

Somerset Environmental Records Centre

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Orb weaver spider's web © Ann Fells

Annual report 2016 – 2017

Somerset Environmental Records Centre

Recording our environment



Introduction

The Somerset Environmental Records Centre is hosted by the Somerset Wildlife Trust and is based at the Trust offices in Taunton.

The core work of the Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) is to gather, manage and supply biological and geological data and hold the county list of sites recognised for their natural value. Data gathered by SERC is used to build up a comprehensive picture of the biodiversity and geodiversity of Somerset, and help to monitor the state of the natural environment. The Record Centre is therefore concerned with quality as well as quantity of data.

SERC is an impartial organisation and its activities are steered by the need for data.

Objectives

The objectives for the Centre are to ensure:

- A wide variety of biodiversity data both recent and historic is collected, managed and used;
- Data is analysed and there is an understanding of data gaps;
- Promotion of wildlife recording and a wide understanding of the need for information about our environment;
- Ensure easy access to biodiversity data for all those who wish to use it whilst maintaining security and quality of data;
- It is adequately resourced to meet the need of stakeholders;
- Continuously review of the Centre's governance and processes assuring it operates efficiency, including benchmarking itself and taking advantage of technological developments;
- Ensure the Centre maintains standards that are promoted by the Association of Local Record Centres (ALERC) and allows it to be part of the National Biodiversity Network (NBN);
- Maintain the transparency of governance arrangements by publishing its Prospectus

Partners

The SERC Executive Management Group consists of representatives from each of the following partners

- Somerset County Council
- Somerset Wildlife Trust
- Taunton Deane Borough Council (representing District Councils)
- Wessex Water
- University of the West of England
- A co-opted member from a leading specialist group in the county
- Natural England

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Staff and Volunteers

The Centre has four permanent staff members, two full time staff and two part-time members of staff, equating to 3 whole time equivalents.

Paula Hewitson – Manager of SERC

Tony Price – Data Management Officer

Ann Fells – Ecologist

Sue Simpson – Records Centre Support Officer

During the year SERC has been enormously fortunate to have many regular, very skilled and dedicated volunteers supporting the work of the Records Centre.

In addition, a placement year was arranged with a student from the University of the West of England. The placement was assisting with Local Wildlife Sites monitoring, learning survey skills, data management and GIS.

The Specialist Group members and County Recorders do an invaluable job, dedicating hours of their own time monitoring wildlife, creating record logs and checking the accuracy of others' sightings.

Key Performance data and achievements

- 2.5m species records held (1.91m 31 March 2016)
- 2095 Local Wildlife Sites registered
- 234 Local Geological Sites registered
- 5 projects delivered
- 3 Training days delivered
- 267 data searches carried out

Big Bat Survey projects; in the Blackdown Hills and in the Brue Valley

In July 2016 the sixth and final Blackdown Hills Big Bat Survey took place. It was organised by SERC in conjunction with the Somerset Bat Group (SBG) and the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. SERC organised a Bat Survey Workshop prior to the event. 45 volunteers attended the survey which enabled 14 transects to be carried out and 1591 passes to be recorded. Common Pipistrelle Bats remain the most frequently recorded bats, and the percentage of passes from this species increased to 61% of the total recorded passes.

In August 2016 a survey was carried out in the Brue Valley. This was the fourth year SERC had organised this event in conjunction with the Somerset Bat Group. 36 people took part covering 10 transect routes. The greatest number of bat passes through all three years of the surveys, was by soprano bats, comprising 50%

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or more of the total numbers of passes. The Brue Valley is indeed a stronghold for this species which is often associated with wetland landscapes. The common pipistrelle, the most common species throughout

Western Europe, was only recorded at half the number of passes compared with soprano pipistrelle, contributing 32% of the overall passes.

Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) Project

Local Wildlife sites cover at least 5% of England's land mass (6% in Somerset). These vary in size and shape. They can be privately or publically owned, and found in the depths of the countryside and in busy towns.

Most LWS are in private ownership and it is ultimately landowners and farmers often with the support of nature conservationists who secure the on-going existence of these special places. Unlike many nature reserves, these special places are not protected by law however they considered important enough to receive recognition within the planning system. National planning policy requires local authorities to provide for LWS protection through local planning process.

There are more than 50 partnerships of local authorities, record centres and local specialists across the country. Each partnership is responsible for surveying, assessing and selecting sites against robust local criteria. Most partnerships also offer advice on land management and grants.



© John Bebbington

SERC manages the delivery of the Somerset Local Wildlife Sites programme and many planning authorities and conservation organisations contribute funding to SERC to support this work.

During 2016-17 SERC continued its Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) review programme, including desktop and site surveys for existing LWS.

Quantock Hills AONB - seven LWS have been surveyed. One site was reconfirmed as still meeting the LWS criteria from this work and the others were still in the process of being assessed.

Blackdown Hills AONB - 22 sites have been surveyed and data is currently being reviewed to reassess the sites against the LWS criteria.

Exmoor National Park - six sites were surveyed in the year.

Mendip Hills AONB - Nine LWS were surveyed and are in the process of being fully assessed.

Key Urban Areas – there are 28 LWS in the key development belt around Yeovil, 7 around Taunton and 13 around Bridgwater. Of these 48 sites, 20 are in the process of being reviewed.

LWS are found throughout Somerset and data was gathered about many of these sites.

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Data Management

Data Collection

- SERC has introduced the on-line recording facility with a number of key partners, including Exmoor National Park, the Blackdown Hills AONB, the Somerset Wildlife Trust Routes to the River Tone project and the Recorders of the Avalon Marshes. This enables data to be received electronically reducing the input and validation time and making data more visible and accessible.
- SERC has begun working with environmental projects and specialist groups in the County to adapt the online recording facility to their needs. SERC will continue to develop the functionality of this to enable the targeting of data gaps.
- The aim for 2017/18 is to review records by species groups and use the developments on this on-line recording system to target species. The SERC facebook page is at 250 likes with a five star rating and will be used along with the newly designed website and to promote recording of target species.

Somerset Environmental Record Centre ranked 19 out of 159 data providers for volume of records uploaded to the NBN. At the end of the 16/17 year the NBN gateway was closed and its' successor, the NBN Atlas, was launched on 1 April.

The number of records held by SERC has increased from 1.9m at 31st March 2016 to 2.5m at 31st March 2017.

A chart showing the number of records by taxonomic group held at March 2017 can be seen on the next page.

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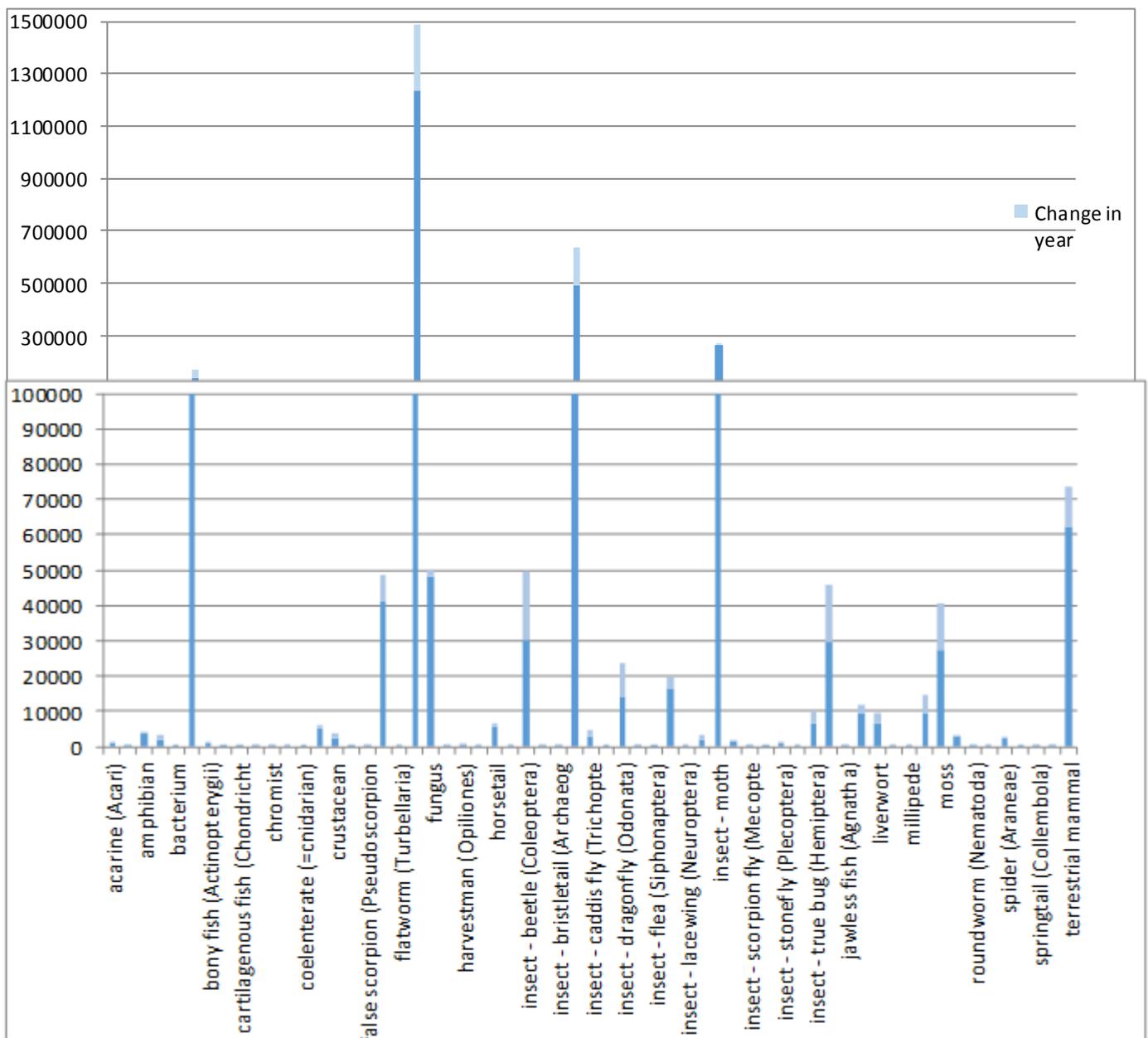
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Taxonomical distribution of data

The following bar chart shows the volume of records held by SERC, divided into taxonomic groups. The dark blue segments show the volume of records at the start of the year. The light blue sections show the increase in records during 2016/17.

number of records



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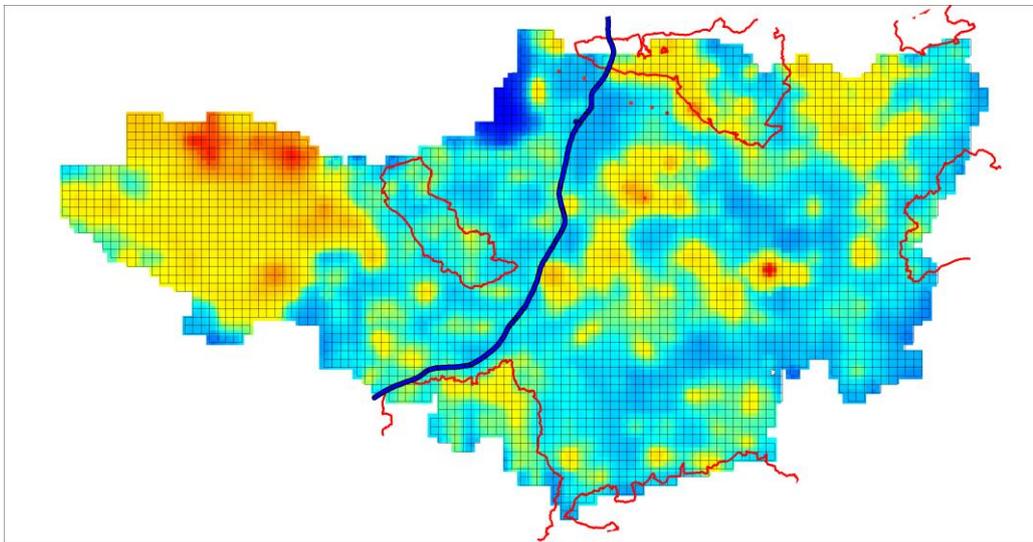
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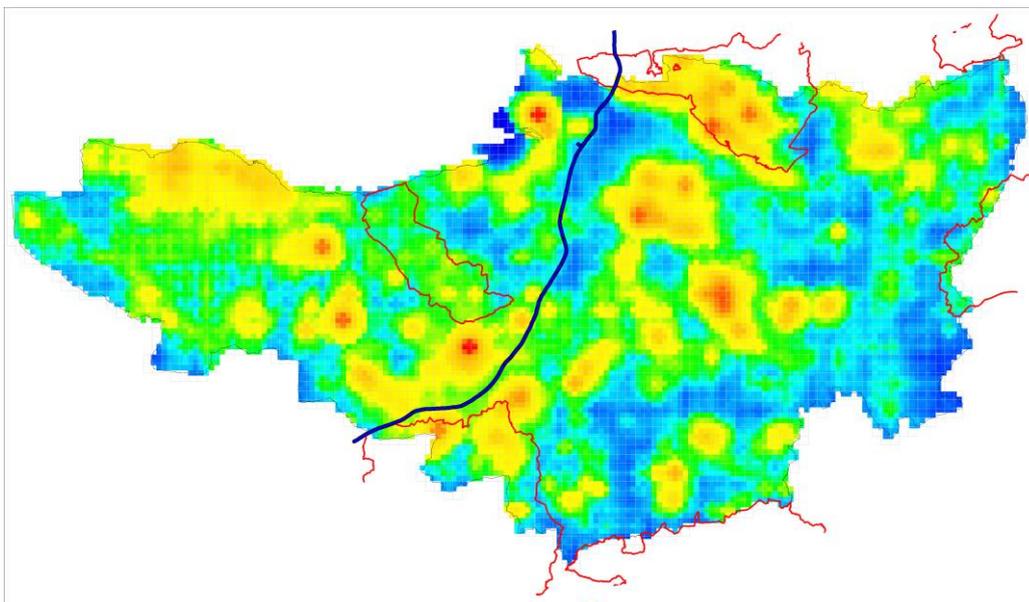
Geographical distribution of data

An analysis of recording hotspots and cool spots is produced below. Starting with the dark blue areas with least recording through turquoise, green, yellow to red showing areas of the highest frequency of recording of data.

This represents a comparison across the county of relative recording effort. Looking at the first map below you can see the extremes of records held in 2015/16. Due to this, SERC aimed to target geographical areas to fill data gaps. The bottom map shows relative distribution of records held in 2016/17. This shows SERC has gathered a more even spread of records across the County.



2015/16 – Record distribution



2016/17 – Record distribution

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Engagement Strategy

Progress continues in implementing data exchange agreements with the Specialist Recording Groups and a regular Specialist Groups Liaison meeting is proving to be really useful in developing a more cohesive network and strategic approach to activities in the county.

Regular data sharing happens with local groups such as the Somerset Moth Group, Exmoor Natural History Society, Somerset Bat Group, Somerset Otter Group, the Reptile and Amphibian Group for Somerset and the Somerset Branch of Butterfly Conservation, Somerset Rare Plant Group and Somerset Botany Group amongst others.

SERC also exchanges data with National groups such as the British Mycological Association, British Lichen Society, the People's Trust for Endangered Species and the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust.

SERC is particularly keen to support local groups such with monitoring and training events which will encourage recording.



The introduction of Somerset on line recording will enable SERC to engage with members of the general public who want to extend their love of wildlife into the recording of useful data. SERC already has an extremely dedicated group of individuals who send their sightings in to the records helpdesk sercrecords@somerc.com. The online recording is a key area SERC is aiming to develop.

Other Projects

SERC has worked in conjunction with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust at Steart Marshes to deliver training days to volunteers, and survey ditches for both vegetation and aquatic invertebrates. SERC was pleased to be involved in monitoring the impact of such a significant habitat creation project.

SERC has also surveyed land, managed as part of a mitigation project, for a land management group which includes Natural England and Viridor.

During the year SERC worked with the Somerset Wildlife Trust (Routes to the River Tone Project) to ensure a legacy would continue after the project ended. Project data was reviewed and an ongoing survey programme designed, current volunteers were given various options to continue contributing to the conservation of the River Tone area and the SERC team will lead various surveys in the spring/summer of 2017.

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Service Level Agreements (SLAs)

In 2016-17 SERC had SLAs to supply data regarding habitats (geological and biological) and species with:

- Environment Agency
- Wessex Water
- Mendip Borough Council
- Taunton Deane Borough Council
- West Somerset District Council
- South Somerset District Council
- Sedgemoor District Council
- Somerset County Council
- Exmoor National Park Authority
- Somerset Wildlife Trust

Some SLAs also contain provision for the supply of Ecological Network data and additional targeted survey work.

- Natural England, at a national level, ended its financial support for Record Centres. However, the Natural England team in Somerset continues to provide opportunities for joint working and mutual support.

Data supply

Ad hoc data search requests are received for a number of purposes. These may be to assist landowners, to enable research or to assist with local community plans. Many data searches are also carried out by consultants to assist with development planning and design process.

Academic	Landowner	Local Group	Consultant/NGO	Public	SLA
25	1	12	222	2	5

As part of the SLAs with the District Councils SERC screens planning applications. This involves SERC carrying out a data search to identify any records held which correspond to the area affected by the planning application. The numbers of applications screened are set out below along with the number returning positive records. These records are supplied back to the District Councils to assist with decision making.

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Authority	Number screened	Number with positive records returned	Percentage
Mendip District Council	12	12	100%
Sedgemoor District Council	1330	436	33%
South Somerset District Council	2605	949	36%
Taunton Deane Borough Council	1247	546	44%
West Somerset Council	0	0	0%
Somerset County Council	3	3	100%
Total	5197	1946	37%

There are many examples where data provided by SERC has prompted more detailed consideration and better outcomes in the planning process.

Examples from 2016/17 include, plans for development at the Hinckley C Site and for the proposed road developments along the Somerset stretch of the A303.

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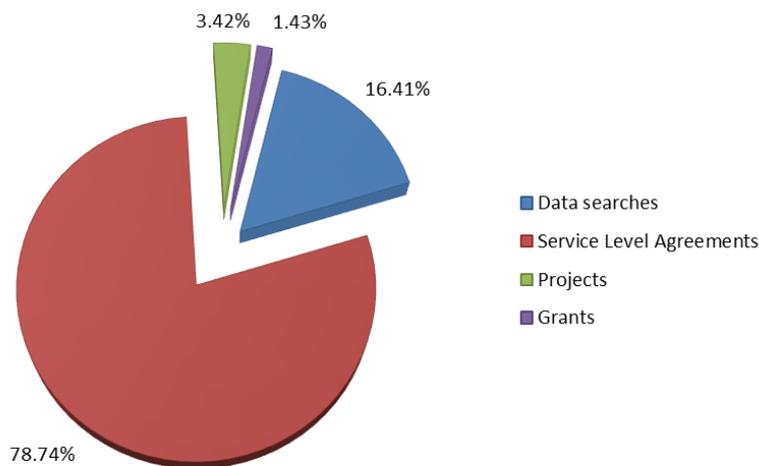
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Financial Summary

The majority of SERC's income comes from its service level agreements but SERC is also able to get involved and carry out project work which enables further data collection and ID training in Somerset. SERC began the year with a small surplus carried over from 2015/16, this enabled SERC to upgrade two PCs.

SERC Income 2016/17



SERC Expenditure 2016/17

