

Dorset Centre of Excellence Shareholder Committee

15 June 2026

Report from Chair of Board For Review and Consultation

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.

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 Coombe House School (the School) continues to successfully grow its pupil roll in partnership with Council commissioners. Plans to manage the intake for the new 2026/27 academic year are well-advanced. Additional spaces have been created as a result of some of our post 16 pupils developing plans to transition to less-supported placements in mainstream colleges. The Company considers this to be a positive outcome and the impact of the positive work of the School.

- 2.2 The School is experiencing another positive season of its pupils sitting external examinations. Some pupils are being entered for accreditation for the first time. We look forward to the results being published.
- 2.3 A range of extra-curricular activities are being planned. With the School's first residential trip taking place in June 2026, along with trips to Longleat in partnership with the Rotary Club, and expeditions as part of the Duke of Edinburgh scheme.
- 2.4 The annual Summer Sports Day events are being planned, with personalised, differentiated activities allowing the vast majority of our pupils to engage and thrive.
- 2.5 The School is managing the recent changes to statutory and non-statutory guidance updated by central government. Updates to the guidance surrounding the Independent School Standards are being implemented, along with changes to the guidance surrounding the use of mobile phones in schools, and the use of physical interventions in educational settings.

3. **White Paper**

- 3.1 The Company continues to interpret the implications of the SEND White Paper and is working closely with the Council to plan for the upcoming changes.
- 3.2 Opportunities to support the Council with their implementation plans are being explored. To this end, the Company is pleased to have been invited to be part of the Dorset Inclusive Education Alliance, where it hopes it can be an effective partner in the development and implementation of the Local SEND Reform Plan.

4. **Commercial and Community Activities**

- 4.1 On 7 June 2026 Coombe House Farm is participating in 'Open Farm Sunday', a national scheme allowing free access to farming environments for local communities. Various workshops, educational trails and family-focussed activities have been planned.
- 4.2 Work to further the community access to our leisure facilities, with successful swim school pilots allowing high quality swim tuition for the local community being reviewed.

5. **Business Plan Implementation**

- 5.1 The Company has welcomed the opportunities to contribute to the forward planning for the Coombe House campus, which is required for it to implement the next stage of its business plan.

6. HR

- 6.1 The Company is currently recruiting for September 2026, which for educational organisations is typically one of the busiest times for starters and leavers.
- 6.2 The Company continues to carefully monitor staff engagement and was pleased that its recent staff survey showed an improvement in this metric over time.
- 6.3 The HR team have successfully led a series of line management training sessions, which have been well received and are proving impactful.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1 The Company ended the 2025/26 financial year ahead of budget and forecast, continuing a now established pattern of strong financial management.
- 7.2 The independent audit of our year-end accounts has begun with the on-site element taking place in June 2026. Once published, the findings will be shared in line with the Shareholder Agreement.
- 7.3 The Company continues to demonstrate its commitment to offer high quality and excellent value when delivering services to the Council.

8. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

- 8.1 Work to further benefit from the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FIPL) grant funding managed by Wiltshire Council continues to progress. Using this funding, Coombe House Farm has installed rainwater harvesting, additional polytunnels and wooden cabins to provide working spaces for both pupils at Coombe House School and members of the community.
- 8.2 The Company continues to explore partnerships to optimise the management of its forests and woodlands. Commissioning a land agent and re-applying for the necessary felling licences will allow for works to commence that will increase the biodiversity and sustainability of these important environments.
- 8.3 The Company's use of its solar and biomass provisions has increased as the servicing and maintenance of these becomes more efficient.
- 8.4 The Company is reviewing the impact of the apparent increase in the regularity of 'extreme heat events' and works it may need to commission to ensure that any necessary adaptations are implemented.

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.

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 None