

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

20 November 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.

Recommendations:

1. The Shareholder is asked to note the content of this report and to continue its support for the Company.
2. The Shareholder is also asked to agree to the filing of abridged accounts as set out in paragraphs 7.1 and 7.2 of the report.

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 Shortly after the last Shareholder Committee meeting in September 2023, the Ofsted report that followed the Coombe House School inspection in June

2023 was published and was as expected based on the verbal feedback and early drafts that had been received.

- 2.2 The Shareholder Committee was provided with a copy of the report promptly upon its publication.
- 2.3 The publication prompted a range of media coverage, which was reviewed alongside the Council's communications team and was generally positive and reflective of reality.
- 2.4 Coombe House School continues to further its quality and has integrated the feedback from Ofsted into its wider School Development Plan.
- 2.5 Coombe House School welcomed a visit from the Dorset Council commissioning team in November 2023, who came to review progress made since the Ofsted visit. Their feedback was positive and reflected the Company's view that progress continues to be made.
- 2.6 Shortly after the publication of the Ofsted report, the Department for Education (DfE) wrote to the Chair of the Board of Directors to confirm that due to all the Independent School Standards now being met, there were to be no further regulatory action to be taken by them. The DfE shared that they had instructed Ofsted to 'return to a typical inspection cycle for the school'.
- 2.7 Coombe House School continues to make progress with its planned growth and is on target compared to the commissioning intentions outlined in the June 2023 business plan. Pupil transition is improving with most pupils reaching a full-time timetable far more quickly than had been achieved previously.
- 2.8 Coombe House School welcomed a planned quality assurance visit from Wiltshire Council in October 2023. The focus was on safeguarding and the feedback shared via the verbal feedback and the draft written report is positive and reflects the progress made over the last twelve months. A final version of this report shall be shared with the Council when it is received.

3. Commercial and Community Activities

- 3.1 The Company has continued to progress the opening of its leisure facilities to the local community since the update provided at the last Shareholder Committee meeting in September 2023.
- 3.2 The community swimming sessions are proving to be popular, with the size of the membership now having grown to 70. Further growth of this opportunity is currently limited by our recruitment of suitably trained and qualified lifeguards but there has been significant progress with this recently, meaning there can be optimism.

- 3.3 The regular hiring of the swimming pool by a local swim school has now commenced, with two sessions a week operating initially, and plans to grow this provision to circa six sessions per week. The operator is particularly focussed on providing inclusive tuition to learners with a variety of needs and starting points and offers tuition to local community groups, as well as to local children.
- 3.4 The local primary school, who had previously struggled to source a venue for their swimming tuition, has embraced the opportunity to hire our pool and is likely to extend their commitment. Although this occurs during school hours, it does not unreasonably impact upon the access afforded to pupils at Coombe House School.
- 3.5 Plans are developing to further extend our efforts to ensure that the all-weather pitch and sports hall are fully utilised.
- 3.6 The training and conferencing offer continues to be worked upon although the Company is mindful that the only suitable venue for this (Pear Tree) is now likely to be needed as contingency classroom accommodation whilst the works to develop new classroom spaces across the campus is completed.
- 3.7 In November 2023, the Commercial and Community Committee received a paper from the Executive Leadership Team about the development of the planned residential social care provision. Useful discussions took place and a clearer plan regarding next steps has been reached.
- 3.8 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 still 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 loan facility being agreed in August 2023, the Company requested its first draw down during October 2023, which was actioned on 1 November 2023. This request came later and at a lower level than had been forecast within the business plan, largely due to the careful financial management and some overperformance against budget.
- 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. The Company understands that significant work has taken place since the last Shareholder Committee but the matters are not yet concluded. 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 continues to welcome the opportunity to work with the Council to plan the development of further classrooms for Coombe House 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 growth intentions that were outlined within the business plan. Planning for the next required phase, which shall be required to be available by September 2025, have begun well.

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.

5. **HR Update**

5.1 The Company continues to make progress with its recruitment intentions. Recruitment for January 2024 has gone well, although targeting teacher recruitment mid-way through an academic year was predictably more challenging than recruitment for September 2023.

5.2 The Company continues to be mindful of the recruitment challenges that are approaching. Recruiting for Coombe House School for September 2024 is the largest single 'step-up' in staffing in the business plan and the development of the residential social care provision is also likely to bring significant challenge.

5.3 The ongoing work on the People Strategy, including implementation of the proposed Remuneration Policy, will assist the Company in meeting its recruitment intentions.

5.4 Staffing continues to be stable, with no significant HR matters being managed currently.

6. **Annual Performance Report**

6.1 The Company was requested to produce an Annual Performance Report to the Shareholder Committee. A copy of this has been provided for consideration by the Shareholder Committee later on the agenda, prior to its consideration by the Council in December 2023.

7. **Financial Statements for the year ending 31 March 2023**

7.1 The Company is required to file its financial accounts for the period ending 31 March 2023 with Companies House by 31 December 2023. The Directors consider that abridged accounts should be filed rather than filleting full accounts.

7.2 The Shareholder is asked to consent to the preparation and submission of abridged financial accounts for the year ending 31 March 2023 in accordance with Section 444 (2A) of the Companies Act 2006. Abridged financial accounts are required to be filed at Companies House by 31 December 2023.

8. **Financial Implications**

8.1 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.

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

9.1 There are no natural environment, climate and ecology 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: Medium

Residual Risk: Low.

13. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

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

14. **Appendices**

14.1 There are no appendices to this report.

15. **Background Papers**

15.1 There are no background papers to be included with this report.