

# The Core Elements of The School Completion Programme



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## Foreword

The School Completion Programme (SCP) is a Department of Education and Science programme that aims to have a significant positive impact on levels of young people's retention in primary and second level schools and on numbers of pupils who successfully complete the Senior cycle, or equivalent.

There are currently 124 SCP projects in operation delivering a range of in-school, after school, out-of-school and holiday supports to young people identified at risk of early school leaving. SCP projects, through their annual Retention Plans, continue to implement a range of flexible, age-appropriate interventions grounded in experience and best practice.

The 'Core Elements' consultation process, initiated by the SCP Co-ordination Team in May 2008, began with the aim of ensuring that supports and interventions delivered by local SCP projects were in keeping with identified international research on what works best to retain young people at risk of early school leaving in the formal education system. One of the main outcomes that emerged out of the process is that supports implemented by local projects closely match those identified in international research.

Another important finding to emerge from the process is that SCP delivers supports and interventions, in the main, outside the classroom setting. SCP projects do not duplicate services already in existence within the education system. In the area of literacy and numeracy, for example, SCP personnel support and enhance current provision. In other areas, such as home visitation, SCP personnel support the relevant services only where and when there is local agreement to do so.

We hope that this report on The Core Elements of the School Completion Programme serves as a useful tool to the range of educational stakeholders interested in what interventions work best to support young people at risk of early school leaving.

We would also like to thank everybody who contributed to the 'Core Elements' consultation process. Your feedback is vital for the ongoing development of the School Completion Programme.

Finally, we would like to thank Dr. Maeve Martin for her contribution to the process. Your insight was invaluable.

With thanks,

**The School Completion Programme National Co-ordination Team.**

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

What are the core elements / most effective strategies for supporting young people at risk of early school leaving? Can projects or initiatives that support young people at risk of early school leaving know exactly what interventions will work for all the young people that they support? These are some of the questions that education researchers have contended with for many years (for example: Durlak & Weissberg (2007), Miller (2003), Zaff et al. (2003), Hennessy & Donnelly (2005), Pugh (1999), Halpern (1999), Harvard Family Research Project (2008)). Increasingly, projects supporting young people in marginalised settings have been asked to scientifically 'prove' the effectiveness of supports put in place to support young people at risk. However, the debate as to how best to measure the impact of interventions to support young people at risk of early school leaving continues<sup>1</sup>.

To add further knowledge to this debate, SCP projects were asked to engage with a consultation process on what might be the core elements of their projects (see Appendix I). To this end, projects were asked to engage with three questions:

1. What are the most powerful / effective interventions in your project?
2. What interventions could you not do without?
3. Are there interventions you would discontinue if you had to?

Projects were asked to discuss these questions at their mandatory 'Review Day', which is an integral part of the SCP's review and evaluation process. Through this structure, many relevant stakeholders involved with SCP were able to discuss what they regarded as the most powerful and least powerful interventions in their respective projects. Projects fed back the main conclusions of these discussions to the SCP Support Service, outlining clearly the methodologies used to ascertain the data<sup>2</sup>. The data was initially sorted under the three headings noted above, then by individual project and finally, by support type.

The conclusions of the consultation process were returned by 84 SCP projects, equating to a response rate of 68%. While a higher response rate to the questions would have equated to more generalisable findings, the author notes that a response rate of 68% was adequate and the findings that emerged are in keeping with international research on key strategies to support young people at risk of early school leaving (see Chapter 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Miller (2003) notes that the search for 'common outcomes' for measuring the success of after school programmes and educational success is elusive. Furthermore, Dryfoos (1999) notes that youth programmes, in general, create substantial evaluation challenges.

<sup>2</sup> Projects chose a number of methodologies to gather information on the three questions. These included group discussion, group work, Likert scales, questionnaires and for some projects, as part of overall project evaluations. Data was returned mainly in bullet point format.

It must also be noted that there were some limitations to the findings. While all respondents answered the first question, the second and third questions posed some difficulties for projects. A number of projects noted that the interventions that they could not do without were also the most powerful / effective interventions within the project and many projects found it difficult to differentiate between the most effective supports and the supports that the project could not do without. However, an analysis of the supports documented under question 2 compared to the supports documented under question 1 reinforces the notion that core elements / effective strategies are at work within the SCP. Question 3 was particularly difficult for projects to answer. Many projects did not return any data on this question while others noted that they would be hesitant to discontinue any supports and that those that were discontinued were done so after a rigorous process of evaluation and review. Moreover, many projects mentioned that they would like to expand and develop the supports they have rather than discontinue any of them. It is difficult, therefore, to extract general findings on which supports SCP projects would discontinue if they had to. For this reason, the findings will concentrate on the data relating primarily to questions one and two.

## Chapter 2

### International research on key strategies to support young people at risk of early school leaving

A consultation process was initiated by the SCP Support Service to ensure that the supports delivered by local projects were in keeping with strategies identified through international research as being the most effective in supporting young people at risk of early school leaving. While SCP projects have the flexibility to put in place an array of interventions to support young people at risk of early school leaving, the Support Service is mindful that interventions should be implemented in keeping with international best practice. The consultation process aimed to ascertain whether SCP projects are in line with most current research on how to prevent early school leaving.

#### Identifying key strategies within international research

Current research on early school leaving points to a number of strategies that should be adopted when putting in place an early school leaving programme. This report refers to three sources that have documented strategies to combat early school leaving:

- Brooks et al. (Australia)<sup>3</sup>.
- National Dropout Prevention Center Network (U.S.).
- National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (U.S.).

Brooks et al. developed strategies to reduce under-age leaving in Australia from survey work carried out in 1997. The authors put the following strategies forward and a number of interventions / supports that should be put in place under each strategy:

#### **Strategy 1: Provide activities to increase social skills:**

- Anger Management
- Peer mediation
- Curriculum based around independent living skills

#### **Strategy 2: Identifying and monitoring students at risk:**

- Monitoring attendance and suspension records
- Establish links with feeder primary schools to identify students at risk before they enter post-primary
- Educate general school staff how to recognise at risk signs

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (2001) *Innovation and Best Practice in Schools: Review of Literature and Practice*. Commonwealth of Australia: Australia. P. 29.

**Strategy 3: Provide activities targeted at increasing self-esteem:**

- Negotiating work contracts with students with achievable goals
- Caring and supportive environment
- Social and cultural excursions

**Strategy 4: Provide counselling to participants:**

- Case management with needs-based counselling
- Family therapy and mediation
- Referrals to support services

**Strategy 5: Strengthen home / school relations:**

- Automatic notification of parents when changes in student's attendance and / or behaviour is noticed
- Regular meetings with parents / caregivers

**Strategy 6: Provide activities to increase literacy and numeracy skills:**

- Specialist literacy and numeracy tutoring
- Temporary withdrawal with intense work on basic skills
- Flexible curriculum to cater for students' varying literacy and numeracy skills

**Strategy 7: Establish interagency links, including links with government agencies and community agencies:**

- Referral of students in local community
- Training and education on relevant topics provided by community agencies
- Membership in local interagency committees

**Strategy 8: Develop appropriate teaching methodologies / provide flexible and /or alternative curriculum:**

- Flexible timetable to fit individual student needs
- Small group work and one-to-one teaching
- Negotiate curriculum to cater for students' needs and preferences

**Strategy 9: Provide professional development for staff:**

- Workshops for school staff on managing challenging students
- Informal training for school staff by initiative staff

Brooks et al. do not make a distinction in their strategies between operational strategies (i.e. delivery of supports) and other strategies such as professional development (training) and establishing interagency links (i.e. delivery of integrated services / partnership working).

The National Dropout Prevention Center Network based in the United States published fifteen effective strategies to reduce early school leaving. There is considerable overlap between the strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center Network and the survey work by Brooks et al.

The strategies identified include:

1. **Systemic renewal:** A continuous process of evaluating goals and objectives to school policies, practices and organisational structure as they impact on a diverse group of learners.
2. **School – Community collaboration:** When all groups in a community provide collective support to the school, a strong infrastructure sustains a caring supportive environment where youth can thrive and achieve.
3. **Safe learning environments:** A comprehensive violence prevention plan, including conflict resolution, which may deal with violence as well as crisis management. A safe learning environment provides daily experiences at all grade levels, that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students.
4. **Family engagement:** Research consistently finds that family engagement has a direct, positive effect on children’s achievement and is the most accurate predictor of a student’s success in school.
5. **Early childhood education:** Birth-to-five interventions demonstrate that by providing a child with additional enrichment can enhance brain development. The most effective way to reduce the number of children who will ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of their school experience through primary grades.
6. **Early literacy development:** Early interventions to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills establish the necessary foundation for effective learning in all other subjects.
7. **Mentoring / tutoring:** Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Tutoring, also a one-to-one activity, focuses on academics and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs such as reading, writing or maths competencies.
8. **Service-learning:** Service-learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. This teaching / learning method promotes personal and social growth, career development and civic responsibility and can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels.
9. **Alternative schooling:** Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programmes paying special attention to the student’s individual special needs and academic requirements for a high school diploma.
10. **After-school opportunities:** Many schools provide after-school and summer enhancement programmes that eliminate information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Such experiences are especially important for students at risk of school failure because these programmes fill the afternoon ‘gap time’ with constructive and engaging activities.

11. **Professional development:** Teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure need to feel supported and have an avenue by which they can continue to develop skills, techniques and learn about innovative strategies.
12. **Active learning:** Active learning embraces teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process. Students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success and become lifelong learners when educators show them there are different ways to learn.
13. **Educational Technology:** Technology offers some the best of the opportunities for delivering instruction to engage students in authentic learning, addressing multiple intelligences and adapting to students' learning styles.
14. **Individualised instruction:** Each student has unique interests and past learning experiences. An individualised instructional programme for each student allows for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies to consider these individual differences.
15. **Career and Technical Education (CTE):** A quality CTE programme and a related guidance programme are essential for all students. School-to-work programmes recognise that youth need specific skills to prepare them to measure up to the larger demands of today's workplace.

The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition quote Lehr et al (2003: 18) who found that the key components of an early school leaver prevention programme include the following:

- Personal / affective (e.g. retreats designed to enhance self-esteem, regularly scheduled classroom-based discussion, individual counselling, participation in an interpersonal relations class);
- Academic (e.g. provision of special academic courses, individualised methods of instruction, tutoring);
- Family outreach (e.g. strategies that include increased feedback or home visits);
- School structure (e.g. implementation of school within a school, re-definition of the role of the homeroom teachers, reducing class size, creation of an alternative school); and
- Work related (e.g. vocational training, participation in volunteer or service programmes).

Lehr (2004: 18) also comments that:

“Given the vast array of programme types, it becomes clear that there is no one right way to intervene. Rather than searching for the perfect programme, identification of components that facilitate effectiveness may prove to be a more valuable endeavour. Identification of these key components may help guide the development of interventions, improve the likelihood of successful implementation, and serve as a useful framework for evaluating outcomes”.

## Chapter 3

### Identifying the core elements within SCP

Data emerging from the consultation process with SCP projects found the following **16 strategies**<sup>4</sup> to be the most powerful / effective within the programme listed in order of priority (number of times identified by projects noted in brackets, some projects identified more than one activity under each heading)<sup>5</sup>:

#### The Core Elements of The School Completion Programme

1. **EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES / SPORTS (91 responses)**
2. **AFTER SCHOOL CLUBS / HOMEWORK CLUBS (84 responses)**
3. **INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT / ONE – TO- ONE / KEY WORK / PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT / GROUP WORK (69 responses)**
4. **BREAKFAST CLUBS / LUNCH CLUBS / SCHOOL MEALS (61 responses)**
5. **COUNSELLING / THERAPIES (57 responses)**
6. **SUMMER PROGRAMMES / EDUCATIONAL TRIPS (53 responses)**
7. **LEARNING SUPPORT / LITERACY AND NUMERACY SUPPORT<sup>6</sup> (50 responses)**
8. **ATTENDANCE TRACKING / MONITORING / AWARDS / REWARDS (49 responses)**
9. **TRANSFER PROGRAMMES / TRANSITION / INDUCTION (35 responses)**
10. **STAFF (33 responses)**
11. **INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION / CO-OPERATION / LIASING / NETWORKING (30 responses)**
12. **FAMILY SUPPORT / HOME VISITS<sup>7</sup> (25 responses)**
13. **BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT / ANGER MANAGEMENT / SUSPENSION INTERVENTION (20 responses)**
14. **TARGETING / PRIORITISATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE AT RISK OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING (17 responses)**
15. **MENTORING (12 responses)**
16. **TRANSPORT (7 responses)**

<sup>4</sup> While the majority of projects identified distinct categories of supports, some overlap between categories did occur.

<sup>5</sup> Core Elements identified during the consultation process match closely those supports identified in the *SCP Guidelines towards Best Practice* (2005).

<sup>6</sup> **SCP personnel support and enhance the work of class teachers and Resource teachers in agreement with participating schools.**

<sup>7</sup> **Home Visitations are only carried out by SCP personnel where and when there is local agreement to do so.**

The types of supports regarded as particularly powerful / effective under each strategy include the following:

**1. EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES / SPORTS**

- Art
- Computers
- Drama
- Music
- Sports programmes (an array of sporting activities)

**2. AFTER SCHOOL CLUBS / HOMEWORK CLUBS**

- After school clubs (activity-based only and / or combination of activity, homework support and food provision)
- Homework clubs (homework completion / additional academic support / literacy and numeracy support)

**3. INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT / ONE – TO- ONE / KEY WORK / PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT / GROUP WORK**

- Individual support / one-to-one work with young people identified to be at risk of early school leaving
- Personal development programmes
- Key work

**4. BREAKFAST CLUBS / LUNCH CLUBS / SCHOOL MEALS**

- Breakfast clubs
- Lunch clubs / lunchtime activities
- School Meals Programme

**5. COUNSELLING / THERAPIES**

- Counselling
- Art therapy
- Other therapeutic supports including Play Therapy

**6. SUMMER PROGRAMMES / EDUCATIONAL TRIPS**

- Summer programmes
- School outings and educational trips

**7. LEARNING SUPPORT / LITERACY AND NUMERACY SUPPORT**

- Learning support
- Literacy and numeracy programme support
- In school academic support

**8. ATTENDANCE TRACKING / MONITORING / AWARDS / REWARDS**

- Attendance monitoring and tracking
- Incentive programmes (including rewards / awards for attendance)

- 9. TRANSFER PROGRAMMES / TRANSITION / INDUCTION**
  - Transfer programmes
  
- 10. STAFF**
  - Employment of dedicated staff to work with young people at risk of early school leaving
  - Role of Co-ordinator
  
- 11. INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION / CO-OPERATION / LIASING / NETWORKING**
  - Interagency nature of SCP
  - Links between school and community settings
  
- 12. FAMILY SUPPORT / HOME VISITS**
  - Family support programmes
  - Home Visits
  
- 13. BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT / ANGER MANAGEMENT / SUSPENSION INTERVENTION**
  - Anger management programmes
  - Behaviour management programmes
  - Crisis intervention work
  - Incredible Years Programme
  - Suspension Intervention programmes
  
- 14. TARGETING / PRIORITISATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE AT RISK OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING**
  - Identification of the appropriate response for each child and his / her particular needs
  - Relationship-building with young people
  
- 15. MENTORING**
  - One-to-one mentoring
  - Big Brother Big Sister Mentoring Programme
  
- 16. TRANSPORT**
  - Bus transport – essential in rural areas

## Core Elements identified in SCP in comparison to strategies identified in international research

Core Elements identified through the consultation process closely match those identified within international research. With respect to the work of Brooks et al., all strategies identified in this work closely match those identified in SCP, even though the interventions might be found within different categories. However, some of the strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center Network have not matched those identified in SCP's consultation process, namely:

- Systemic renewal
- Safe learning environments
- Early childhood education
- Service-learning
- Alternative schooling
- Active learning
- Educational technology
- Career and Technical Education (CTE).

As noted during the pre-consultation deliberations of the Support Service, the majority of these strategies were not considered to be the core work of SCP. However, some of these strategies crosscut the work of SCP in conjunction with schools, external agencies and other relevant stakeholders. Although not regarded as a core element by SCP projects, the SCP Support Service regarded the process of evaluation and review as a core element of the programme.

The SCP consultation process also identified a number of key strategies that were not identified specifically in the literature, namely:

- Breakfast clubs / lunch clubs / school meals – the value of nutrition on the academic, social and personal development of young people.
- Transfer programmes / transition / induction – recognition of the need for extra support for young people as they transfer from one educational stage to the next.
- Transport – particularly in rural areas.

## What interventions could SCP projects not do without?

Projects were also asked during the consultation phase to identify interventions that they could not do without. As discussed in Chapter 1, answering this question was problematic for some projects as the majority regarded the interventions most powerful / effective within their projects as those they could not do without. With this caveat in mind, the author categorised the data relating to question 2 into the relevant strategies. Table 1 identifies the supports projects could not do without. While there is considerable overlap with the findings of Question 1, two interesting conclusions emerge:

1. The supports SCP projects can't do without do not exactly match the most powerful / effective interventions.
2. **Financial support** was also found to be an intervention SCP projects can't do without.

**Table 1:**

**Interventions that SCP projects identified as those most powerful / effective compared to interventions SCP projects can't do without**

<b>Most powerful / effective interventions (in order of preference)</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Those interventions SCP can't do without (in order of preference)</b>	<b>Responses</b>
1. Extra-curricular activities / sports	91	1. After school clubs / Homework clubs	56
2. After school clubs / Homework clubs	84	2. Extra-curricular activities / sports	50
3. Individual support / one-to-one / key work / personal development / group work	69	3. Individual support / one-to-one / key work / personal development / group work	43
4. Breakfast clubs / lunch clubs / school meals	61	4. Counselling / therapies	37
5. Counselling / therapies	57	5. Breakfast clubs / lunch clubs / school meals	35
6. Summer programmes / educational trips	53	6. Attendance tracking / monitoring / awards / rewards	33
7. Learning support / literacy and numeracy support	50	7. Learning support / literacy and numeracy support	32
8. Attendance tracking / monitoring/awards / rewards	49	8. Summer programmes / educational trips	31
9. Transfer programmes / transition / induction	35	9. Staff	26
10. Staff	33	10. Transfer programmes / transition / induction	21
11. Interagency collaboration / co-operation / liaising / networking	30	11. Interagency collaboration / co-operation / liaising / networking	19
12. Family support / home visits	25	12. Family support / home visits	18
13. Behaviour management / Anger Management / Suspension Intervention	20	13. Behaviour management / Anger Management / Suspension Intervention	17
14. Targeting / Prioritisation of young people at risk of early school leaving	17	14. Mentoring	6
15. Mentoring	12	15. Financial support	5
16. Transport	7	16. Targeting / Prioritisation of young people at risk of early school leaving	4
		17. Transport	3

# Chapter 4

## Implications of Core Elements for SCP projects

The Core Elements process impacts on service delivery in four key areas:

- **Delivery of supports to young people at risk of early school leaving** – One of the most powerful aspects of the School Completion Programme is the flexibility it gives to local projects to put together a Retention Plan that reflects the individual needs of young people identified at risk of early school leaving. While the consultation process clearly identifies core strategies that are most powerful across SCP projects, the identification of core strategies must not take away from the flexibility required by local projects to implement their respective retention plans. However, projects should be mindful of the core strategies identified within SCP and the close links these strategies have to those identified in international research. Furthermore, there are close links between the most powerful / effective strategies identified and the supports SCP projects state they cannot do without. Therefore, SCP projects should continue to review strategies in operation on a regular basis, being mindful of the possibility of implementing other key strategies identified as core, if appropriate. However, projects should also ensure that strategies identified as 'core' are still reviewed on a continuous basis to ensure that they are still producing positive outcomes for young people identified at risk of early school leaving.
- **Training** – Strategies documented through the consultation process should be incorporated into the SCP Inservice training schedule. Personnel working within SCP should have up-to-date training and information on the most powerful / effective strategies identified within the programme. Work is already in progress within the SCP Training and Inservice Consultative Committee (TACC) to plan the future SCP training schedule.
- **Dissemination of good practice** – The identification and dissemination of good practice in relation to the core strategies must be prioritised. This can be achieved through Inservice (national and regional), the SCP newsletter and other communication materials. National and international research materials on the core strategies should be disseminated to SCP projects on a regular basis (see References).
- **Personnel** – SCP projects must endeavour to employ / upskill staff on core strategies. The majority of SCP projects already employ personnel to record, monitor and track attendance. After-school activities and homework clubs are staffed, in the main, by teachers / Co-ordinators / Project Workers within participating schools. Therapeutic interventions / counselling should only be carried out by qualified personnel, in conjunction with principals of participating schools. Project workers delivering learning support / one-to-one support / personal development programmes should be trained in the most effective strategies to support young people at risk of early school leaving. Projects should be aware of other local services that have personnel / expertise in core areas e.g. HSCL teachers, parents, school staff, Education Welfare Officers, Visiting Teachers for Travellers, NEPS etc.

# Chapter 5

## Conclusions

The following conclusions emerge from the consultation process:

- Core strategies have clearly been identified through the consultation process. Sixteen key strategies emerge as the most powerful / effective in supporting young people at risk of early school leaving within the School Completion Programme.
- The core strategies identified through the consultation process relate closely to key strategies identified in international research.
- A close relationship emerged between the most powerful / effective strategies in operation within SCP and supports SCP projects state they cannot do without.
- The majority of supports / interventions delivered within SCP are outside the classroom, with most of the focus being in the areas of after-school provision, social and personal development programmes and holiday provision.
- Projects were hesitant to discontinue any support and argued for the expansion and development of supports that are working well. The author was unable to generalise the findings relating to this question.
- All responding projects have core strategies in operation within their respective projects. On average, projects deliver four core strategies.
- The identification of core strategies within SCP will have implications for local service delivery, training, dissemination of practice and the employment / upskilling of personnel.

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# Appendix 1

Dear Co-ordinator,

The School Completion Programme National Support Service has recently engaged in a process of reviewing 'core elements' that have been identified through research as essential strategies to retain young people at risk of early school leaving in school. A number of research publications that document effective strategies to combat early school leaving were reviewed. The outcome of this review process has been the identification of a number of key strategies that could be considered 'core elements' to the work of the School Completion Programme.

The next stage of this process is for the SCP National Support Service to engage in a consultation process with relevant stakeholders on the feasibility of introducing core elements to inform the work of SCP. Post-consultation, it is hoped that the programme would be in a position to agree core elements with relevant stakeholders, which will form the foundation of each SCP project's Plan, while still accounting for the bottom-up / flexible approach adopted by SCP.

To ensure that the core elements identified in research tie in with what is currently happening in practice, the SCP Support Service, as part of a wider consultation process, is requesting that your project spends part of this year's mandatory 'Review Day' to discuss the following key questions with key stakeholders:

- 1 What are the most powerful / effective interventions in your project?
- 2 What interventions could you not do without?
- 3 Are there interventions you would discontinue if you had to?

The conclusions of these discussions should be sent to Marian Brattman in the CDU, Captain's Road, Crumlin, Dublin 12, no later than Monday June 30th 2008.

If your project has already conducted its Review Day or the agenda has been agreed for the day, please use another opportunity, such as a Local Management Committee meeting, to ask stakeholders the key questions noted above.

I urge your project to engage with this consultation process. Please do not hesitate to contact your relevant Assistant National Co-ordinator for further information.

Thank you for your good work and continued interest in SCP.

Yours sincerely,

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