

Somerset Environmental Records Centre

34 Wellington Road
Taunton
Somerset
TA1 5AW

01823 664450
info@somerc.com



Annual Report 2018-19



Hurlstone Point ©John Bebbington



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Summary

The Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) is an independent partnership-led organisation hosted by the Somerset Wildlife Trust and is based at the Trust offices in Taunton. The core work of SERC is to gather, manage and supply biological and geological data, as well as hold the county list of sites recognised for their natural value.

SERC has four permanent staff members, as well as dedicated volunteers and members of specialist and recording groups. SERC is governed by an Executive Management Group consisting of representatives from partners such as Somerset County Council, as well as the recording community.

During 2018-19, SERC achieved the following: -

- Entered 108,484 species records into our Recorder database, bringing the total to 2.7 million species records;
- Reviewed 19 existing Local Wildlife Sites (LWS)
- Reviewed c 60 existing Local Geological Sites (LGS);
- Delivered five projects;
- Delivered one training day and gave three talks;
- Screened 2259 planning applications; and
- Performed 351 ad hoc data searches.



Catcott Lows ©Brian Phipps

The majority of SERC's income comes from Service Level Agreements and ad hoc data supply, but we are also involved in project work, which enables further data collection and analysis in Somerset. Most of SERC's expenditure results from staff costs (including salary and pension schemes), but we continue to support specialist and recording groups with payments for licences and web hosting from our Recorders Fund.

During 2019-20, SERC will be putting together a new business plan for the next three-year period (2019-2022), which will aim to ensure a cohesive and strategic approach to data collection and analysis, for effective use within both conservation and planning. SERC will also be looking for ways to diversify and ensure it remains financially viable in the future.



Introduction

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

The core work of SERC is to gather, manage and supply biological and geological data, as well as 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, which helps to monitor the state of the natural environment. The Records 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.



Beautiful demoiselle ©John Bebbington

Key aims

The key aims for SERC 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 needs of stakeholders;
- Continuously review the SERC's governance and processes assuring it operates efficiently, including benchmarking itself and taking advantage of technological developments;
- Ensure SERC maintains standards that are promoted by the Association of Local Record Centres (ALERC)
- Maintain the transparency of governance arrangements by publishing its Prospectus.

Staff and volunteers

SERC has four permanent staff members; one full-time and three part-time members of staff, equating to three whole time equivalents: -

- Leanne Butt – Manager;
- Tony Price – Data Management Officer;
- Ann Fells – Ecologist; and
- Sue Simpson – Records Centre Support Officer.



During the year SERC has been enormously fortunate to have many regular, very skilled and dedicated volunteers supporting our work, including data entry and management, surveys and various admin.



Male Small skipper on Marsh thistle ©John Bebbington

County Recorders and members of specialist and recording groups also do an invaluable job, dedicating hours of their own time monitoring wildlife, creating record logs and checking the accuracy of others' sightings.

In addition, members of the Yeovil & District Natural History Society and Wessex Water assisted in Local Wildlife Site (LWS) surveys as part of the ongoing Review. Two students from the University of Cardiff also assisted with the first year of the Local Geological Sites (LGS) Review.

Partners

The SERC Executive Management Group consists of representatives from each of the following partners, some of which hold Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with SERC: -

- A co-opted member from a leading specialist group in the county (currently the Somerset Ornithological Society);
- Natural England;
- Somerset County Council;
- Somerset Wildlife Trust;
- Sedgemoor District Council (representing District Councils);
- University of the West of England; and
- Wessex Water.

Key performance data and achievements in 2018-19

Overview

During 2018-19, SERC achieved the following: -

- Entered 108,484 species records into our Recorder database, bringing the total to 2.7 million species records;
- Reviewed 19 existing LWS;
- Reviewed c 60 existing LGS;
- Delivered five projects;
- Delivered one training day and gave three talks;
- Screened 2259 planning applications; and
- Performed 351 ad hoc data searches.



Male adder ©Kevin Palmer

Data management

Data collection

Regular data sharing exists with local specialist and recording groups including the Exmoor Natural History Society, Somerset Botany Group, Somerset Rare Plant Group, Somerset Branch of Butterfly Conservation, Somerset Moth Group, Reptile and Amphibian Group for Somerset, Somerset Ornithological Society, Somerset Otter Group and the Somerset Bat Group.



Dartford warbler ©Brian Gibbs

SERC also exchanges data with National organisations such as the British Lichen Society, Fungus Conservation Trust, Plantlife and the People's Trust for Endangered Species. Records are also regularly sent in by consultant ecologists, as well as ad-hoc records from members of the public.

Online recording

The number of records SERC have received through our online recording form is steadily increasing, with a total of 5281 (from 4543, 16% increase in the last year) records since its launch in spring 2017. Coverage is also excellent (see Figure 1 on the following page), with most of Somerset covered and 38 (was 33) taxon groups (1073 species, up from 677) recorded. There is also a bias towards birds, flowering plants and



butterflies. To date we have also embedded online recording to six websites, including the Recorders of the Avalon Marshes, Exmoor National Park Authority and Quantocks Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

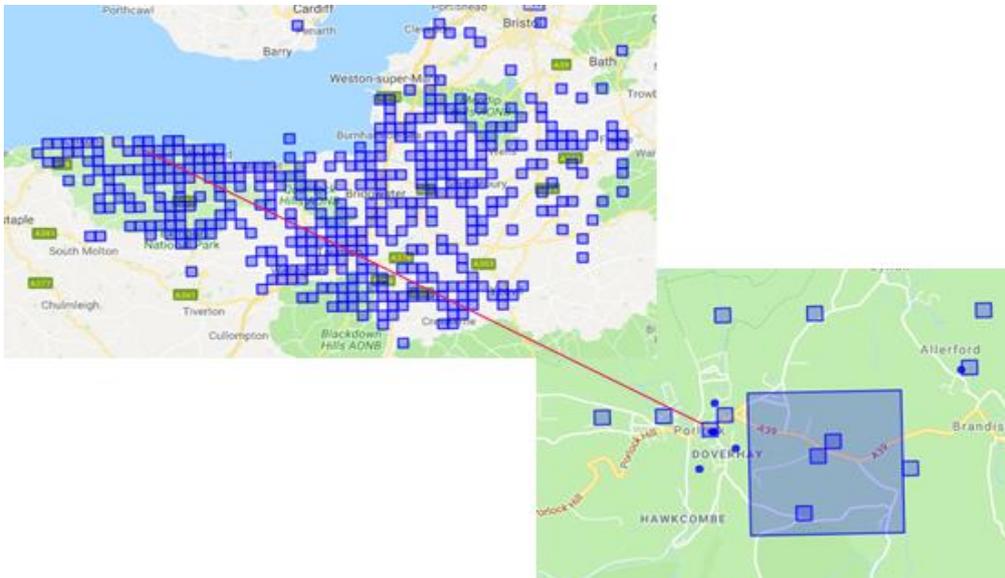


Figure 1. Online recording record coverage.

Data entry

The number of records being entered over the preceding year is relatively low and the chart below shows a different picture to the previous report. An improved technique in filtering non Somerset records has resulted in an apparent reduction in the total. The switch to reducing the backlog has reduced the volume being processed. While a significant amount of the data is of high value (important species) it is also more challenging to process and in smaller quantities. The total number of records is 2.7 million.

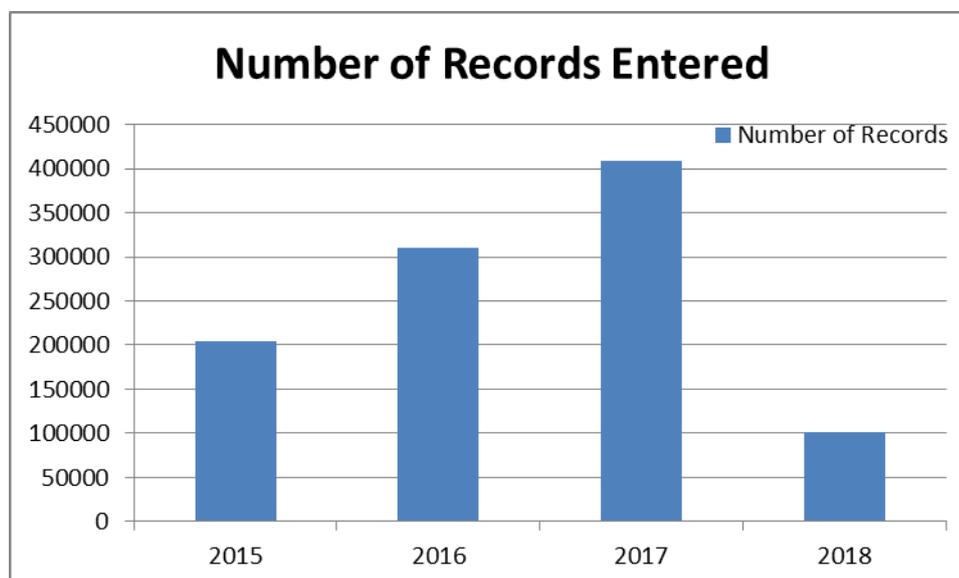




Figure 2. Total number of records entered per annum.

Taxonomic distribution of data

Figure 3 on the following page illustrates the accumulation of species records at SERC since 2015, divided into taxonomic groups.

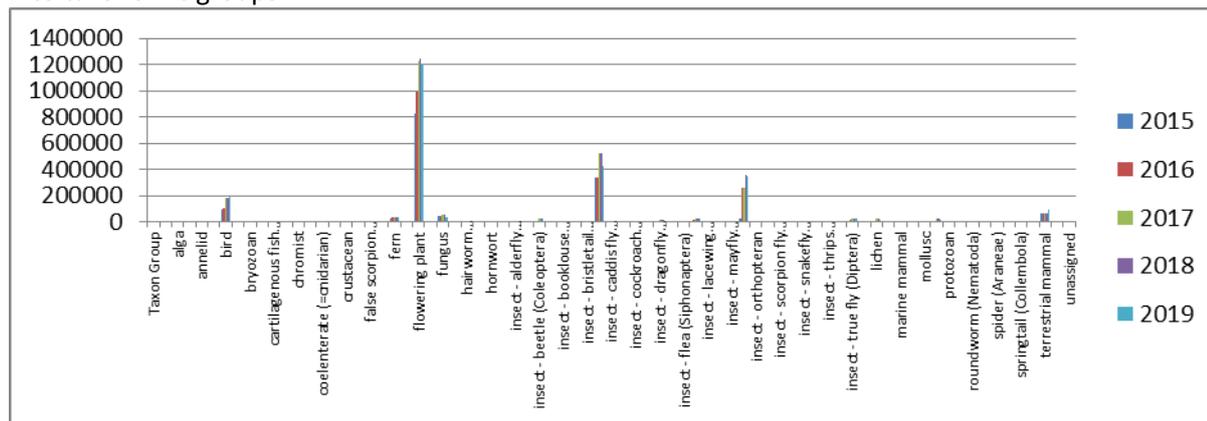


Figure 3. The accumulation of species records, divided into taxonomic groups.

Local Wildlife Sites Review

Background

Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) cover at least 5% of England’s land mass and cover 6% of Somerset. These vary in size and shape. They can be privately or publicly owned, being 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 are considered important enough to receive recognition within the planning system. National planning policy requires Local Authorities to provide for LWS protection through the 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 LWS against robust local criteria. Most partnerships also offer advice on land management and grants.



Common broomrape ©Ann Fells



SERC manages the delivery of the Somerset LWS Review programme, which includes desktop and site surveys for existing and candidate LWS. Our SLA partners (which include Local Authorities and conservation organisations) contribute funding to SERC to support this work. During 2018-19, SERC continued its LWS Review programme, assessing 19 sites against the current LWS criteria, with two additional sites requiring further assessment in 2019-20. These are summarised on a district basis below – they include 8 sites in Exmoor National Park, 6 sites in the Blackdown Hills AONB and 4 Key Urban Area LWS.

Sedgemoor 2 sites

One LWS that was surveyed by Somerset Botany Group the previous year was re-visited as not sufficient information was available to assess the site against the LWS criteria. The second visit confirmed that the site does not meet LWS criteria alone and a discussion is underway regarding using it as a link between two other LWS which are 25 metres and 65 metres away.

Key Urban Areas

A separate project that involved surveying land in Bridgwater for Sedgemoor District Council was agreed by the Panel to be added to the LWS list as a Key Urban Area LWS (a large pond, open access, with interesting wetland vegetation communities).

Somerset West & Taunton 13 complete sites, 1 partial site (8 Exmoor, 5 Blackdown Hills AONB, 1 neither)

A new LWS (the only one in this group not in Exmoor or the Blackdown Hills) was agreed by the Panel – a churchyard with good populations of waxcaps.

Exmoor National Park

Five sites under the same ownership were visited – four woodland sites and one acid grassland site. These were all re-listed with boundary changes (including two sites being merged). These were all originally listed as LWS with no survey data therefore the mapped boundaries did not relate to any physical boundaries on the ground – in addition, a large area has disappeared due to cliff collapse.

Three Forestry Commission sites in Exmoor were visited. These were:

- A conifer plantation with high quality acid grassland and heath along rides and large open glades, with numerous notable vascular plants recorded.
- Wet woodland with three separate owners. One ownership area was removed from the LWS (a filled in pond), the woodland areas were re-listed.
- A small broadleaved plantation, listed for notable vascular plants, some of which appear likely to be recording errors. The site did meet the LWS criteria but was considered by the Panel to not be of high quality.

Blackdown Hills AONB

One site that had been surveyed by the Blackdown Hills Natural Futures team – the LWS panel meeting in March 2018 requested that land adjacent to the existing LWS be visited and assessed. This was done over summer 2018 – the land adjacent was not of LWS quality (botanically-poor secondary woodland).

Two more sites, not previously listed as LWS, that had been surveyed by the Natural Futures Project were listed as new LWS.



A third woodland was surveyed – good quality broadleaved woodland with notable vascular plants, easily meeting LWS criteria.

The fourth site visited in the Blackdowns is a multi-ownership site (5 or 6 owners, including Somerset Wildlife Trust, with the site split by the River Yarty). Part of the site was surveyed by the Blackdown Hills Natural Futures team in 2017, the SWT part of the site was surveyed in 2018 – the owners of the remaining areas are still to be traced in order for surveys to be arranged.

South Somerset 5 sites

One woodland site on the Dorset border was visited – a lovely little wood with a vast herb paris population. The owners have a number of LWS in Dorset and another LWS in Somerset (species-rich grassland and mire communities, re-listed as a LWS in 2017).

Blackdown Hills AONB

One site that had been surveyed by the Blackdown Hills Natural Futures team – the LWS panel meeting in March 2018 requested that land adjacent to the existing LWS be visited and assessed. This was done over summer 2018 – the adjacent land was good quality wet woodland and mire communities and was added on to the original LWS.

Key Urban Areas

Four Key Urban Area LWS in Yeovil Country Park were surveyed. Two of these were merged; two were re-listed with boundary changes (due to errors in mapping the original LWS boundaries and due to extension of the country park).

Local Geological Sites Review

Background

In Somerset, there are currently c. 230 Local Geological Sites (LGS), formerly known as Regionally Important Geological Sites (RIGS). As with LWS, national planning policy requires Local Authorities to provide for LGS protection through the local planning process.



These sites were originally identified and formally designated with the assistance of the Somerset Geology Group (SGG) in the late 1980s and 1990s. However, little detail exists on each site and it became apparent that there was a need to re-survey the sites, including detailed desk research to update the information.

In 2016-17, considerable preparation work was undertaken to enable the design of a three-year joint project with SGG to review Somerset's existing LGS. Whilst our SLA partners (which include Local Authorities and conservation organisations) contribute core funding to SERC to support this work, additional funding Exmoor National Park Authority, the Quantock Hills AONB and Wessex Water specifically for the Review.





SERC have also been awarded a grant from The Curry Fund of the Geologists' Association and the Pat Hill Cottingham Memorial Fund of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society for the project, as well as sponsorship from the geological consultancy Geckoella during 2016-17.

SGG input has been entirely voluntary and is considerable, including assisting with securing grants, coordination, geological expertise, and help-in-kind. Many SGG members have also acted as volunteer mentors, with knowledge of the geology of particular areas of Somerset, such as the Quantock Hills.



Pickwell Down Sandstone Formation north of Dulverton
©Wesley Harris

2018-19 Review

In 2018-19, SERC continued its LGS Review programme with SGG, which includes desktop and site surveys. Selection is based on four main criteria, with sites meeting any one of these criteria designated as a LGS: *Scientific* value; *Educational* value (in its widest sense); *Historic* interest (including related economic geology); and *Aesthetic* (i.e. landscape) interest.

SGG placed an advertisement to university geology departments for student volunteers to assist with the review. Two SERC-based student volunteers (c. 3 days per week) were appointed

for summer 2018 from Cardiff University, one of which continued to volunteer for the project throughout autumn and winter 2018-19.

During the year, the student volunteers and SGG mentors assessed c. 60 LGS in Somerset against the LGS criteria, with a focus on the western part of Somerset, particularly Exmoor National Park and the Quantock Hills AONB. Further desk work was also added to some of the sites that were visited in 2017-18, following improvements to the assessment form.

A total of 33 LGS were put forward to the two LGS Panels in September and November 2018, and a further 26 sites have been prepared for the next panel set to take place at the start of the next year of the project.



Reverse faulting in the Ilfracombe Mudstone Formation, Exmoor ©Wesley Harris



Projects

In 2018-19, SERC delivered five projects.

Blackdown Hills AONB – Connecting the Culm.

Connecting the Culm is a three year project which commenced in January 2019 which aims to make the River Culm and its floodplain more resilient to flood and drought, improve water quality, support biodiversity and habitat, and involve local people and organisations in the process. SERC supplied species data for the mires in the Culm catchment to help underpin the evidence base for the project.

Blackdown Hills AONB Historic England

Running until September 2018 this was one of nine national pilot studies, funded by [Historic England](#), to explore how the heritage sector might more fruitfully engage with ‘natural capital’ and ‘ecosystem services’ approaches by looking in detail at the heritage associated with particular environmental contexts. The aim of the overall project was to explore how the historic environment might be better included in these approaches contribute to developing guidelines. SERC provided baseline data to support the project.

Friends of the Quantocks – Baseline Survey

An ecological baseline study of the Friends of the Quantocks landholding on the Quantock Common was carried out in 2018 by Louis Pearson, a professional ecologist living in Nether Stowey. The study will form a reference point against which any changes to the plant cover and habitat can be measured for many years to come. Louis looked at all the available historical data with the help of SERC before carrying out detailed and mapped on site surveys on the 15th June and 2nd September 2018.

South West Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) Management Plan

SERC provided data regarding invasive and non-native species data for collation into a map which will be used to identify hotspots of INNS and potential pathways for spreading.

Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) Taunton Big Bat Survey

The Taunton Big Bat Survey will be held over a four-year period and commenced in 2018. SERC compiled the bat data currently held for the Taunton area, and performed some detailed analysis on the data to enable SWT and SERC (using Somerset Bat Group’s expertise) to design an appropriate survey for Years 2 to 4 (2019-2021).



The overall objectives are to provide an accurate representation of the bat usage of Taunton which could be used to inform local development plans. Somerset County Council are also keen to produce technical guidance on bats for planners and developers using this data. The data should highlight 'dark' routes that bats use, areas with good vegetation cover and pinch-points which must remain dark so Taunton remains permeable to bats, which would aid Taunton's Garden Town status. The Taunton Big Bat Survey would also become part of the legacy of the Routes to the River Tone project, encouraging the volunteers that were engaged and upskilling them, and outreaching to new potential volunteers.

Recorders engagement

Training days

Tony Price held an introduction to Recording session in May 2018.

Talks

Tony also gave a number of talks aimed at encouraging recording from the general public. These were very well received – “your passion for data collection and application was clear to observe as was your knowledge of the area which is incredibly detailed”.

- May 2018 for the Somerset Wildlife Trust Heart of the Levels Group
- June 2018 at the for Exmoor National Park Authority at the Lynmouth National Park Centre
- February 2019 Somerset and Exmoor Environmental Education Network (SEEEN)

Data collection

Progress continues in improving data exchange between specialist and recording groups and SERC, to ensure data is shared regularly and efficiently, avoiding the risk of duplicate records. Regular specialist group liaison meetings at SERC continue to be well represented and attended by various taxa specialists, and are proving to be useful in ensuring a strategic approach to recording across the county, as well as spread news of events or training.

The online recording form has enabled SERC to engage with members of the public and encourage regular recording in their gardens or local area. This has been well received, with SERC continuing to encourage casual recorders to enter their records directly onto our website, thus reducing input time at SERC. The SERC Facebook page is at 362 likes with a five-star rating. The website is regularly updated with 'what to look out for this month'.



Data supply

Service Level Agreements (SLAs)

In 2018-19, SERC held 11 SLAs to supply data on sites (both geological and biological), habitats and species to the following partners: -

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



Yellowhammer ©Brian Gibbs

As part of the SLAs with District Councils, SERC also 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. These records are then supplied back to the District Councils to assist with decision-making.

The number of planning applications screened and ad hoc data requests for SLA holders totalled 2259 in 2018-19, with 46% returning positive records. This was compared to 4212 in 2018-19. The fall is due to the fact that SERC no longer screen planning applications for either Taunton Deane Borough Council * (since July 2017) or South Somerset District Council (since August 2018). The termination of this service was stopped at the request of the District Councils.

Table 1 on the following page summarises the number of planning applications screened by SERC in 2018-19 along with the number returning positive records.

*Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset Council merged in April 2018 to become Somerset West and Taunton Council.

Table 1. Summary of planning applications screened by SERC in 2018-19, and the number returning positive records.

Planning Authority	Number of planning applications screened	Number of planning applications returning positive records	Percentage
Mendip District Council	6	6	100%
Sedgemoor District Council	1525	762	50%
South Somerset District Council *	728	260	36%



Somerset County Council	0	0	0
Total	2259	1028	46%

*SERC stopped screening planning applications for South Somerset District Council in August 2018.

Ad hoc data searches

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.

In 2018-19 we carried out a total of 351 data searches, compared to 305 in 2017-18. This is an increase of 46, of which 43 were consultants, and so generated income for SERC. The number of searches processed continues to increase year on year. Table 2 summarises the total number of data search requests carried out by SERC in 2018-19.

Table 2. The total number of ad hoc data search requests performed by SERC in 2018-19.

Client type	Consultant/NGO	Academic/ Landowner	Community/ Parish Planning	Local Groups/ Other	SLA holders	Total
Number of ad hoc data search requests	296	15	4	24	12	351

SERC continue to receive positive feedback for the service and delivery of data searches.



Financial summary

Income

The majority of SERC's income comes from SLAs and ad hoc data supply, but we are also involved in project work, which enables further data collection and analysis in Somerset. SERC also began the year with a large surplus carried over from 2017/18. Figure 4 illustrates SERC's income during 2018-19.

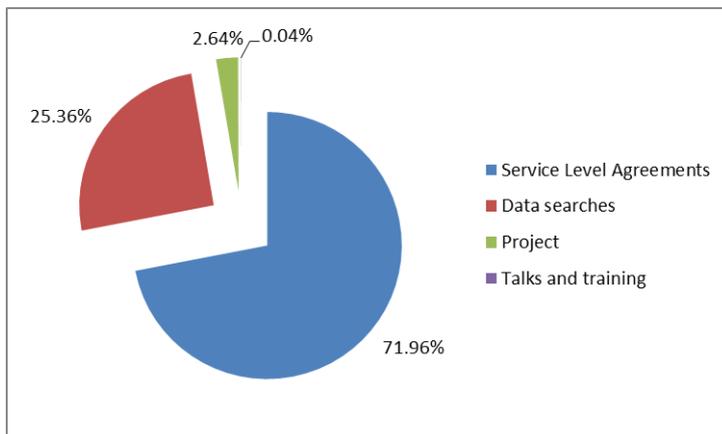


Figure 4. SERC's income during 2018-19.

Expenditure

Most of SERC's expenditure results from staff costs (including salary and pension schemes), but we continue to support specialist and recording groups with payments for licences and web hosting from our Recorders Fund. Figure 5 illustrates SERC's expenditure during 2018-19.

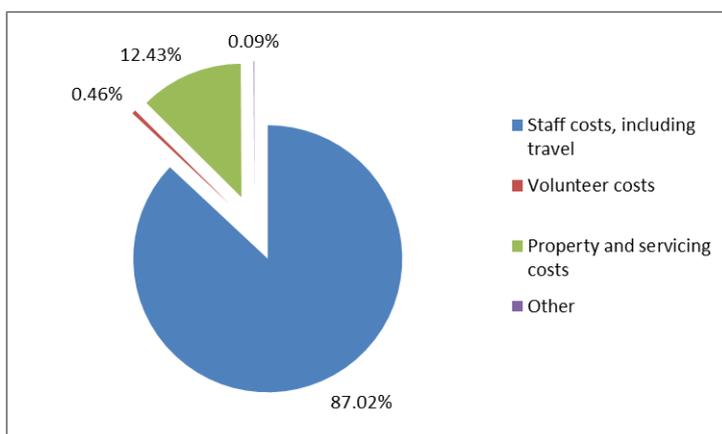


Figure 5. SERC's expenditure during 2018-19.



Objectives for 2019-20

SERC will be putting together a new business plan for the three-year period (2019-2022), which will aim to ensure a cohesive and strategic approach to data collection and analysis, for effective use within both conservation and planning, and positioning SERC as the 'go to' ecological data evidence provider to improve Somerset's natural environment.

SERC will also be looking for ways to diversify and ensure it remains financially viable in the future. Now there is an established team, SERC can utilise the wide range of team skills and become involved in projects that support and enhance the core work of SERC.

SERC wants to ensure it remains up-to-date with new software to enhance data analysis techniques and improve data provision to SLA partners and clients. SERC will also continue to seek opportunities for acquiring more data for other less recorded taxa, through better working relationships, more efficient data exchange and new agreements.