

## Executive Summary

### Steiner Waldorf: Distance Travelled – An Evaluative Review of Progress from 2018–2024

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This executive summary presents key findings and insights from an independent review commissioned by Waldorf UK and conducted by Dr. Carla Solvason, Dr. Angela Hodgkins, and Samantha Sutton-Tsang from the University of Worcester. The report examines the progress made by Steiner Waldorf (SW) schools in the United Kingdom between 2018 and 2024, primarily through the lens of Ofsted and Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) reports, but also through qualitative data collected through interviews with senior leaders at Waldorf UK. The objectives were to:

- determine the extent of development in key performance areas
- identify the measures taken to bring about change.

#### Context and Rationale

This review follows a turbulent period for SW schools following harsh inspection findings in 2018 and 2019 that drew widespread media attention and public scrutiny. At that time, Ofsted cited serious concerns in safeguarding, leadership, curriculum clarity, and teaching quality across many SW schools. These inspections led to negative headlines, significant reputational damage, and the consequential closure of many schools<sup>1</sup>.

In proactive response Waldorf UK commissioned a review of their curriculum by Richard Pountney. This review highlighted the need for:

- Greater transparency in curriculum design
- Better articulation of pedagogical values
- Improved alignment with the English national curriculum
- Development of impact measurement tools
- Stronger external communication of SW's benefits

Notably, Pountney's review did not address safeguarding, a core failure area identified by Ofsted, but this became a central focus of reform in subsequent years.

#### Leadership and Governance Transformation

Post-2019, a number of schools initiated structural reforms to address systemic weaknesses. Key to these was a transition from flat, non-hierarchical governance to more standardised models through appointing head teachers and senior leadership teams. In September 2019, Waldorf UK appointed an Executive Director and an Education Co-ordinator with both mainstream and Steiner backgrounds, forming a new Executive Group.

This team aided positive change through approaches such as:

- Supporting leadership teams through regular coaching and online forums
- Offering training on Ofsted preparedness and conflict-of-interest management
- Facilitating engagement with school improvement partners
- Maintaining a productive dialogue with Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE).

These efforts, amongst others, contributed to rapid cultural and operational shifts. These were reflected in the markedly more positive inspection reports published between 2021 and 2024. Thirteen of these inspections reported a 'good' rating in leadership and management.

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<sup>1</sup> There were 31 SW schools operating in the UK in 2019 and just 17, and one academy remained in 2024.

## **How Was Change Brought About?**

### **Safeguarding Improvements**

Perhaps the most dramatic improvement was in safeguarding. In 2018–2019, safeguarding failures were a near-universal theme in inspection reports. By contrast, none of the 13 schools inspected between 2022 and 2023 had concerns in this area.

The safeguarding strategy focused on changing attitudes rather than simply enforcing compliance. Training sessions redefined the concept of risk and dismantled the notion of SW schools as “safe bubbles.” Teachers were trained to interpret and report early signs of harm, and new reporting systems such as CPOMS and My Concern were adopted. Schools also restructured staff-parent relationships to avoid blurred boundaries that could compromise judgement. Clear accountability structures and ongoing staff development underpinned a cultural shift from informal safeguarding to systematic, embedded vigilance.

### **Teaching and Curriculum Development**

A core area of transformation was teaching and learning. Earlier inspections criticised inadequate teaching quality, poor sequencing, and a lack of phonics instruction. By 2023, most schools received positive evaluations for curriculum planning, teaching quality, and student outcomes-particularly in literacy, mathematics, and the arts.

A new curriculum framework, co-developed with Waldorf academic Dr. Martyn Rawson, supported schools in articulating their pedagogy more clearly. This included:

- A seven-part learning process aligned with SW philosophy
- Introduction of phonics through the “Sounds Write” programme
- Integration of creative maths via “Math for Love”
- A digital planning tool supporting cross-curricular teaching and assessment.

This shift allowed teachers to describe their methods in a way that was more accessible to inspectors, bridging the gap between Steiner pedagogy and more familiar notions of teaching.

### **Assessment and Differentiation**

In response to previous criticisms around assessment, Waldorf UK introduced “point in time” assessments, recorded in classroom-based “purple folders.” These focused on a child’s trajectory rather than comparative, data-heavy tracking. Pupil progress meetings replaced data reviews with professional conversations about individual learners, aligning with SW values whilst also meeting inspection criteria.

The curriculum now features age-related opportunities framed as experiential actions (for example, “explore,” “encounter,” “practise”) and disconnected from rigid age expectations. This format supports differentiated instruction while preserving the holistic principles of Steiner education.

### **SEND and Inclusion**

Earlier reports revealed low expectations and inconsistent provision for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Since 2019, major progress has been made in this area. Most schools now employ qualified SENDCos, have access to SEND hubs, and training has been provided on early identification, neurodiversity, and inclusive pedagogy.

Inspection reports now highlight SEND provision as a strength, citing “expertly delivered” support and inclusive learning environments. Schools also refined their admissions policies to assess whether they could meet children’s needs, and developed transparent communication strategies with families regarding SEND support.

## **School Culture and Behaviour**

Positive shifts in school culture were widely noted. The transition from reports of bullying and poor behaviour to the recognition of respectful, cooperative pupils is striking. In later reports 14 out of 16 schools were rated 'good' or 'outstanding' for behaviour and attitudes.

Changes included:

- Stronger PSHE and pastoral programmes
- Trauma-informed practice and behaviour training
- Improved parent-school communication.

Although early inspections may have misunderstood aspects of SW classroom dynamics, subsequent training and clearer articulation have helped bridge that interpretive gap.

## **Collaborative Culture and CPD**

A new culture of collaboration across SW schools was nurtured to replace the previous guardedness of some schools. This was encouraged through over 100 CPD sessions, regular network meetings, and leadership development conferences. This shared learning environment has fostered a more collective understanding of pedagogy, curriculum delivery, and inspection readiness, as well as greater openness and sharing between schools.

## **Initial Teacher Training Reform**

Historically, SW teacher training lacked rigour, with little formal assessment or safeguarding rigour. Waldorf UK addressed this by developing Steiner-specific teacher standards, accrediting training programmes with Bath Spa University/Waldorf Learning Foundation and University of Buckingham/Emerson College, who launched respectively two postgraduate diplomas, one for qualified teachers and one for graduates entering via apprenticeships. These new pathways ensure that new teachers are not only philosophically aligned with SW values but also professionally equipped to meet national standards.

## **Conclusion and Next Steps**

The progress demonstrated between 2018 and 2024 represents a significant educational transformation. SW schools have not only addressed historical failings but have also redefined how they maintain the integrity of Steiner pedagogy while meeting modern regulatory and educational expectations.

Moving forward, this report identifies key areas for ongoing development, drawn from the latest inspection reports:

- Continuing to refine assessment practices and the use of data
- A particular focus upon EAL provision whilst continuing to enhance SEND provision
- A review of how and when technology is introduced in schools
- Continued support for teachers in understanding and articulating the coherent nature of the curriculum
- A further expansion of extracurricular opportunities to meet a wider range of interests
- The continuation of robust CPD and teacher preparation.

It is not assumed that all will be adopted, in some cases Waldorf UK may choose to articulate their reasons for alternative action, instead.

In summary, SW schools have travelled a remarkable distance in a relatively short amount of time. They have transformed criticism into constructive action and in doing so rebuilt public, parental, and professional confidence. The actions taken by Waldorf UK provide a compelling model for how independent schools can respond to external accountability while preserving their unique educational identities.