

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

9 March 2026

Report from Chair of Board For Review and Consultation

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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 School continues to successfully grow its pupil roll in partnership with Council commissioners.
- 2.2 Governance continues to be strong, with the recent School Quality Committee focussing on:
 - 2.2.1 The new Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy, which provides greater clarity and consistency for those wanting to understand curriculum approach.

- 2.2.2 The recent Wiltshire Safeguarding Audit, which was positive and highlighted many areas of strength.
 - 2.2.3 The impact of 'Therapeutic Thinking', the new framework for our relational approach to meeting individual pupil needs.
 - 2.2.4 New government guidance around the use of mobile phones in schools.
 - 2.2.5 New government guidance around the use of 'reasonable force'.
 - 2.2.6 Provision for Art, Design and Technology, and ICT / Coding.
- 2.3 There continues to be an aspirational range of externally accredited qualifications, with further examinations sat in this reporting period. Functional Skills and Entry Level qualifications in English and Maths have been gained, marking real progress for many of our pupils. Provision for pupils who find attendance extremely challenging have also been included in the planning for exams, with many of these pupils excelling due to the personalised support they have received.
- 2.4 There have been several 'Meet the Team' events, where parents / carers have been invited to meet members of the Therapy Team, and our Farm Manager, to learn more about what they do and why. Feedback has been extremely positive.
- 2.5 Pupils who are considering their transition to Post-16 education have been supported to visit several local mainstream colleges. This has provided them the opportunity to make an informed choice about whether to stay at Coombe House or return to a maintained setting.
- 2.6 There has been a focussed period of partnership working with the Council's SEND Transport department, where opportunities to drive efficiency and improve communication will help control both quality and cost.
- 2.7 The School's open day, held on 11 December 2025, for parents / carers was a success, with over 100 visitors attending, representing 60 of our pupils.
- 2.8 After a competitive tendering process, a new catering provider started providing school meals in January 2026. The new service has a focus on linking high-quality nutrition and learning / behaviour. Pupils and staff have already noticed improvements in quality and are keen to invest in this important partnership going forward.
- 3. **White Paper**
 - 3.1 The Company is mindful that the new white paper 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' could have an impact on how it delivers value to the Council and the families of Dorset. It is ready to work collaboratively and help the Council to

deliver on the detailed SEND reforms, both through the delivery of high-quality, low-cost school placements, but also with the rollout of the broader inclusive approach described.

4. Commercial and Community Activities

- 4.1 The Company's community swimming offer continues to be popular and well-supported.
- 4.2 The Company continues to explore options to open more of its leisure facilities to the community, with various business models being explored.
- 4.3 Some of the commercial and community activities, including for leisure, which have been scoped by the Company are being considered within the Council's options appraisal.

5. Business Plan Implementation

- 5.1 The Company is engaging with the Council's external consultant that is leading the options appraisal process that aims to identify the optimal next steps for the Coombe House project.

6. HR

- 6.1 The HR team continue to prioritise recruitment and retention, wellbeing and careful management of HR casework.
- 6.2 A staff survey was completed in November and December 2025, and the results are being used to ensure there are ongoing improvements to staff experiences.
- 6.3 The People and Remuneration Committee continue to provide effective support and challenge, to ensure that patterns are identified, and risks are mitigated.
- 6.4 The Company is aware of the changes to HR legislation and has already taken effective steps to plan for their effective implementation.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1 As we approach the end of the financial year, the Company is operating ahead of budget and reforecast.
- 7.2 There have been useful conversations with the Council about how the Company can offer optimal value for money in the short, medium and long term.
- 7.3 The Company is progressing its budget writing process for the financial year 2026/27 and has welcomed clarifications and support from the Council.

7.4 The Finance, Audit and Risk Committee continues to offer effective oversight.

8. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

8.1 The Company continues to work with Wiltshire Council to maximise the environmental and broader benefit from its (Farming in Protected Landscapes) FIPL grant funding.

8.2 Work to develop the meadows within the grounds, and work to establish a woodland management plan are set to increase the sustainability and biodiversity of our campus.

8.3 Work to increase the efficiency of the biomass and solar panel plant are starting to show pleasing returns, with a lower draw on non-sustainable power sources now being required.

9. Well-being and Health Implications

9.1 The Company continues to prioritise the health and wellbeing of the members of its community and carefully monitors the feedback we receive in this regard.

Other Implications

10.1 No other implications have been identified.

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.

Appendices

13.1 None

Background Papers

14.1 None