

# **Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee**

**11 March 2024**

## **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.

The Shareholder is also asked to agree to the 2024 business plan as set out in paragraph 7 of the report.

#### **Reason for Recommendation:**

The Board, in collaboration with colleagues from Dorset Council, continues to make progress towards its objectives. The Board is mindful that the ongoing support of Dorset Council to deliver the next phases of growth required to deliver the business plan through enhanced cooperation with the Council is ensuring the viability of the Company.

#### **1. Background**

1.1 The Company continues to perform well against its business plan, growing the pupil roll of Coombe House School, improving its quality and developing its wider commercial and community offer.

## 2. **Coombe House School**

- 2.1 Coombe House School continues to grow in line with the approved business plan. The biggest single point in time increase in pupil roll is due to be in September 2024 and identification of pupils, and planning for their transition and enrolment is going well.
- 2.2 Leadership and quality continue to be stable and engagement from pupils is typically very strong. Occasional dysregulated behaviours, which are to be expected given the context of the School, is well-managed and does not unreasonably detract from the overall experience of the wider cohort of pupils.
- 2.3 Internal quality assurance processes continue to be developed with the annual cycle being continually developed to monitor quality matters weekly.
- 2.4 External quality assurance and governance is also strong. School Quality Committee meetings are increasingly occurring in-person and on-site and are impactful. Independent external perspectives are also being sought, for example, via the commissioning of a leading sector expert for safeguarding.
- 2.5 Work to review the 'core' policies on curriculum and behaviour are being reviewed to ensure that they are optimal and best reflect our current and future aspirations.
- 2.6 The School Council has been developed significantly since the last Shareholder Committee meeting, allowing pupil voice to be more effectively captured and acted upon.
- 2.7 Examples of feedback from parents and carers have included:

"She is enjoying it and settled in so well. Her teacher has phoned to say how brilliant she has been, joining in, working, asking great questions and just generally getting stuck right in with everything. She is engaged and learning and her teacher said she has been a pleasure. She's really happy, although rather tired! And so far the journey has been ok for her and she's managing well. Also so far I've been so impressed with Coombe House School, really happy with it and X loves it. It's a very caring and nurturing environment and I've been really impressed." November 2023

"X was very reassuring and able to answer our questions. We could see some of the children in class and were very pleased to learn more about the curriculum, the current use of the premises (the way that the more sensitive children are housed in a separate area) and the extra facilities and the specialist team in the future." January 2024

“Since starting at CHS we have seen huge reductions in anxiety. This has impacted at home – he sleeps now! Previously he couldn’t sleep and then was unable to attend school the next day.” January 2024

### **3. Commercial and Community Activities**

- 3.1 The commercial and community activities at the swimming pool continue to develop well. Community swimming, the partnership with a high-quality swim school and use by a local mainstream school are all running smoothly and receiving regular positive feedback.
- 3.2 Preparation for the opening of the residential social care provision continues and has the full attention of the Commercial and Community Committee. The Council is currently carefully identifying the commissioning priorities and arrangements that will ensure the Company will best meets their needs.
- 3.3 The Company is seeking advice regarding business rate liabilities before further progressing its non-School commercial activities to ensure that they are optimally planned. The Company is grateful to the Council for their support and advice with this matter.

### **4. Business Plan Implementation**

- 4.1 The Company is grateful to Council colleagues who have assisted in progressing the amendment to the Commissioning Agreement. The Company understands that this is now agreed in principle and is awaiting written confirmation of this after final legal checks have taken place.
- 4.2 The amendments to the Lease Agreement that were outlined within the June 2023 business plan have also progressed and further work is planned to ensure they reach a similar point of readiness.
- 4.3 The Company continues to operate strongly and as it reaches the end of its financial year, it is likely to close ahead of both budget and mid-year reforecast.

### **5. HR**

- 5.1 The Company is continuing to have success in recruiting qualified and experienced staff to allow them to meet their growth and quality aspirations.
- 5.2 Staff engagement surveys consistently provide more positive feedback than the national average comparator for ‘other schools.’ Where there are areas for improvement identified, they are worked upon promptly.
- 5.3 Recruitment plans for the coming months, particularly those which will support the September 2024 growth phase have begun strongly.

## **6. Capital Investment**

- 6.1 The Company has had regular opportunities to contribute towards the planning processes that are in place to arrange the development of the campus.

## **7. Business Plan**

- 7.1 The Company is submitting its annual business plan for consideration by the Shareholder.
- 7.2 Due to the relatively short amount of time that has passed since the approval of the June 2023 business plan, changes are relatively minor in terms of impact.
- 7.3 The Company is seeking approval for this plan, in line with the terms of the Shareholder Agreement.

## **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.
- 8.2 After an extensive selection process, the Company has appointed a financial auditor to review the 2023/24 accounts, in line with the requirements of the Shareholder Agreement.

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

- 9.1 There are no natural environment, climate and ecology implications associated with this report, although the Company is supportive of all efforts to consider environmental impact as it assists the Council in its development of the campus.

## **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 Business Plan

15. **Background Papers**

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