

# **Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee**

**10 June 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 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, 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 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 and has further developed its transition arrangements since the last meeting, meaning that pupils receive a more personalised experience that is improving their ability to settle successfully into their new school, as seen by their strong attendance, their engagement in learning and the feedback that they and their parents and careers have provided.

- 2.2 Planning for the September 2024 intake of pupils is going well, with most spaces now allocated. Communication with families to confirm these places is being planned and will be dependent on the handover arrangements for the new classroom block that is currently being built. Work to ensure staff recruitment for this intake is detailed in section 5.3.
- 2.3 Pupils and staff are excited to see the development of the new classroom block and are watching with interest the various stages of its build. There is confidence that it will provide an excellent environment in which to learn.
- 2.4 September 2024 will see the school with its first significant cohort of sixth form pupils, who are going to receive a curriculum offer specific to their needs. Work to plan the redesign of a space that can be specifically theirs will aid them in feeling a greater sense of independence and maturity.
- 2.5 Work on our behaviour and curriculum policy review continues, with working parties reviewing best practice and the latest research to ensure our offer is high quality, ambitious, and meets the needs of our pupils.
- 2.6 The school welcomed a highly experienced specialist consultant to review the safety of our behavioural approaches. Initial feedback has been positive, with a more complete full written and verbal report being given to the Company's Board meeting in late June 2024.
- 2.7 Work to develop innovative, research based therapeutic classrooms has been very successful. Pupils have found them to be calming and they have aided them in their self-regulation. Social interaction between peers has also significantly improved. Further plans to roll out this new model further within the School are being made. Dorset Council have expressed interest in understanding the potential impact of these therapeutic classrooms on other local schools within the wider local education system.
- 2.8 A similar design approach has had a strong positive impact upon pupils' dining experience, where the new furniture and layout has meant pupils feel safer and happier to enjoy their lunch in a calm, positive space. One pupil said, "It's so nice to be able to sit and let my food go down on a sofa" and, after perusing the fake greenery, said "it's like bringing the outside inside". This is a young man who, when he started at the School, was unable to express himself in any other way than repeating what had just been said to him.
- 2.9 Leadership and quality continue to be stable and engagement from pupils is typically very strong. Occasional dysregulated behaviour, 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.

2.10 External quality assurance and governance is strong. School Quality Committee meetings are increasingly occurring in-person and on-site and are impactful.

2.11 Examples of feedback from parents and carers have included:

*“Since starting at CHS we have seen huge reductions in anxiety. This has impacted at home – he sleeps now! Previously he was unable to sleep and then he was unable to go to school” March 2024*

*“There is a good team around her. Her needs are being recognised and she is seen as an individual. Things feel more positive.” March 2024*

*“She is so excited about the opportunities available to her. She tells us that when she was a primary school, the things that were classed as ‘extras’ are done daily at CHS – like going for walks and cooking” March 2024.*

*“I just wanted to pass on our sincere thanks for yesterday’s brilliant Annual Review. It was the first one in 11 years where I haven’t felt raging anxiety! Your support, wisdom, positivity and proactive advice was incredibly helpful, and all info was delivered with such warmth and clarity. She’s a lucky girl tucked up in your lovely, safe setting with all of you looking out for her. She is so happy at Coome House. What more could we ask for?” April 2024*

*“He is very happy and had so much to tell me! I just mentioned it and he said oh could I just write down ideas, he often doesn’t like speaking out with new people around. He is currently saying he would like all 5 days next week. That was his first whole day at school since 18 months ago roughly so we are super proud and happy for him! Thank you for making him feel so settled so quickly!” May 2024*

*“Just wanted to say that X loved his time in this morning! Went in so anxious but came out so happy with how the day went! So glad he’s finally found his place!” May 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 The Commercial and Community Use Committee is considering options for providing residential social care provision and the Council fed back positively about the latest iteration of options.

3.3 The Company has received an update about its business rates liability, which it is reviewing as part of its plans to develop other non-School commercial activities.

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

4.1 Growth of pupil numbers is in line with the approved business plan and the associated commissioning agreement. September 2024 marks the most significant increase in both pupil numbers and staff.

4.2 The Company is grateful to Council colleagues who have assisted in progressing the amendment to the commissioning agreement. The Company has signed and returned this agreement and is expecting a countersigned version back imminently.

4.3 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.

#### **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 the Company's full attention. The HR team have been doing, and continue to do, extensive recruitment drives to fill the teaching and support roles.

#### **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.

6.2 Phase Two classrooms are currently being built and the Phase Three plans continue to develop well.

#### **7. Financial Implications**

7.1 The Company ended the 2023/24 financial year ahead of budget and business plan. It has sound financial security following the arrangement of a loan facility with the Council.

7.2 The selected auditors for the 2023/24 accounts have now been appointed and the main body of work involved with the audit is due to be undertaken in June 2024. Feedback from this audit will be shared with the Council in line with the requirements of the Shareholder Agreement when the report is available.

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

8.1 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.

## 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: Medium

Residual Risk: Low.

## 12. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

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

## 13. **Appendices**

13.1 None

## 14. **Background Papers**

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