

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

16 September 2024

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, 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 improve and grow and ended the school year with a wide range of positive community events.

- 2.2 Coombe House School welcomed an assurance visit from Dorset Council officers including the Principal Lead - Best Education for All, an Education Challenge Lead and the Strategic Commissioner for Education, which was both challenging and supportive. School leaders were pleased to be able to showcase the developments and improvements that have been embedded and to discuss priorities for the future.
- 2.3 The summer term saw significant development to the breadth of curriculum offered to pupils. A far wider range of on-site and off-site trips took place, which included the first overnight residential activity, linked to the Duke of Edinburgh scheme.
- 2.4 The number and variety of community links continue to develop and grow. Pupils joined other schools on a trip to Longleat, where pupils represented their school exceptionally well.
- 2.5 One class initiated, planned and implemented our inaugural 'Coombe Fest', which was a whole school event aimed at bringing the community together and fundraising.
- 2.6 In July 2024, the PE department led a hugely successful sports day, where a wide range of accessible activities were arranged for pupils to enjoy. There were some huge successes and feedback from pupils and their families was overwhelmingly positive.
- 2.7 Parents and carers of existing pupils attended an open evening in the final weeks before the summer break, which was very well attended. Staff were able to share the work of pupils with their families, who were grateful for the opportunity to visit and see the significant progress that has been made.
- 2.8 Growth continues to be well planned and transition arrangements for our 2024/25 intake have been carefully co-created with pupils and their families. Some plans have been adapted to respond to the later than anticipated handover of our new classroom block.
- 2.9 The commitment to developing our therapeutic classroom offer has continued with a further four spaces developed in time for the new academic year. Our first sixth form classroom has also been developed.
- 2.10 The first exam results were published in August with some truly exceptional outcomes gained by pupils. Strong GCSE passes in English and maths, as well as a range of functional skills and vocational qualifications were gained, marking a significant improvement over time based on prior attainment and historical patterns of engagement with learning.

2.11 Some pupils left the school in July 2024 with carefully planned transitions in place for their onward destinations. Their progress will be closely monitored, and ongoing support will be available to them.

2.12 Examples of feedback from parents and carers have included:

“We are just so happy with how well it’s going with B at Coombe house. You wouldn’t believe how difficult it was in mainstream just to get him out the door bless him but he’s happy leaving every morning to come in now! Thank you all so much!” June 2024

“I’m grateful for the support in school, so thank you. I have for so long been doing this alone” June 2024.

“Sports Day – Pupils were visibly proud of their achievements and messages from parents showed that they were also delighted with their children being given this opportunity. For many, it was their very first Sports Day ever.” July 2024

3. Commercial and Community Activities

3.1 The swimming pool continues to be a popular community resource and is well used. The Company is anticipating an uptake in demand following the closure of the local Lido in Shaftesbury at the end of its summer season. The Company has been able to invest in the changing facilities to enhance the experience of users this summer. New showers and changing cubicles will afford pupils and community users more privacy and a more pleasant experience.

3.2 Conversations are ongoing about the Council’s commissioning needs regarding residential social care. The Company was pleased to be able to visit one of the Council’s own provisions during August 2024 which aided its planning. Further financial modelling and meetings with key officers have been helpful in clarifying next steps.

3.3 Scoping work regarding potential uses for the main house have led to some exciting proposals. These proposals are now being costed and will be discussed with the Company’s Commercial and Community Use Committee and key Council officers in the coming weeks.

4. Business Plan Implementation

4.1 The Company has invested heavily in its growth commitments and has returned for the 2024/25 academic year having delivered the largest increase of both pupil and staff numbers to date. The delay to the completion and handover of the four-classroom block has impacted on its ability to deliver optimal transitions for a small number of pupils but careful collaborative

planning in partnership with the Council has mitigated the impact that this will have on families as much as possible.

- 4.2 The Company has worked closely with Council colleagues to help them assess our readiness to depart from the contractual state of enhanced co-operation. We are pleased that we have been able to reassure the Council against their previously stated criteria and agree it is appropriate to now move towards a more typical way of working. The Company is fully committed to continuing the collaborative relationship with the Council regardless of this change.

5. **HR**

- 5.1 Recruitment has been a significant focus for the Company with the number of new starters required to meet its business plan for the 2024/25 academic year being the largest of its 5-year-plan. The Company met its recruitment targets and is now carefully implementing the induction and training plans for the new starters.
- 5.2 Staff engagement continues to be a strength. The summer term ended very positively with staff enjoying the whole-school events described above. Surveys and consultation continue to ensure that any emerging patterns are spotted and responded to promptly.
- 5.3 Training has been prioritised and a number of professional development opportunities have been offered to staff. The Company invited two leading visiting speakers to its INSET days in September 2024, which were well received, and our Deputy Headteacher presented the findings from her senior leadership course to a national SEND conference in June 2024.

6. **Capital Investment**

- 6.1 The Phase 2 developments to provide the school with four additional classrooms has continued but the handover date for these classrooms has been delayed. The Company has been working closely with the Council to manage this change and to make plans to mitigate the impact.
- 6.2 Work continues to progress the plans for the other phases. Further scoping for phases three, four and five are ongoing, in partnership with the Council.
- 6.3 The Company has welcomed the Council appointed contractor to its site, who are focussed on remedial works. A programme of improvements has begun and will be ongoing, with a focus on ensuring occupied and unoccupied buildings are fully compliant. The Company is working closely with the Council to ensure that this is done efficiently with minimal impact upon the smooth operations of the Company operations.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1 The Company has now received verbal feedback regarding the financial audit that took place in July and August 2024. This feedback was positive and written reports are expected soon. At the appropriate point, these shall be shared with the Council, in line with the terms of the Shareholder Agreement.
- 7.2 The Company continues to perform well during the 2024/25 financial year and is reporting updates regularly to its Board. It is anticipated that a financial reforecast shall occur during Autumn 2024 to ensure optimal financial management to year end.

8. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

- 8.1 The Company has been mindful of questions raised during the last Shareholder Committee about its environment credentials.
- 8.2 Work is underway to produce an update regarding this, which is planned to be included within the annual Performance Report.
- 8.3 Since the last Shareholder Committee, there have been significant efforts to further the efficiency of our green energy production via investment in improvements to our Biomass boiler and solar arrays.

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.