

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

9 December 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 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 The Company was pleased to welcome members of the Shareholder Committee during their visit to the School in September 2024. It is hoped that it was helpful to meet staff and pupils, and to see the work of the School first hand.

- 2.2 Coombe House School continues to perform well. The School is grateful for the new classroom block that has been delivered by the Council, which is now being occupied by pupils, who are reporting back extremely positively about their new spaces.
- 2.3 The ongoing work to develop the curriculum and the therapeutic approaches used by the School is a strength of this period of development work.
- 2.4 Close collaboration with other senior leaders within the local education landscape have helped the School to work effectively within its locality in an integrated way.

- 2.5 Examples of feedback from parents and carers have included:

“My son only started in September and is so happy and settled, all he does is talk about school and how much he loves it, as a parent I can now relax during the day as I know his needs are being met and he is looked after, cannot thank the staff enough for settling him in and making him feel part of something”

“Our daughter got the Golden Ticket when she was offered a place here. A very special place. Thank you.”

“An absolutely wonderful nurturing school. Staff go above and beyond we have never felt so supported”

“An amazing school”

“Coombe House has made the most amazing difference to all our lives, but especially my daughter who is now thriving! It really is like hitting the education jackpot! Thank you to all of you”

“Amazing school. Not only a wonderful support for our children, but also to us parents. Thank you for all you do.”

- 2.6 Further information about the Coombe House School outcomes feature within the attached annual performance report.

3. Commercial and Community Activities

- 3.1 The community swimming has returned to typical numbers following the seasonal closure of the Shaftesbury Lido. Membership continues to rise, and the Company consistently receives positive feedback from users.
- 3.2 Our partnership with a local swimming lesson provider continues to develop, with them now increasing their high-quality offer to local residents.

3.3 Our arrangement with a local primary school has been extended, meaning local children continue to have access to local high-quality facilities in which to experience their school swimming lessons.

3.4 The Company has liaised with other potential users, who have shown an interest in hiring the pool for the benefit of the local community.

4. **Business Plan Implementation**

4.1 The Company is working closely with colleagues at Dorset Council to review the impact of the updated indicative timeline for the capital investment required for the future phases of growth set out within its business plan.

4.2 The Company has been modelling the impact of the changes to ensure that it can continue to offer stable high-quality services alongside an attractive value for money proposition.

4.3 The Company is carefully following the announcements from central government, and other peripheral organisations about their evaluations of the current SEND landscape and potential plans to bring improvement.

4.4 Reports from the Local Government Association, the National Audit Office, the Association of Directors of Children's Services and the Department of Education are being scrutinised to ensure that the work of the Company continues to be aligned with emerging national strategy.

4.5 The recent government budget had some impact on the implementation of the Company's business plan, namely the additional employers' national insurance contributions, and the new requirements regarding VAT and independent schools. The Company is taking all necessary steps to prepare for and adapt to these changes.

4.6 The Company has begun to prepare its next five-year business plan, which will demonstrate how it is adapting to the changing national and local context.

5. **HR**

5.1 The Company continues to have success with its recruitment efforts. Potential staff are carefully selected and then offered high-quality induction and ongoing training. Surveys are undertaken to ensure that areas for further improvement are explored.

6. **Capital Investment**

6.1 The Company is aware that the Shareholder is considering further capital investment into the site to allow the Company to fulfil its business plan.

- 6.2 The Company welcomed the opportunity to explore this important work with the Council at a recent strategy meeting, where there was a shared commitment to ensure investment was well-planned and efficiently scoped.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1 The Company has now received its final audited accounts for financial year 2023/24, which have been shared with the Shareholder. The audit was a positive experience for the Company and reinforced its position that its financial systems and oversight are robust and effective.

- 7.2 Within the current financial year, performance continues to be strong, with a recent mid-year reforecast predicting a positive outturn compared to budget.

- 7.3 A number of factors will have an impact on the longer-term finances of the Company. The changes to how VAT is applied to independent schools, employers' national insurance contributions increasing and central government decisions about changes to teachers' pay are being considered alongside the new timeline for capital investment to create a new context in which to operate. The Company's work to model these changes have been positive and there is optimism that the Company will be able to adapt well to the new parameters.

8. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

- 8.1 The Company has set out its latest work on the natural environment, climate and ecology within its attached annual performance report.

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.