ISI Independent Schools Inspectorate

School inspection report

15 to 17 September 2026

South Devon Steiner School

Hood Manor

Dartington

Totnes

TQ9 6AB

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. School trustees and leaders at all levels work in close collaboration. They ensure that they consistently promote pupils' wellbeing, together with the school's distinctive ethos and philosophy. Pupils' emotional and mental wellbeing is central to decision-making. As a result, leaders have created a school with a warm, supportive atmosphere in which pupils feel secure and happy, and can flourish.

2. Leaders have the knowledge and skills to ensure that school policies meet the Standards. While the policies in place reflect current guidance accurately, leaders do not always check the detailed application of their policy expectations or the understanding that staff have of the policies that they need to implement. This includes staff in the early years. Some minor errors in completing the single central record of appointments (SCR), linked to the accurate recording of qualification checks on new staff, were corrected during the inspection.

3. The required information for parents, including a suitable complaints procedure, is available on the school's website.

4. Leaders have established positive working relationship with other agencies. They ensure that the local authority is provided with required information as needed, including on attendance and on the funding for pupils who have education and health care plans (EHC plans).

5. Leaders have established a broad curriculum that successfully meets the Standards. The curriculum is based on the Steiner philosophy of child development. It emphasises learning through practical activities to support academic material

6. The curriculum is appropriate for all pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Pupils are supported effectively. As a result, they make good progress from their starting points.

7. Teachers typically have robust subject knowledge. Most set high expectations for pupils' learning. They manage their classrooms well and plan lessons effectively to build on pupils' prior knowledge. Pupils are eager to learn, are self-motivated and responsible, and achieve well.

8. The personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) programme meets pupils' needs effectively. Relationships and sex-education (RSE) is provided as part of PSHE provision. Topics for RSE are taught at age-appropriate points in pupils' learning.

9. Leaders implement the policies to support pupils' attendance and registration effectively. They maintain contact with the local authority as required.

10. Pupils understand the school's expectations with regard to their behaviour. Their relationships with each other are consistently respectful. They know that bullying in any form is unacceptable. Should it happen, it is dealt with promptly by staff.

11. Arrangements for the safety of the premises, including measures for fire prevention, are well managed. Provision for first aid is appropriate.

12. The curriculum teaches pupils to value and respect the right to personal liberty within a civilised society. They understand the importance of respect for the law, for the good of all in a community.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are met.
- Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society are met.
- Standards relating to safeguarding are met.

Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- strengthen procedures for checking systematically that the details of statutory requirements are consistently applied
- ensure that training is fully effective so that all staff, including those in the early years, understand current statutory requirements and how to implement them
- ensure that recruitment processes adhere to all requirements and that the outcomes of checks are correctly recorded on the single central record of appointments.

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Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

13. Trustees and leaders at all levels work in close collaboration to maintain the school's distinctive ethos and philosophy. They promote pupils' wellbeing consistently effectively. Leaders link their decision-making closely to supporting pupils' emotional and mental wellbeing. Pupils flourish in the school's warm, supportive atmosphere in which they feel happy and secure.

14. Leaders have the knowledge and skills to ensure that policies meet the requirements of the Standards. They incorporate the recent changes in guidance. Occasionally, they have not checked fully what this means in practice in the school. Consequently, some small errors in implementation of the expectations occurred, such as in the management of information recorded on the SCR. This did not compromise pupils' safety and was corrected in the course of the inspection. Overall, practice across the school meets the Standards, including in the early years. At times, however, this is because staff react promptly when issues are pointed out, rather than applying their knowledge of the Standards from the outset.

15. Trustees receive thorough and helpful termly reports from school leaders. These, alongside their regular school visits assure them that the Standards are met consistently. Trustees work closely with school leaders. Together, they ensure that the school's values are maintained when considering any future developments.

16. Leaders have a solid understanding of risk management. They act promptly and appropriately when they identify safety risks on the school site. Risk assessments for school-based activities and for educational trips are thorough. Leaders are alert to any risks that may emerge in the school community. They act appropriately through suitable action plans to manage any risks which could potentially impact negatively on pupils' wellbeing. Leaders form helpful working relationships with local agencies, for example, in creating supportive arrangements for pupils who have education and health care plans (EHC plans). They inform the local authority promptly when a pupil joins or leaves the school at a non-standard transition point.

17. The school's website provides all the required information for parents of current and prospective pupils. Regular newsletters keep parents up to date with school events. Parents have regular meetings with class teachers, including private discussions. They receive informative written reports so that they are well informed about their child's academic progress and personal development.

18. There is a suitable complaints policy that meets requirements. School leaders take all complaints from parents seriously. As required, they resolve these within the stated time frame. Leaders also reflect on lessons to be learnt from formal complaints. They take appropriate actions to prevent any reoccurrence.

19. Leaders ensure that all pupils, including those who have SEND, have equal access to the curriculum and the support they need to make good progress. There is an appropriate plan to continue to improve access to the curriculum over a specific three-year period. The plan identifies improvements to access to the premises within the constraints of a listed building. The requirements of the Equality Act 2010 are met as a result.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

20. The curriculum meets the regulatory requirements in a structure that reflects the distinctive Steiner philosophy. . A broad range of subjects is taught in a topic-based approach that covers all the required areas of learning thematically.

21. Pupils develop their literacy and numeracy skills. In the daily session known as the 'main lesson', pupils in each class develop their understanding of a specific topic, such as farming or astronomy. In these sessions, pupils apply their skills across the range of subjects, including sciences and humanities. Their technological understanding grows through dedicated lessons in handwork, woodwork, metalwork and gardening. Information and communication technology (ICT) is introduced in Class 8, which is for pupils in Year 9. Lessons consistently draw on and develop pupils' personal creativity. Teaching methods consistently use practical tasks and art and music as essential aspects of pupils' learning. Specific lessons in art and music further develop pupils' skills in these areas.

22. In the early years, the curriculum supports the development of children's oral communication and language skills effectively. Children are articulate. They speak confidently about their activities. Formal teaching of phonics, reading, writing and mathematical operations begin in Class 1, which supports pupils in the Year 2 age range.

23. Pupils may choose to take GCSE examinations in English and mathematics if they wish. Most of those who choose to do so achieve results at Grade 4 or above. The oldest pupils follow a three-year externally assessed course leading to the New Zealand Certificate in Steiner Education (NZCSE). This can support university entrance. Many pupils achieve well, gaining commendations or distinctions.

24. Teachers are alert to any signs that a pupil is struggling in class. They liaise with parents and leaders with responsibility for pupils who have SEND to discuss appropriate support and next steps. This may include the creation of an individual education plan that identifies specific strategies to support individual pupils' progress. Planning to meet the needs of pupils who have an EHC plan is thorough. Teachers are skilled at adapting tasks to help pupils to access the curriculum. They provide discreet additional support in the classroom. Regular assessments help teachers to monitor the effectiveness of this support and whether further adaptation is needed. As a result, pupils who have SEND make good progress from their starting points.

25. The few pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) need little additional support in class. Teachers provide further explanation of material as needed.

26. Teachers stay with the same class as pupils move from Class 1 (Year 2) through to Class 5 (Year 6) They are responsible for most of the subject teaching to their class until Class 5 (Year 6). At this point, some specialist teaching is introduced. Most teachers have confident subject knowledge. They are skilful in ensuring that the needs of all pupils in the class are met. They use practical activities to help pupils' understanding. These reflect the Steiner mantra of learning through 'hand, head and heart'. They plan lessons that challenge and intrigue pupils. Teachers encourage a spirit of enquiry and remind pupils of fundamental values, such as respect and tolerance. Most teachers set high expectations for their pupils. Occasionally, however, aspirations for pupils are too low. Sometimes, teachers are not consistently effective in using strategies that both engage pupils' attention and encourage pupils to think for themselves. Most teachers manage classroom behaviour well,

balancing gentleness with firmness. In a few lessons, however, inattention and distracted behaviour go unnoticed, and this hinders some pupils' progress.

27. Assessment is used at regular points throughout the term. Teachers and leaders track pupils' progress effectively using the school's system. They analyse the information gathered to identify any concerns related to groups or individual pupils. Teachers use assessment outcomes effectively to plan lessons that meet individual pupils' needs, and which encourage pupils to achieve their potential.

28. Pupils are motivated and responsible learners. They are supportive of each other and settle to work sensibly. They are quick to question and ask their teachers for clarification when they need to. They listen carefully, absorbing new information swiftly. Their enthusiasm is evident, for example, in their exclamations of astonishment when discovering new astronomical facts. This is also shown in their excitement in using their understanding of geometry to create three-dimensional mathematical patterns. Their pleasure in discovering new facts and applying their knowledge results in a positive atmosphere. This benefits the learning for all pupils in the class.

Section 3: Pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

29. Leaders consistently emphasise the importance of respect for everyone as unique individuals. This is evident in pupils' positive relationships with each other. Their interactions are characterised by kindness and mutual support. Children in the early years share and take turns in activities. They help each other spontaneously. Older pupils understand that everyone learns in different ways. They are respectful of the rights and needs of those in the class who have SEND.

30. The curriculum reflects a deep respect for the natural world. Children and pupils explore the school's rural setting. They use natural resources in practical work. From their earliest days in the school, pupils learn outdoors as well as in indoor classrooms. They absorb an awareness of the rhythm of the seasons through outdoor activities and value the beauty of their surroundings. Their appreciation of, and care for, the natural environment support their understanding of the importance of spiritual and non-material values.

31. Leaders encourage pupils to discover and be proud of their own abilities. The curriculum provides regular opportunities for pupils to speak and perform in public. Consequently, pupils develop considerable self-confidence. Teachers' consistent encouragement further helps pupils to develop their self-esteem. Pupils know that they and their opinions are valued by the adults around them. This helps them to value themselves.

32. The physical education (PE) curriculum helps pupils of all ages to develop physical co-ordination and their personal fitness. The school's ethos focuses on raising pupils' awareness of physical health, rather than on developing skills in specific sports or success in competitive games. Pupils enjoy opportunities to play team games such as football or basketball. Formal games lessons help older pupils develop their skills as well as their personal fitness. Older pupils learn the positive impact of physical activity on their mental health and the importance of healthy eating.

33. Teachers ensure that children in early years learn the importance of personal and dental hygiene. Children develop their gross-motor skills through climbing, vigorous activities the garden and moving equipment around to create obstacle courses. Careful teaching enables them to be confident in undertaking risky activities, such as using knives to chop apples and using a press to extract juice. Activities that include threading, weaving and drawing help to develop their fine-motor skills.

34. Leaders place a high priority on the teaching of PSHE. Through this, they provide pupils with a firm foundation of skills to support healthy relationships and self-knowledge. Topics covered include substance misuse, risky behaviours and mental health. Older pupils learn how to keep themselves safe when working online. Teaching on internet safety includes understanding of the dangers of misinformation and disinformation.

35. The curriculum for RSE reflects requirements. Parents were consulted in making the necessary recent changes. Topics taught at age-appropriate points include the changes that come with puberty and the importance of consent in healthy relationships.

36. Leaders set clear behavioural expectations that the pupils respect. This includes accepting that mobile phones are not used in school. Teaching in PSHE covers the unacceptability of bullying, including harassment and use of derogatory language based on gender or sexual orientation. Pupils

understand that such behaviour is contrary to the school's ethos of respectful and thoughtful relationships. Should any unacceptable behaviour be reported, it is managed appropriately by staff in accordance with the school's policies.

37. There is an appropriate policy on the use of restrictive practice and reasonable force in the school. Staff understand what they need to do, but they have not had to apply any such sanctions in practice.

38. Admission and attendance registers are correctly maintained. Leaders responsible for these understand the most recent requirements. They ensure that these are met. Arrangements to create the required single time for registration were put in place during the inspection. Leaders work effectively with parents should a pupil's attendance cause concern.

39. Health and safety measures are thorough. Premises are clean and well maintained. There are clear procedures for the prevention of fire. Regular evacuation drills are carried out. First aid provision is suitable and appropriate numbers of staff are trained in first aid. Staff who work in the early years have the paediatric first aid training required.

40. Duty rotas ensure that there are suitable numbers of staff on duty at all times. This means that all areas of the school are appropriately supervised during breaktimes. Children in the early years are always within sight and hearing of adults. Staff are vigilant while supervising the children eating and are alert to the danger of choking.

Section 4: Pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

41. The thematic approach to teaching in the daily 'Main Lesson' enables pupils to form an understanding of how human societies and attitudes have developed over time. This includes, for example, through discussions of how understanding of scientific phenomena has developed, or changing attitudes to sexuality. Annual overseas trips for older pupils give them first-hand insight into other cultures.

42. Leaders use assemblies to reinforce pupils' understanding of the importance of respect and acceptance of others' beliefs and cultural traditions. Teaching ensure that pupils learn about different faith traditions and people's rights to their faith and personal liberty. The core value of accepting each person's right to be respected as a unique individual underpins all aspects of school life, and is fully embraced by pupils.

43. Building an awareness of different career paths starts to be formalised in Class 7 (Year 8). Pupils in Class 8 (Year 9) have individual discussions with teachers of Class 9 (Year 10) to discuss the options available in the upper school and how these align with their own interests and aspirations. The school organises a three-week work placement in an agricultural setting for all pupils in Class 9. Discussions with pupils on their personal aspirations and abilities continue as they move into the next classes. This focus includes visits from employers and entrepreneurs in a range of careers. Additional work experience in Class 11 (Year 12) and attendance at fairs run by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) provide pupils with further insight. Pupils are supported in making their application for the next stage of their education, whether they wish to move school to take more formal academic qualifications, or to apply for an apprenticeship or to university.

44. Pupils understand the core values that are fundamental to modern British society. They know that these align closely with the school's values of respect and tolerance. Discussions in PSHE help pupils to understand that legal structures work within society, for example, the legal issues surrounding drug misuse and the importance of the laws on equality and inclusivity. They learn that this country's political system is democratic and that this gives all the right and opportunity to influence the way the country is governed. Pupils experience democracy in school in the work of the school council, and in the way in which teachers routinely ask for their opinions.

45. Pupils have a well-developed sense of mutual responsibility. They take pride in the presentation of their work and in keeping the school tidy and free from litter. Pupils in Class 8 each adopt a pupil in Class 1 as a 'buddy'. They form supportive relationships that continue through the years. Pupils lead the school council, encouraging their peers to become involved so as to improve school life for all.

46. Financial awareness develops in mathematic lessons and in PSHE sessions for older pupils, who learn about the realities of taxation and managing a bank account. Pupils run stalls for school fairs, managing the finances of these to raise money for improvements within the school. On some overseas trips, pupils involve themselves in activities to support the community they are visiting, drawing on their own creativity for the benefit of others.

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Safeguarding

47. Leaders have established a robust culture of safeguarding. Policies are appropriate. They reflect the most recent statutory requirements. Trustees undertake an annual review of the policy. They draw on information provided by school leaders so that they can be assured that safeguarding procedures are thorough and protect pupils effectively.

48. Suitably trained senior members of staff act as safeguarding leaders. They provide appropriate points of contact across the school. They provide formal training annually for all staff, supporting this with regular updates in briefings and staff meetings.

49. The thoroughness of the training ensures that staff have a clear understanding of the importance of safeguarding and of their responsibilities. The pastoral structure of the school supports teachers' close understanding of their pupils. This means that they can identify emerging signs of concerns. Staff take prompt action and follow procedures correctly. They understand the importance of reporting concerns about pupils or about any adults working in the school.

50. Safeguarding leaders maintain clear records of concerns and of the actions taken in response. These records are confidential and stored appropriately. Leaders have formed positive working relationships with local agencies. They use these links to secure wider support for pupils and their families as necessary.

51. While pupils have tightly limited access to ICT within the school, leaders understand that many pupils will be using ICT at home. Consequently, they ensure that the curriculum includes teaching about internet safety at an earlier stage. Trustees and leaders have established thorough internet filtering and monitoring systems within the school. They monitor these regularly and test the robustness of these systems annually.

52. Processes for the recruitment of staff are rigorous. No one is allowed to start work in the school before the required checks are completed. Trustees and leaders oversee the recruitment process. However, there were some misunderstandings about the requirement to retain evidence of staff qualifications and how to record these correctly on the SCR. These errors were corrected during the inspection.

53. Pupils know the names of the safeguarding leaders. They are clear that they can approach these leaders, or any member of staff, for help should they need support. They form trusting relationships with their class teachers and class guardians. They know that staff will do their best to help if they are worried.

School details

School	South Devon Steiner School
Department for Education number	879/6029
Registered charity number	286434
Address	South Devon Steiner School Hood Manor Dartington Totnes Devon TQ9 6AB
Phone number	01803 897377
Email address	enquiries@sdsteiner.org
Website	www.southdevonsteinerschool.org
Proprietor	The Rudolph Steiner School (South Devon) Ltd
Chair	Mr Robert Worthington
Headteacher	Mr Jeffrey van Zyl
Age range	2 to 19
Number of pupils	229
Date of previous inspection	19 to 21 September 2023

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Information about the school

54. South Devon Steiner school is a co-educational day school for pupils aged 2 to 19. The school provides education based on the educational philosophies of Rudolf Steiner. It is a member of the Steiner Waldorf School Fellowship. The school occupies a rural location close to Totnes in South Devon. The school was previously inspected by Ofsted. This is the first full inspection of the school by ISI.

55. The school extends the early years provision to include children up to the age of six. There are 36 children in the kindergarten. They are taught in two separate classes, one for children aged two to four and the second for those aged four to six.

56. The school has identified 79 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. A small number of pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.

57. The school has identified English as an additional language for four pupils.

58. The school states its aims are to foster pupils' intellectual, social and emotional growth as they mature. Its intention is to encourage creativity, independent thinking and nurture empathy, respect and resilience.

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Inspection details

Inspection dates	15 to 17 September 2026

59. A team of three inspectors visited the school for two and a half days. The on-site inspection was quality assured by a monitor.

60. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods and assemblies
- discussions with the chair and other governors
- discussions with the headteacher, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work including with staff and pupils
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

61. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

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How are association independent schools in England inspected?

- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit **www.isi.net**.

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