

# Somerset Environmental Records Centre

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## Annual Report 2017-18



*Common poppies* ©John Bebbington



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## Contents

<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>2</b>
Key aims.....	2
Staff and volunteers .....	2
Partners .....	3
<b>Key performance data and achievements in 2017-18 .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Overview.....	4
Data management .....	4
Local Wildlife Sites Review .....	6
Local Geological Sites Review .....	8
Projects.....	9
Recorders engagement.....	11
Data supply .....	12
<b>Financial summary .....</b>	<b>14</b>
Income .....	14
Expenditure .....	14
<b>Objectives for 2018-19 .....</b>	<b>15</b>



## Summary

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.

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 2017-18, SERC achieved the following: -

- Entered 435,167 species records into our Recorder database, bringing the total to almost 2.6 million species records;
- Reviewed 41 existing Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) and registered two new LWS;
- Reviewed 65 existing Local Geological Sites (LGS);
- Delivered four projects;
- Delivered two training days;
- Screened 4212 planning applications; and
- Performed 305 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. In 2017-18, grants were given to the Somerset Moth Group towards a new laptop, to the Mammal Group for survey equipment and to the Otter Group towards printing costs for a new *Informative Pack for Surveyors* booklet.

During 2018-19, 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 efficiency, including benchmarking itself and taking advantage of technological developments;
- Ensure SERC 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); and
- 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, three Blackdown Hills Natural Futures Trainees on 6-month placements assisted in Local Wildlife Site (LWS) surveys as part of the ongoing Review. Three students from the University of Plymouth 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;
- Natural England;
- Somerset County Council;
- Somerset Wildlife Trust;
- Taunton Deane Borough Council (representing District Councils);
- University of the West of England; and
- Wessex Water.

## Key performance data and achievements in 2017-18

### Overview

During 2017-18, SERC achieved the following: -

- Entered 435,167 species records into our Recorder database, bringing the total to almost 2.6 million species records;
- Reviewed 41 existing LWS and registered two new LWS;
- Reviewed 65 existing LGS;
- Delivered four projects;
- Delivered two training days;
- Screened 4212 planning applications; and
- Performed 305 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

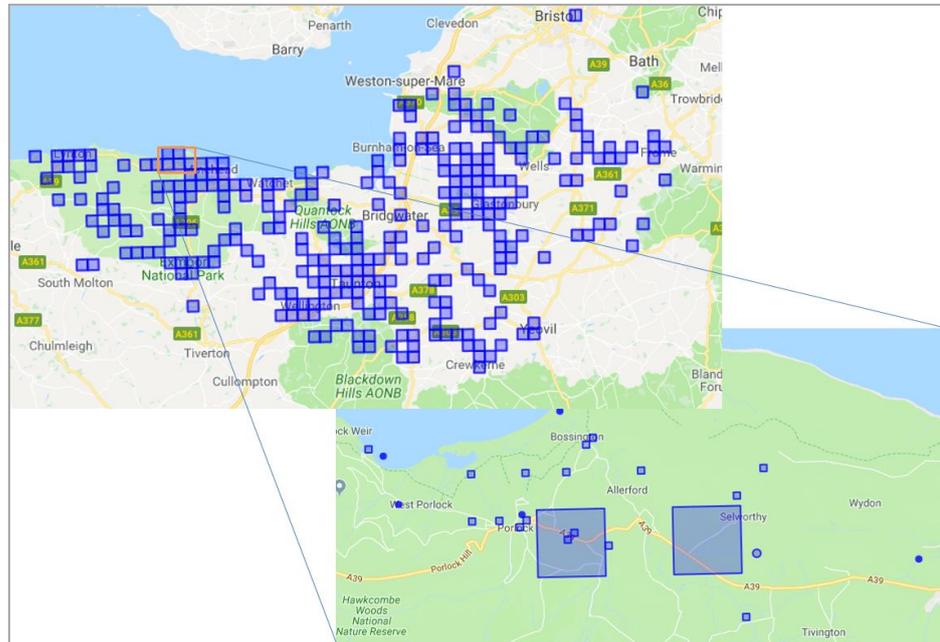
SERC also exchanges data with National organisations such as the British Lichen Society, Fungus Conservation Trust, Plantlife and the People's Trust for Endangered Species. Records are also regularly sent in by consultant ecologists, as well as ad-hoc records from members of the public.

#### Online recording

The number of records SERC have received through our online recording form is steadily increasing, with a total of 4543 records since its launch in spring 2017. Coverage is also excellent (see Figure 1 on the following page), with most of Somerset covered and 33 taxon groups (677 species) recorded. There is also a bias towards birds, flowering plants and butterflies. To date we have also embedded online recording to six



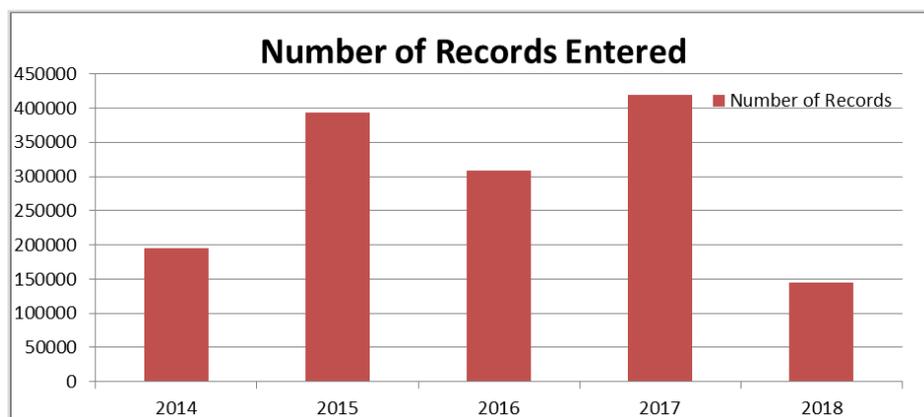
websites, including the Recorders of the Avalon Marshes, Exmoor National Park Authority and Quantocks Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).



**Figure 1. Online recording record coverage.**

### Data entry

The number of records entered into our Recorder database has remained stable, with an average of 300,000 records entered per annum, as shown by Figure 2. In 2017-18, SERC entered 435,167 species records into our Recorder database, bringing the total number of species records to almost 2.6 million at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018 (compared to 2.1 million at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017).



**Figure 2. Total number of records entered per annum. Note: 2018 includes records entered until 31<sup>st</sup> March.**

### Taxonomic distribution of data

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

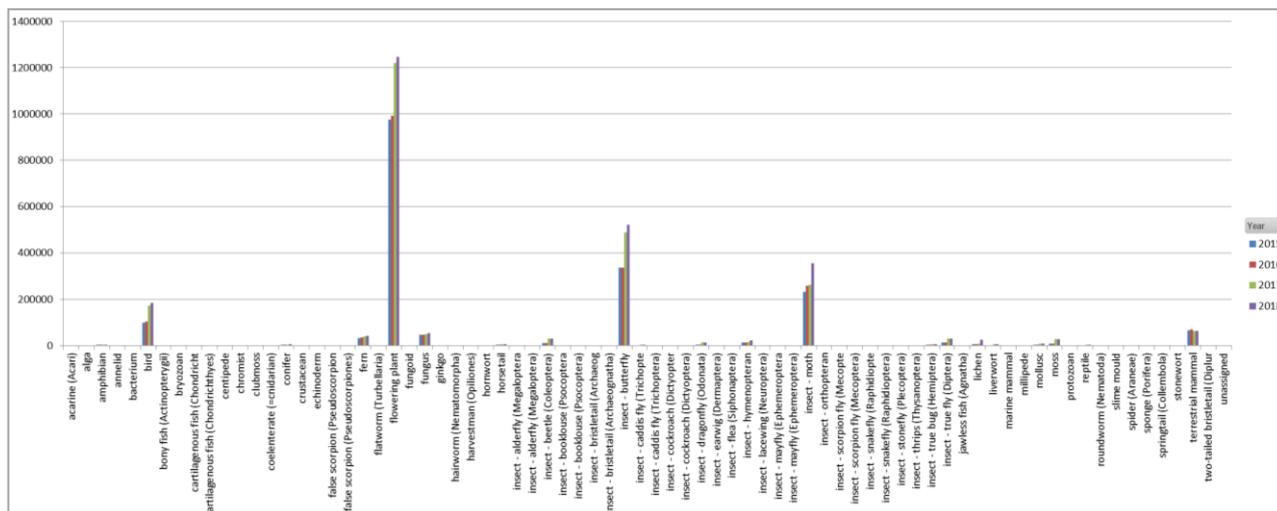


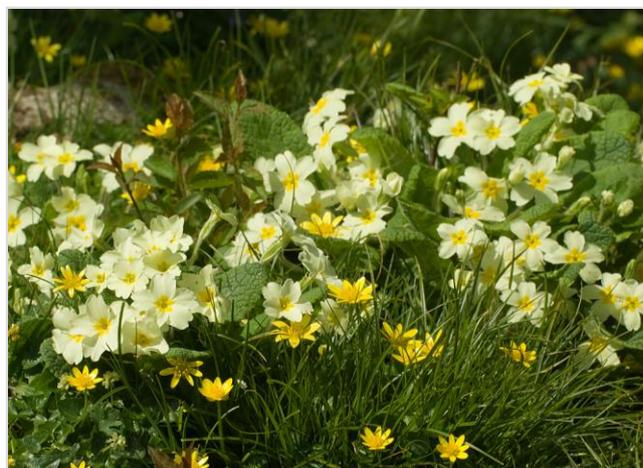
Figure 3. The accumulation of species records, divided into taxonomic groups.

## 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.



Primrose and lesser celandine ©John Bebbington

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.

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 2017-18, SERC continued its LWS Review programme, assessing more than 40 sites against the current LWS criteria, some of which requiring further assessment in 2018-19.



### Blackdown Hills AONB

13 sites in the Blackdown Hills AONB were assessed, comprising: -

- One new site designated as a LWS;
- Two existing LWS, one of which meets current LWS criteria following survey, and the other under the same ownership, which requires further assessment in 2018-19; and
- 10 existing LWS (in both Taunton Deane and South Somerset) reassessed using data collected during the Blackdown Hills AONB Natural Futures Project. All 10 sites meet current LWS criteria, with boundary amendments for three sites. Two sites require further assessment in 2018-19 regarding potential boundary extensions.

All sites surveyed in their entirety as part of the Natural Futures Project have now been assessed against the current LWS criteria, but sites which have been partially surveyed are still undergoing assessment.

### Exmoor

Nine sites on Exmoor were assessed, comprising: -

- One new site designated as a LWS; and
- Five existing LWS, which meet current LWS criteria, with boundary amendments for two sites. Land surrounding one of these will be assessed in 2018-19 as a possible extension to the existing LWS;
- Two existing LWS which require further assessment in 2018-19; and
- One existing LWS, which has been de-designated due to a change in the selection criteria.



*Exmoor oak woodland* ©Ann Fells

### Key Urban Areas

One Key Urban Area LWS in Bridgwater was the subject of a biodiversity audit by a MSc student from the University of Gloucester, producing a large amount of data for the site and enabling it to be assessed. The LWS meets three of the current LWS criteria.

### Quantock Hills AONB

Two existing LWS in the Quantock Hills AONB were reassessed and re-designated as a composite LWS. Both sites are contiguous and under the same ownership and management.



## Mendip

11 sites in Mendip were assessed, comprising: -

- Seven existing LWS, six of which meet current LWS criteria with a boundary extension for one site. One LWS requires further assessment in 2018-19; and
- Four existing LWS, which have been partially surveyed by the Somerset Botany Group, but require further assessment in 2018-19.

## South Somerset

Four sites in South Somerset were assessed, comprising: -

- Three existing LWS re-designated as a composite LWS; and
- One existing LWS, which meet current LWS criteria.

## Taunton Deane

Three existing LWS in Taunton Deane were assessed, all of which meet current LWS criteria.

## **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 was secured from the Exmoor National Park Authority and the Quantocks AONB 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.



*Trentishoe Member of Hangman Sandstone Formation on coast* ©Wesley Harris

days per week) were appointed for summer 2017, as well as one gap-year placement for autumn and winter 2017-18, all from the University of Plymouth.

During the year, the student volunteers and SGG mentors assessed c. 65 of LGS in Somerset against the LGS criteria, with a focus on the western part of Somerset, particularly Exmoor National Park.

12 of these LGS were selected to be put forward for reconfirmation at the first LGS Panel in May 2018. The remaining LGS visited in 2017-18 require further desk work in 2018-19, following improvements to the assessment form.

### Projects

In 2017-18, SERC delivered four projects, including data analysis, two bat surveys and a bioblitz.

#### Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership Management Plan

SERC was commissioned by the Blackdown Hills AONB to analyse data on the progress of the AONB against indicators within their 2014-19 Partnership Management Plan. The results have since been summarised in a State of the AONB report, in order to inform for the next five-year plan for the AONB.

#### 2017-18 Review

In 2017-18, SERC began 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



*Ilfacombe Mudstone Formation (Combe Martin Slates Member) on Exmoor, Somerset* ©Wesley Harris

### Brue Valley Big Bat Survey

The Brue Valley Big Bat Survey project began in 2013, with the final year in 2017. The project was a collaboration between SERC, Somerset Wildlife Trust and the Somerset Bat Group, with assistance from numerous volunteers. Funding for the project was gratefully received from Wessex Watermark (a Wessex Water initiative), as well as membership subscriptions and fundraising.



Common pipistrelle © Amy Lewis

The Big Bat Survey concept originated as part of the Mendip Hills Living Landscape project in 2007, with an aim of furthering understanding of how different species of bat use the landscape through a repeatable annual method over five years.

The Brue Valley Big Bat Survey in 2017 recorded bat activity (i.e. the number of bat passes) over six transect routes with predefined stops using bat detectors and recorders. The average number of passes per transect route in 2017 was 380, with 10 bats species recorded overall, comprising: barbastelle; serotine; *Myotis* sp.; noctule; Nathusius' pipistrelle; common pipistrelle; soprano pipistrelle; long-eared bat sp.; greater horseshoe bat; and lesser horseshoe bat. Survey reports for 2013-2017 are available on the SERC website.

### Forde Abbey bioblitz

The Blackdown Hills AONB held a Wildlife Discovery Day at Forde Abbey near Chard, in June 2017, with the help of 16 organisations across Somerset, Devon and Dorset, including SERC. The event was part of the Heritage Lottery funded Natural Futures project, which ran from 2015-18.

As well as species recording, various wildlife-themed events were held throughout the day to enthuse the 500 members of the public who attended, including pond/river dipping, birdwatching, bug hunts and forest crafts. SERC collected numerous records with the expertise of various specialist groups who were involved, particularly on various invertebrate groups.



Male Orange-tip on Spanish bluebell ©John Bebbington



### Routes to the River Tone – Daubenton’s Go to Town survey

To continue the legacy of the Routes to the River Tone project ran by Somerset Wildlife Trust, SERC and the Somerset Bat Group, the Daubenton’s Go to Town survey was designed, in order to learn more about the foraging activity of Daubenton’s bats known to roost in Taunton town centre.



*Sherford Stream Pool* ©SERC

The survey was performed with the help of the Somerset Bat Group and a group of dedicated volunteers, who attended training by an experienced Bat Group member. The survey was held over two dates, a month apart, in June and July 2017. The survey recorded bat activity (i.e. the number of bat passes) over transect routes with predefined stops along the Sherford Stream and Mill Stream (tributaries of the River Tone) using bat detectors and recorders.

The first survey was attended by 29 volunteers who gave in total 72½ hours of their time recording almost 6500 bat passes. The results of the surveys are currently being analysed and will be used to inform further focussed work on bat usage of Taunton in 2018-19.

### **Recorders engagement**

#### Training days

In October 2017, SERC’s Ecologist, Ann Fells held a training day on tree identification for Bruton’s Tree Warden and a group of local people hoping to improve their knowledge of trees to record trees in their local area. In January 2018, Ann also held a training day on winter tree identification at the SERC offices for members of the public.



©Chris Loudon

#### 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. SERC has also sought to renew and widen data exchange agreements with National organisations such as the People’s Trust for Endangered Species. Regular specialist group liaison meetings at SERC are 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 324 likes with a five-star rating and is being used to promote recording of target species, along with the website, which is regularly updated with 'what to look out for this week'.

### Data supply

#### Service Level Agreements

In 2017-18, SERC held 10 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;
- 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 4212 in 2017-18, with 43% returning positive records. This was compared to 5197 in 2016-17; the fall might be due to SERC no longer screening planning applications for Taunton Deane Borough Council since July 2017 on their request.

Table 1 on the following page summarises the number of planning applications screened by SERC in 2017-18 along with the number returning positive records.



**Table 1. Summary of planning applications screened by SERC in 2017-18, and the number returning positive records.**

Planning Authority	Number of planning applications screened	Number of planning applications returning positive records	Percentage
Mendip District Council	4	4	100%
Sedgemoor District Council	1541	710	46%
South Somerset District Council	2338	945	40%
Taunton Deane Borough Council *	328	132	40%
West Somerset Council	1	1	100%
Somerset County Council	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>4212</b>	<b>1792</b>	<b>43%</b>

\*SERC stopped screening planning applications for Taunton Deane Borough Council in July 2017.

## 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 2017-18 we carried out a total of 305 data searches, compared to 267 in 2016-17. This is an increase of 38, of which 31 were consultants, and so generated income for SERC. From statistics available from 2012-13, this is the highest number of searches processed in any one year. Table 2 summarises the total number of data search requests carried out by SERC in 2017-18.

**Table 2. The total number of ad hoc data search requests performed by SERC in 2017-18.**

Client type	Consultant/NGO	Academic/ Landowner	Community/ Parish Planning	Local Groups/ Other	SLA holders	Total
<b>Number of ad hoc data search requests</b>	253	27	2	14	9	<b>305</b>

SERC continue to receive positive feedback for the service and delivery of data searches, a personal highlight being a comment from a consultant who had not used SERC before:

*"I'd like to congratulate you on the ease of the form to use - the drop downs and associated cost are a dream. I use local record centres throughout the UK, and yours is by far the easiest and most comprehensive. Well done, others should take note."*



## 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 small surplus carried over from 2016/17. Figure 4 illustrates SERC’s income during 2017-18.

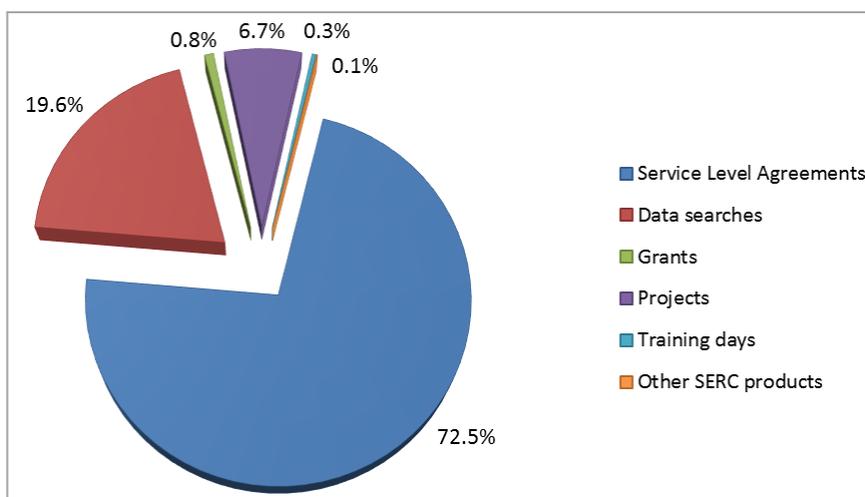


Figure 4. SERC’s income during 2017-18.

### 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. In 2017-18, grants were given to the Somerset Moth Group towards a new laptop, to the Mammal Group for survey equipment and to the Otter Group towards printing costs for a new *Informative Pack for Surveyors* booklet. Figure 5 illustrates SERC’s expenditure during 2017-18.

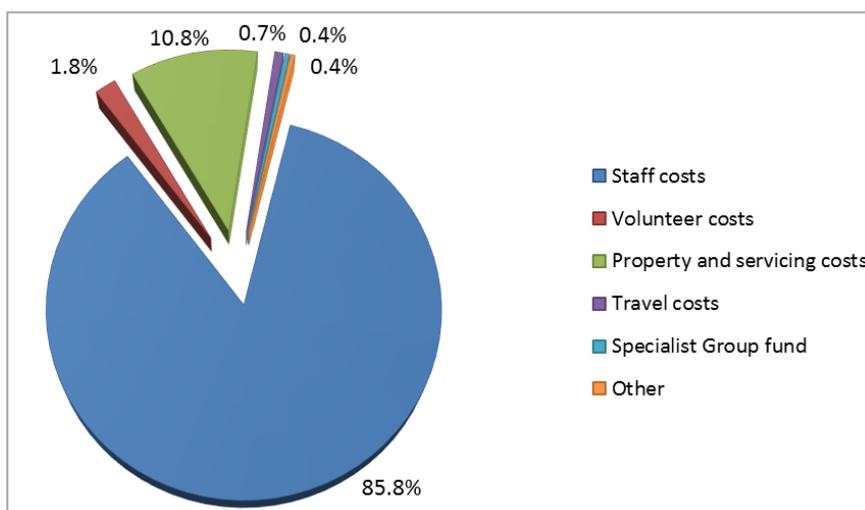


Figure 5. SERC’s expenditure during 2017-18.



## Objectives for 2018-19

During 2018-19, 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. 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. We also hope to hold more training days to secure income.



*Short-eared owl* ©Brian Gibbs

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.