SOMERSET ENVIRONMENTAL RECORDS CENTRE

PROSPECTUS October 2014

Introduction

An Environmental Records Centre for Somerset (SERC)

SERC provides a one stop shop to

- Collate and manage robust data about wildlife
- Provide analysis and consolidated summaries
- Carry out strategic reviews of data holdings in the County and lead on addressing data gaps
- Work in partnership with a range of groups and individuals to support and encourage recording

Data about wildlife and its whereabouts and health is crucial to its conservation – a fact recognised by all those involved in countryside management and by individuals and organisations that make decisions that affect the natural environment. The collection of such data is a valued activity for many naturalists and natural history societies.

In Somerset there are a number of agencies, authorities, voluntary organisations and individuals that hold information on the County's wildlife, in varying forms and for many purposes. However, these databases remain largely unconnected and are often very far from complete, with no one group or organisation able to provide an overview or to service the many bodies involved in recording wildlife in Somerset. The records are kept in different formats, are disparate and can be difficult to interrogate and analyse.

Information on the health and whereabouts of wildlife in Somerset is needed by a wide range of individuals and organisations to:

- Enhance the value of Somerset's biodiversity
- Minimise the adverse impact of developments
- Advance individual knowledge and enjoyment.

Without accurate and up to date information decisions that will affect Somerset's habitat and wildlife are taken at high risk.

SERC was established to gather, manage and disseminate data about Somerset's wildlife. SERC takes a partnership approach based upon shared objectives, and offers mutual benefits to those involved. It aims to establish the kind of network of knowledge and intelligence which Somerset needs if it is to safeguard and promote the interests of its rich natural terrestrial and marine environment over the next millennium.

SERC cannot work in isolation and needs key partner organisations and individuals to succeed. It must engage with and work within national and regional initiatives that are taking place to monitor and enhance biodiversity. Crucial to this approach are the needs of partners and the security of data that goes with working together.

Partnership working is manifested through the SERC Team which provides funding partners, specialist groups and other interested parties with an opportunity for discussion and information sharing about issues central to the operation of the Records Centre. The Executive Group oversees the strategic direction of SERC, as well as approving and monitoring its annual work programme and priorities.

This prospectus defines the aims, objectives, structure and operations of SERC.

AIMS OF SERC

1   To achieve and maintain comprehensive, up to date and rigorous information on the state of Somerset's natural environment, particularly habitats and species.
2   To encourage and facilitate co-operation and communication, including data sharing between all those involved with recording.
3   To provide appropriate access to information held at SERC in order to better understand and to enjoy Somerset's wildlife and to enable decision makers to protect and enhance it.

OPERATION

All work in SERC is carried out under the following three principles:

1.   **The quality of work will always meet best practice standards**
2.   **Work will always be delivered to agreed deadlines**
3.   **Clients will enjoy working with SERC, and staff and volunteers will enjoy working for SERC**

DATA COLLECTION

- Ensure data collected on Somerset's marine and terrestrial species and habitats has been collected a rigorous manner, and appropriate verification process is followed.
- Promote and conduct surveys and individual data submission to help monitor the state of specific marine and terrestrial habitats and species, and the trends affecting these
- Lead on managing the extent and condition of Somerset's Local Wildlife Sites
- Enhance the exchange of data between recorders and SERC

DATA MANAGEMENT

- Maintain metadata for all data held by SERC
- Consolidate and analyse data using appropriate techniques and software
- Ensure all best practice storage and security safeguards are in place to protect the integrity of the data.
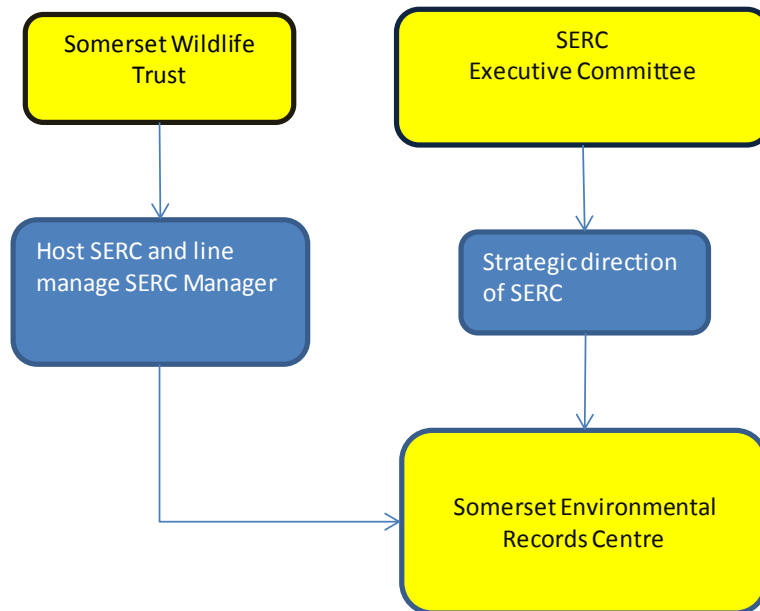

DATA DISSEMINATION

- Disseminate data on habitats and species in the most appropriate form that meets client needs.
- Produce reports and summaries of wildlife information in Somerset

- Ensure gaps in data for Somerset by species, habitat and geographical area are transparent

ORGANISATION & DELIVERY

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│  Somerset Wildlife  │        │        SERC         │
│        Trust        │        │ Executive Committee │
└─────────────────────┘        └─────────────────────┘
           │                              │
           ▼                              ▼
┌─────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────┐
│ Host SERC and line  │        │ Strategic direction │
│ manage SERC Manager │        │ of SERC             │
└─────────────────────┘        └─────────────────────┘
           │                              │
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           │              ┌─────────────────────────────┐
           └─────────────▶│  Somerset Environmental     │
                          │     Records Centre          │
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1. SERC is hosted by Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) which is responsible for managing SERC's work in co-ordination with the Executive Group. Line management is through SWT's Head of Conservation and Strategy Policy Officer with the support of the Chief Executive. SERC follows all SWT employment and Health and Safety policies. The SERC Manager role is responsible for the operational management of the team which includes volunteers and contracted staff.

2. The Executive Group will contribute towards the strategic direction of work programmes and priorities. The Executive Group members will highlight project opportunities and funding ideas, and feedback areas where SERC may need to address data gaps. The composition of the Executive Group is set out in Appendix 1.

3. SERC staff:
- Take the lead in monitoring and assessing Local Wildlife Sites
- Conduct specific and focussed surveys of habitats and species when needed
- Engage with recording groups in order to get accurate and timely information.
- Encourage new volunteers and recorders to contribute and become involved
- Collate and analyse data held for Somerset and communicate data gaps
- Ensure all data held at the SERC is accurate, validated, verified and conforms to NBN standards
- Ensure the security and use of data complies with agreed policies and procedures
- Work with partners to ensure SERC is as innovative, efficient and effective as it can be within the resources available
- Communicate analysis and summaries on the state of Somerset's habitat and species

FUNDING

SERC's work is funded from a mix of sources:

1. Service Level Agreements and Memoranda of Understanding with partners who require specific work to be carried out
2. Contracts with partners that relate to specific projects
3. Commercial contract work for other organisations and businesses
4. Data licences with partners
5. Revenue from data searches for commercial organisations
6. Other ad hoc income

SERC **operates on a not for profit basis**. The size and scale of its operation is dependent on the funding it can secure.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 SERC Executive Group Terms of Reference

Appendix 2 SERC Policies
> Data collection
> Data security
> Data management
> Data dissemination

Appendix 3 Table of charges for 14/15 business year

Appendix 1

SERC Executive Group Terms of Reference

Whilst SWT as employer retains legal responsibility for staffing and finances of SERC, the role of the Executive Group is to work with SWT management and SERC staff to:

- Understand the business of SERC and advise on future direction and development
- Review progress and help safeguard the financial status of SERC
- Identify survey and monitoring priorities across the County for and with SERC

SWT will be responsible for the following operational areas:
- Agree an annual programme of work
- Agree an annual budget
- Provide technical advice and support on operational issues
- Support the establishment of contractual agreements between partner organisations and SERC

In addition Executive Group members shall communicate with:
- interested parties to ensure that all participate in reducing the level of risk by identifying funded work opportunities and other means of support
- decision makers, elected representatives and budget holders in the county

Membership

Representatives from Somerset County Council, Somerset Wildlife Trust, Representative from the Defra Group, District Council (one representative on a rolling basis), Wessex Water, University of the West of England, co-opted representation from the recorder community and two SERC employees. The group;

- is quorate when at least four members, who are not SERC employees, are present
- will elect a Chair annually from its' members.
- asks organisations to consider the renewal or re-appointment of its representative every three years
- currently comprises of

Ed Wells, Specialist Group/Recorder representative

Tony Serjeant, Somerset   County Council

Barbara Collier, Taunton Deane Borough Council
Michele Bowe, Somerset Wildlife Trust
James Diamond, Defra Group
Dave Jones, Wessex Water
Mark Steer, University of the West of England
Paula Hewitson, SERC Manager
Tony Price, SERC Data Manager

Interim Chair – Simon Nash for 2014/15 only

Meetings

- The Executive Group will aim to meet quarterly to review progress, review strategy and to review the financial status of SERC.
- The Executive Group does not have the power to make any decision that commits the staff or trustees of the Somerset Wildlife Trust to expenditure or a particular course of action.
- Minutes of meetings shall be taken and distributed by a member of SERC staff

Appendix 2 SERC Policies

1. SERC Data collection policy

1.1	Data collection

1.1.1 Data gathered by SERC will be used to build up a comprehensive picture of the state of habitat and species in Somerset, and help to monitor the health of our natural environment.

1.2	Strategic data collection

1.2.1 There is a huge amount of data that could be collected and collated by SERC. In order to manage the process of data acquisition sensibly SERC needs to have oversight of

- The existing holdings (count, geographical area, habitat and species coverage)
- The data that is held by other organisations and individuals
- The data SERC needs to collect to fill significant gaps and provide for present and future data needs of key data users i.e. its data priorities
- The resources available i.e. skills, time and funding in order to perpetuate the acquisition of new data

1.2.2 SERC will keep under regular review data collection and input priorities within the resource available, referring to the Executive Group where guidance is needed.

1.3	Metadata, data audits and reviews

All data held should be traceable to its metadata i.e. its' geographical location, who collected and who verified the record.

Routine and regular data quality assurance audits should be carried out.

1.4	Survey and monitoring

1.4.1 SERC will produce, follow and report performance against an annual business plan. The business plan will include sections covering surveying and monitoring priorities.

1.4.2 SERC will also work to develop a medium term plan.

2. SERC DATA MANAGEMENT POLICY

2.1   Data management

Once received, paper and electronic records will be managed in line with the SERC Data Processing Protocol.

2.2   Data ownership

The majority of data held by SERC is supplied by people or organisations other than the Records Centre. In law, the intellectual property rights of data generally resides with the person who collected the data, or their employer if they were paid to collect it.

Recorders placing copies of their records (or the originals) at the Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) do not relinquish ownership or copyright over their opinion, interpretation or photography of the records, unless they specifically state that they wish to do so. Data owners have the right to withdraw data at any time. Records supplied to SERC are protected by copyright, database rights and other intellectual property rights. SERC complies with the Data Protection Act (1998) with respect to information on recorders. Ownership of records is clearly recorded along with conditions of use, set on the records by the owners. Any such conditions are adhered to in full by SERC. Records that have restrictions on use are clearly marked and access to these records is controlled in accordance with the terms of agreements with data providers. SERC will not alter or amend any part of records supplied without the agreement of the recorder, recording groups, schemes or other organisations, as appropriate, except to correct obvious errors. The supplier of the records will be informed of any amendments following verification checks. Any amendments will be noted on the copy of the record in SERC's database 'Recorder'.

2.3   Processing newly acquired data

Data received by SERC should be verified internally or sent for verification, if required, within two weeks of receipt at SERC. Verified data should be added to the data base within one month of receipt.

Detailed processes are contained within the SERC Data Processing Protocol.

2.4   Processing existing data holdings

If data processing backlogs build up SERC will prioritise data regarding protected species or sites of particular interest first, and will seek to address the backlog by identifying additional resource.

2.5   Data storage

Reliable and accurate data storage is fundamental to SERC's operation. As such the Data Processing Protocol encompasses data storage conventions. This covers where and in what format data should be stored electronically, and in hard copy where appropriate, along with naming conventions.

2.6   Sensitive species and habitats

Specialist groups in the early days of SERC made reasoned suggestions about the use of data in terms of resolution and acceptable attribution and some of these rules are still applied today. The core differences being that working with data was a manual process and perception of risk was different. The volume of data collected and collated and the attitudes of people generally have changed. This has allowed for a more relaxed use of data meaning that some data no longer has any restrictions on it and other conditions have and are being negotiated to suit both the needs of the users and the protection against abuse.
Some data has the location name removed or adjusted or the geographic precision reduced to avoid landowners being approached directly and to protect the exact location of particular species.

SERC is working towards more sophisticated ways of dealing with both needs. It is now plausible to search on precise data but only display reduced quality information.

SERC also make a distinction between those people who are qualified to assess data and those who just need to be informed of a significant species or habitat.

3. SERC DATA DISSEMINATION POLICY

3.1   Data dissemination

SERC will normally provide access to any species and habitat records held except in certain specific circumstances where there is concern over releasing protected habitats and species records. Records are supplied by SERC to the following:

- Organisations with formal Service Level Agreements (SLAs), or equivalent, are either provided with copies of updated datasets periodically or specific data in response to a request. These include national and local nature conservation organisations and the local authorities.

- Enquirers in connection with commercial and non-commercial activities through the data enquiries service, for example ecological consultants, landowners, universities, local groups and individual recorders.

3.2   Data agreements and service level agreements

SERC's current agreement holders are Somerset Wildlife Trust, Natural England, Environment Agency, Wessex Water, Exmoor National Park, Somerset County Council and all District Councils.

SERC has data sharing agreements with many other environmental organisations to enhance the protection of the environment

In addition, SERC will continue to increase the number of data sharing agreements with national recording schemes and societies.

3.3   Data enquiry service

SERC reserves the right to make a charge for the time it takes for staff to extract, analyse and supply data to commercial enquirers. These charges are to cover staff time for administrating and undertaking the search.

Data searches are a common component of planning applications and as such SERC charges for supplying data to applicants e.g. consultant ecologists working on behalf of a client, land agents etc. A standard data search for a planning application entails a search of designated sites of conservation importance and a search of records for legally protected species, biodiversity priority species, Red Data Book and county notable species within a specified site radius (usually 1-2km) of the proposed development site.

Landowners and tenants seeking species records and survey reports relating to their land holdings can generally access this information free of charge, unless the request is connected to planning applications or agri-environment schemes or the area of search is extensive for a single enquiry (e.g. several land parcels in different locations) in which case SERC may charge for undertaking the data search due to the staff time needed in providing this service.

Where communities seek information to assist with the local planning process, a small charge will be made to cover the time needed to extract the relevant data.

SERC does not charge any recording groups or national societies for data searches where a data exchange agreement is in place. Individual recorders, supplying copies of their data to SERC ad-hoc and without an agreement, can receive copies of their original data free of charge at any time.

SERC will not generally charge individual members of the public for a data search aimed for nature conservation purposes or habitat/species research. However, SERC reserves the right to charge individuals, universities, charities and other organisations for data searches where there is a commercial gain for the applicant e.g. for grant applications. These requests will be assessed on a case by case basis.

3.4 Data ownership/use

The data provided under the above circumstances remains under the governance of SERC and is governed by the licencing terms which enables the recipient to use data for specified reasons only.

3.5 Sensitive species

In assessing the motivation of a data request, SERC is concerned about potential abuse of the data, including suspicion of destructive intent for species or habitats. Information on confidential species records (e.g. exact locations of badger setts, bat roosts etc.) is restricted in accordance with agreements with the data providers and full details of these records can only be released under specific circumstances:

·   Following the permission of the data provider to release the information requested.

·   Where there is evidently a nature conservation gain and the legitimate use of the data and SERC is confident that the information will not be misused. The provision of two legitimate referees and a data exchange agreement may be sought prior releasing any specific details of confidential records.

3.6 Environmental Information Regulations (1992) and Freedom of Information Act (2000)

Release of Records

Records held by SERC are available to all legitimate enquirers unless one or more of the following situation occurs:

- The data requested is restricted
- The enquirer is seeking data that is out of proportion to the case study or research project concerned.

4. SERC DATA SECURITY POLICY

4.1   Data security

PC Comms, an external IT company is contracted by the Somerset Wildlife Trust to provide IT Support which includes a level of data security services. PC Comms has provided their written procedures to SERC.

There are many data security risks however the two key areas for SERC are password security and data back-ups.

To maintain log on and password security a Manager must give authorisation for new user set up and specify the access needs. Passwords are issued to the new user and good password practice is encouraged.

The server back-up process is performed every night to a fire proof and waterproof USB drive. Copies of back-ups are kept for three days to allow shadow copies to be restored should it be required. Periodically back-ups are taken and kept indefinitely.

4.2   Access to the SERC offices

Access to the SERC office is restricted via door code security system. Staff and all other visitors are required to manually sign in on arrival. After office hours a door lock and security alarm are also activated.

4.3   SERC/SWT Staff and Volunteers

Access to data is only granted to those directly employed by SERC and to appropriately trained volunteers.

4.4   Access to SERC's digital records

Electronic data stored in SERC's data drive is restricted to authorised users via IT controls (i.e. log on settings). Data requests may be submitted to SERC via email or the internet site however direct access to data is not permitted.

4.5   Access to SERC's paper records and archives

Access to hard copies of records and archives are restricted via office security see 4.2 above. In addition protocols exist for signing out books, reports and other

resources, subject to the sensitive species restrictions (see paragraph 4.6 below).

4.6   Passing Data to Third Parties for verification

Data is sometimes passed to third parties for validation. This is exceptionally useful and allows expert knowledge to review a data set. In these circumstances a copy of the raw data is retained by SERC and correlated when the validated file is returned.

Appendix 3 Table of charges for 14/15 business year

Service	Audience	Charge (NB all exclusive of VAT)
Data Searches	Members of the public, SWT members	No charge but reviewing how we handle data request for Community Plans – there will be a charge
	Primary schools	No charge
	Students and secondary schools	No charge
	Academic institutions	No charge
	Recorders and Recording Groups with a data agreement	No charge
	Recorders and Recording Groups without a data agreement	Subject to negotiation; will depend on reason for request
	Nature Conservation Organisations	No charge
	Landowners (own or nearby land)	No charge
	Landowners (For commercial purposes e.g. planning applications, Farm Environment Plans)	90.00 – 250.00
	Developers and Consultants	90.00- 250.00
	Local Authorities, National Park Authorities and Government Agencies without an SLA	90.00- 250.00
	Local Authorities, National Park Authorities and Government Agencies with an SLA - for work outside the terms of the SLA	76.00-213.00
Reports	On email or CD	Costed individually (£90+)
	On paper	Costed individually (£90+)
Surveys	Preferential survey rate under SLAs	Costed individually based on time needed (iro £170 per day)
	Surveys for landowners or community groups	Costed individually based on time needed (iro £200 per day)
	Marine Survey	Costed individually based on time needed (iro £200 per day)