reason for Recommendation:

Progress continues to be sustained enabling the company to focus on delivering the business plan and preparing for growth.

1. Report

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the current position in relation to the enhanced cooperation between Dorset Council and the Dorset Centre of Excellence (DCOE) and an update on Dorset Council activity required to realise the delivery of the Dorset Centre of Excellence Business Plan.
- 1.2 Regular contract review meetings continue focused on the performance of the school, with continued engagement between the Managing Director of DCOE and the Strategic Commissioner for SEND. Regular operational meetings are in place to support conversations about individual children and to plan admissions. Contract management focuses on assessing progress on the priority action plan, stability and operation of the school and learning from the Ofsted Inspection.
- 1.3 Commissioners can report that the Executive Leadership team of the Dorset Centre of Excellence and the Board of Directors are continuing to make good progress in the following areas:
 - **Governance:** Regular Board meetings and sub-committees are in place, meeting regularly and providing assurance, support and challenge to the executive leadership team. Dorset Council Commissioners continue to attend in an advisory capacity. The Ofsted inspection found that the leadership of the school and the arrangements for governance have been significantly strengthened; Leaders have the confidence of staff, parents and pupils. Inspectors also found that leaders had “significantly improved the school in a short time”. Following the inspection it is now deemed that all the requirements of the independent school standards are met in full. This triangulates with our assessment through contract management arrangements, the pace of improvement has been swift, prudently balanced with a sustainable approach to long term sustainability.
 - **Recruitment and retention:** Recruitment activity continues to be a high priority for the school, with continued activity on recruitment to support the planned growth in pupil numbers for January 2024. The 13 new teaching staff were employed, starting September 2023; a further recruitment round for January 2024 is just being completed. No staff resignations have been received (during the window in the academic year for resignations).

Subject leaders are being recruited to bring a specialist focus to enable greater depth to the curriculum; this breath of curriculum is not always present in special schools and should be a strength of the school offer. Current subject leaders are in place for art, design and design technology, and PE and outdoor learning, English and Maths is the next focus.

- **Ofsted and key performance indicators:** The school was inspected by Ofsted in the Summer Term, areas of strength and areas for development were identified, particularly related to the development of curriculum. The company has updated the School Development Plan to include actions from the Ofsted Inspection and these have been shared with commissioners as part of the contract review arrangements. Officers from the council (Commissioners, Education Challenge Lead and Head of Service for Children Thriving in Education) met with the Headteacher and DCOE Managing Director at the school on the 6th November, this included a tour of the school. Based on this quality assurance we are assured of the robustness of the plans in place, and the Education Challenge Lead will meet with the school curriculum lead to review evidence of impact and progress in more detail. This will include reviewing evidence of the learning ladders that have been established for all core subjects and the progress in embedding phonics this year.
- **Pupil growth:** Identification of additional pupils is now underway for a trajectory of 72 by the end of this Autumn Term – progress is being made in the identification of pupils and the focus now is on ensuring that transitions arrangements can be put in place to deliver a strong start. A weekly tracking system has been introduced to oversee progress. The opening of the Oak building has enabled a focus on the needs of different pupils and expansion – with Oak for pupils with internalised behaviours and Birch and Cherry for those with externalised. This significantly benefits pupils' experience at school and supports the model of 3 schools within a school.
- **Pupil experience:** Capturing pupil voice is a priority for the coming year and commissioners look forward to receiving information about this in ongoing reporting. The Ofsted inspection found the following regarding pupil experience: Pupils like their new school; Some

pupils have made friends within their class groups; they have formed trusting relationships with staff who have a detailed understanding of their needs; the attendance and motivation of most pupils improve over time; pupils feel safe in school and they see that staff want the best for them

- **Enrichment and broadening of the learning offer:** teachers are actively encouraged by the Headteacher to make use of the site for learning for example forest school approaches and the walled garden. There is now an established focus on cultural capital and community engagement for pupils, so they begin to be prepared to be part of their local community, providing valuable life skills.

1.4 **Community engagement:** Arrangements for use of the swimming pool by local community groups and schools are in place and are well received.

1.5 As in the last commissioner's report, the enhanced co-operation agreement remains in place, however the executive leadership team and the Board of Directors continue to be in a place where the support from Dorset Council officers continues to reduce. A summary of the position against each is provided below:

- Monthly contract reviews are in place
- Regular operational meetings continue
- Admissions process – joint working continues to identify new pupils to attend this term and beyond will continue for the foreseeable future until the school is a maximum capacity
- On-site presence of DC officers – this continues to be at the expected levels with no requirement for on-site presence identified
- Commissioner attendance at the board continues
- Joint approach to complaints and communications – DCOE are fully leading this, with no input from Dorset Council required
- Recruitment activity – continues to be successfully led by DCOE
- Support Offer – all DC support offered continues to be accepted and action taken as a result. This is continues to be focused on planning for growth including ensuring the delivery of appropriate classroom space.

2. **Support required to deliver the Company Business Case**

2.1 The Dorset Centre of Excellence Commissioning Group, chaired by the Chief Executive of Dorset Council continues to meet to oversee the next phases of growth required to deliver the business plan. Attendance

includes officers from Finance, Assets and Regeneration and Children's Services.

- 2.2 As described in the previous commissioner's report, increasing the number of additional classrooms available to the school and suitable for the delivery of a high quality Special Educational Needs curriculum is essential by September 2024 to support the delivery of the Business Plan. Contractors have been appointed and progress is being managed by Assets and Regeneration, Dorset Council.
- 2.3 The review of the lease arrangements is due to be completed by the end of December subject to the successful completion of on-site surveys to enable the legal team to complete their work.

3. **Financial Implications**

Fee price continues to be maintained at the previously agreed rates.

Work continues to develop the site to meet the growth trajectory required in the business plan. The funding for this work is contained within the Capital Budget which was approved by Cabinet in March 2023.

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

None identified at this stage – further work will be required as the programme develops.

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

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.

6. **Other Implications**

None identified

7. **Risk Assessment**

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

Current Risk: Medium

Residual Risk: Medium

8. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

Not required for this report

9. **Appendices**

None

10. **Background Papers**

None