

Towpath user survey 2009



	Contents	2
1.0	Introduction	3
2.0	Methodology	4
3.0	Results	5
3.1	User Profile	5
	i) Gender and age profile	5
	ii) User groups and most popular sections	7
3.2	Survey Questions	9
	i) Getting to the Regional Park	9
	ii) Why visit the Regional Park?	13
	iii) Other towpath users	14
	iv) Information	14
	v) Access issues	15
	vi) Encouraging visitors back and improvements	15
4.0	Discussion	18
4.1	User Profile	18
4.2	Survey Questions	18
5.0	Comparison with previous years	21
5.1	User Profile	21
5.2	Survey Questions	21
	Appendices -	
	Appendix A - Recording Sheet	26
	Appendix B - Questionnaire	27
	Appendix C - Informal Feedback	29
	Appendix D - Historical Towpath Counter Data	31
	Appendix E - Survey Review	32

1.0 Introduction

This user survey was undertaken by Lagan Valley Regional Park in order to determine the users who frequent the towpath, how far they have travelled and reasons for their visits. This is a follow up to the surveys undertaken in 1998, 2001 and 2006.

The aims of the user survey are:

- To identify the key users within the park and provide facilities to enhance their experiences within the Park;
- To increase people's enjoyment and appreciation of the Regional Park;
- To identify non-users of the park and remove any barriers to their participation.

In order to achieve the above aims a user survey was conducted throughout the park during the months of July, August & September 2009.

The key elements of the user survey record the following information:

- Profile of the users in terms of age and gender,
- Usage of the park (frequency & location),
- Purpose of visit
- Identification of user conflict issues
- Identification of barriers to enjoyment

Although the fundamental questions remained the same as the user surveys conducted in 1998, 2001 and 2006 the following additional questions were added:

If you had £100 to spend on the park, what would you like to see it spent on?
Have you noticed any improvements in the park and if so what?
Are you a member of a club/organisation/group?

In question 7 the extra category, 'health' was added.

2.0 Methodology

A total of 2071 users were counted during the survey, from which a total of 168 surveys were completed.

The entire length of towpath between Union Locks, Lisburn and Stranmillis, Belfast was split into 5 sections as follows:

Section 1	Lockview car park to Shaw's Bridge
Section 2	Shaw's Bridge to Drumbeg
Section 3	Drumbeg to Hilden
Section 4	Hilden to Lagan Valley Island
Section 5	Lagan Valley Island to Union Locks

The time periods during which the survey was undertaken were between 0900 hours and 2000 hours. These time periods were chosen to ensure coverage of the broadest range of use of the towpath over any given day.

Each day gave a possibility of five two hour survey windows, 35 windows per week. The time slots were rotated thus, if a survey was carried out on Monday from 1000 to 1200, Tuesdays survey would be carried out from 1200 to 1400, and Wednesday 1400 to 1600 and so on until 1800 to 2000, whereupon the next day started at 1000 to 1200 and the cycle was repeated. The five sections of the towpath were surveyed with a staggered rotation, thus: section 1, section 3, section 5, section 2, section 4, and then back to section 1 whereupon the cycle was repeated. This gave an acceptable level of randomization whilst ensuring a balanced coverage of all sites.

The surveys were conducted over a period of three months, which covered a total of 92 days. In practise a total of 62 survey days were recorded, with a total of 168 individuals being interviewed. During this period the surveyors spent 2 hours of each day on one of the 5 sections, with the first hour being devoted to the user count.

Towpath users were stopped at random and asked to participate in the survey, with their responses being noted on the questionnaire. A copy of the questionnaire is presented in Appendix A.

Many of those questioned welcomed the opportunity to express their views and concerns and considered it a worthwhile exercise. The main findings of the survey are presented in section 3.0.

3.0 Results

The results can be divided into section 3.1 dealing with the counts of the survey and section 3.2 dealing with the data derived from the questions asked.

3.1 User Profile

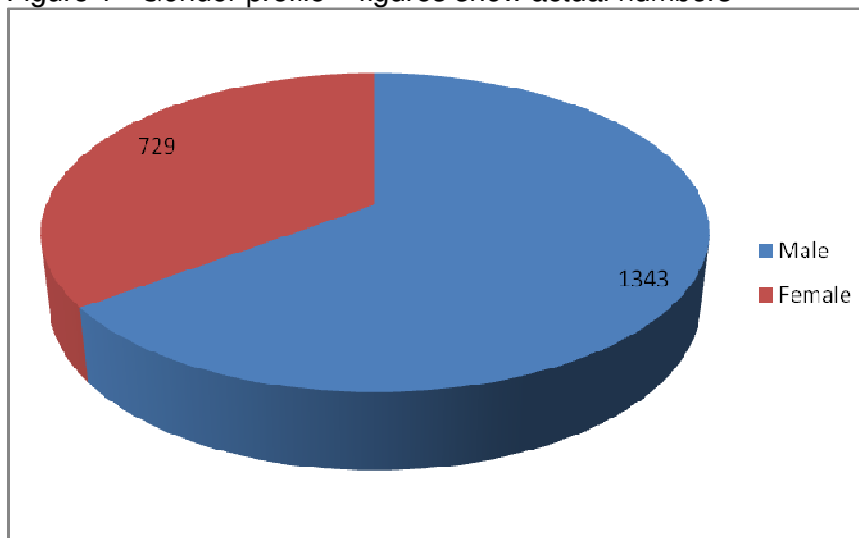
i) Gender and age profile

The recording sheet for counting users is shown in Appendix A

Gender profile

The proportion of male to female is presented in Figure 1, with males representing 65% of users and females representing 25%.

Figure 1 - Gender profile – figures show actual numbers



In considering the gender profile we can analyse each of the time slots throughout the day and see if one or other gender preferred to use the towpath at a certain time. Figure 2 shows gender and total use for each of the six time slots for the surveys. It is apparent from Figure 2 that there are no obvious differences in time of day between the genders.

Figure 2 – Gender and time of day

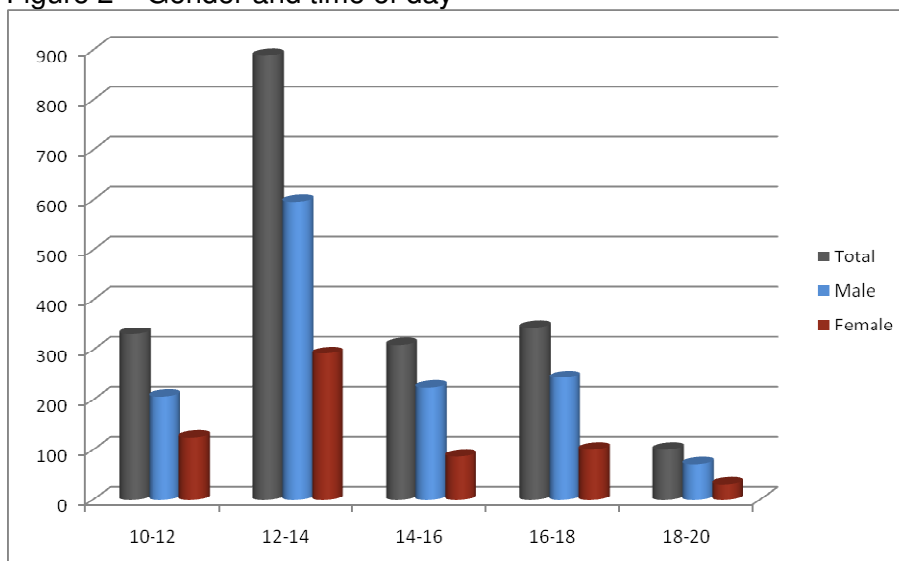


Figure 3 – Age profile of users – figures show actual numbers

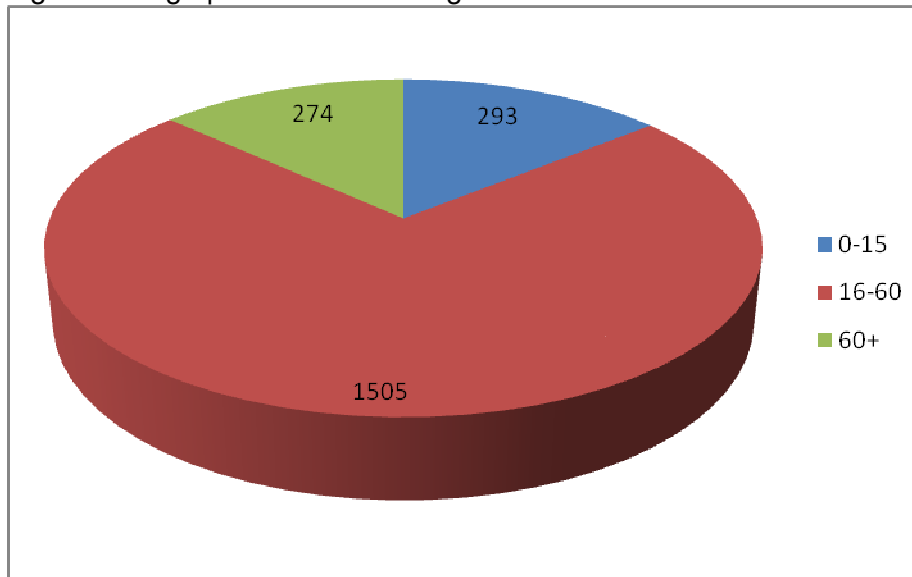


Figure 3 shows the age profile of the towpath users surveyed. As might be expected the sample of people surveyed resembles the age profile of the population as a whole, with 73% falling into the main body of adulthood, 13% retired and 14% younger people.

ii) User groups and most popular sections

Figure 4 – User groups – figures show actual numbers

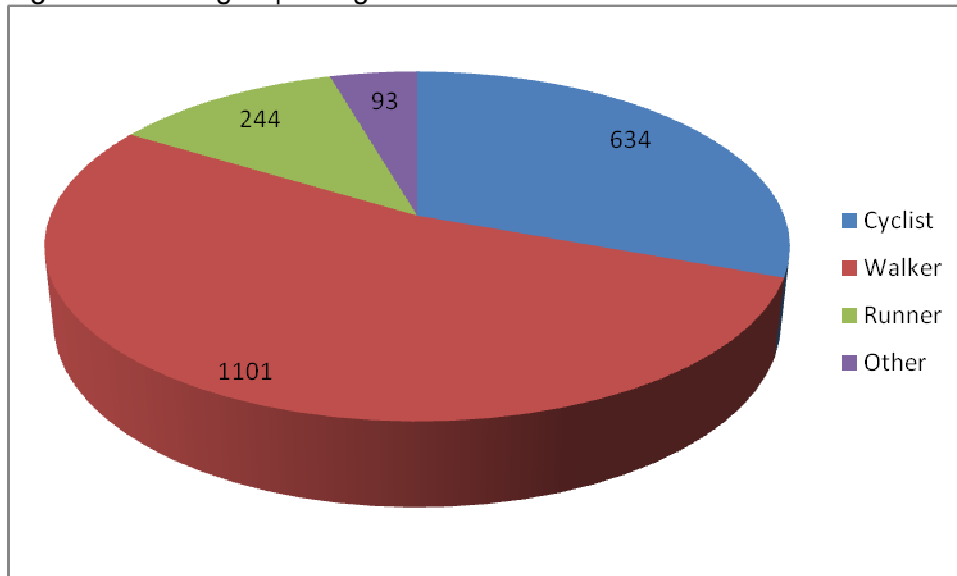


Figure 4 shows the proportions of the main user groups on the towpath. 53% fall into the pedestrian category of walkers, whilst the second biggest category was cyclists at 31%. Runners and joggers take 12% whilst the other category represents 4%.

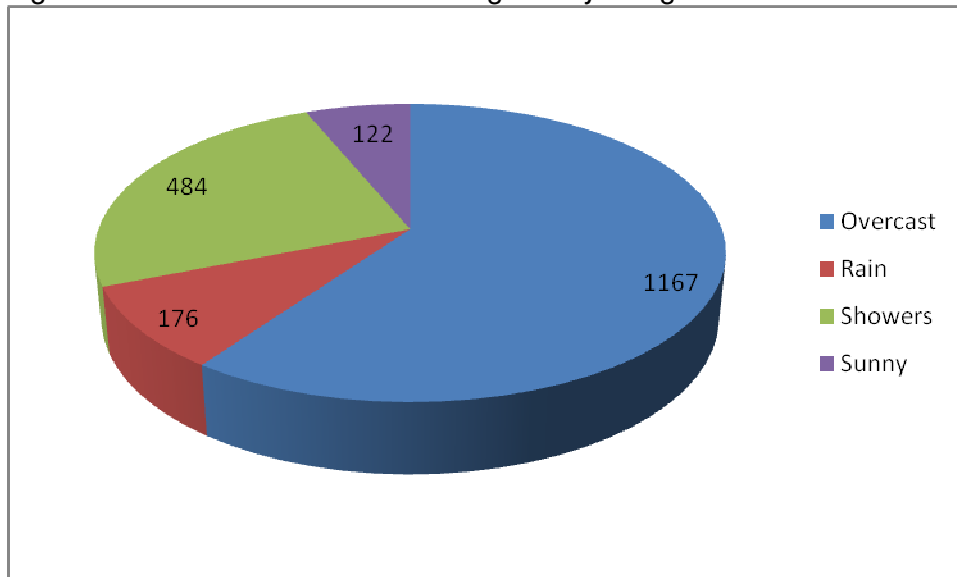
Figure 5 – Comparative popularity of sections



The five sections used to conduct the survey have innate variations in their popularity and the figure above clearly shows that Shaw's Bridge is the most popular. Unexpectedly, Stranmillis, Drumbridge and Hilden all show similar levels of popularity with Moore's bridge showing the least use.

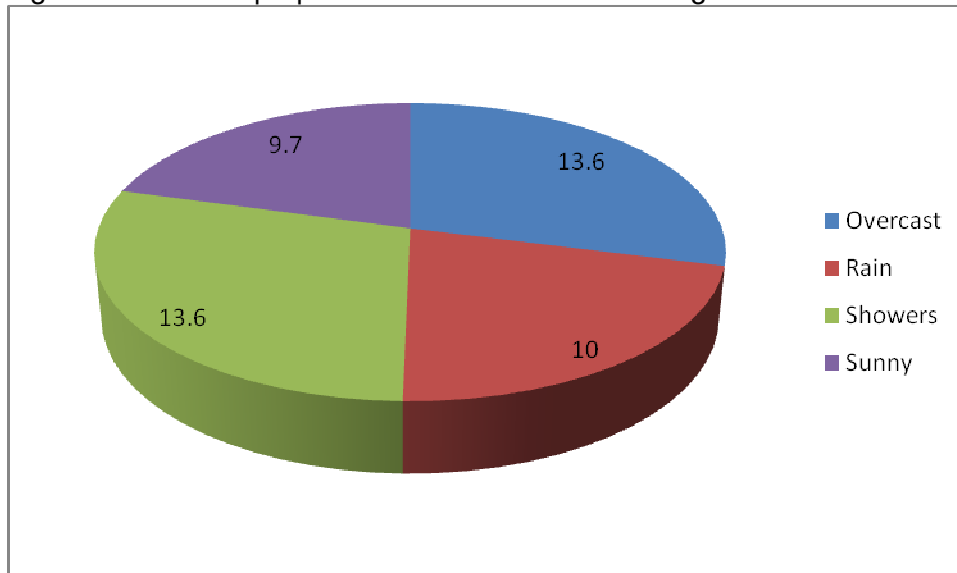
Northern Ireland and the weather !

Figure 6a – Weather conditions during surveys – figures show actual numbers



A further detail recorded was the weather conditions at the time of survey. The question of weather influencing use has been postulated and the following data may give some insight as to whether this is indeed the case. Figure 6a shows the weather conditions during the surveys and as can be expected they reflect a typical Northern Ireland summer, with most survey days being carried out during overcast weather, and showery days, with a much smaller portion during heavy rain or sunshine.

Figure 6b – Use in proportion to ambient weather – figures show actual numbers



In order to see if this influences people's motivation to visit we looked at the level of use in proportion to the prevailing conditions. Figure 6b shows the use in proportion to the prevailing weather conditions on that day and it is clear that average use varies little with the weather.

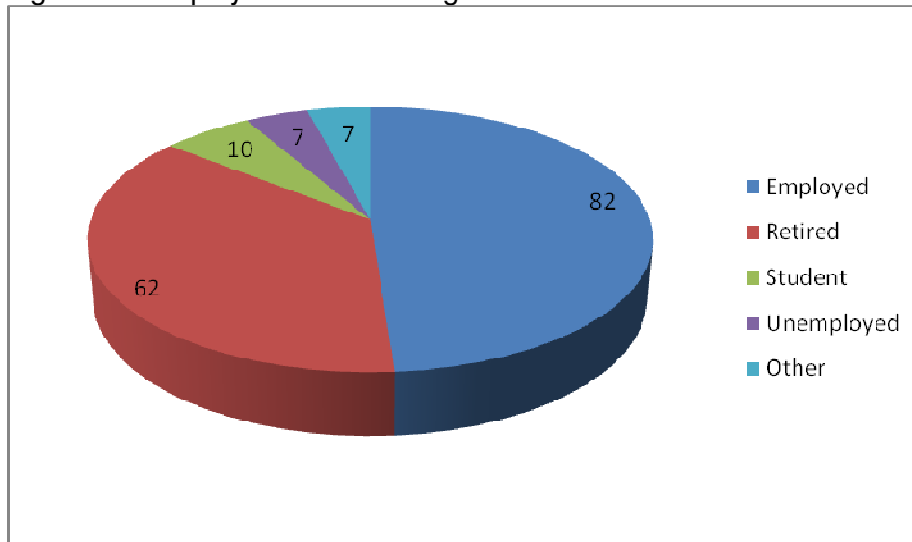
3.2 Survey questions

Users were asked a total of 16 questions (Appendix B) the responses to which are presented in this section.

i) Getting to the Regional Park

Question 1 - Employment status

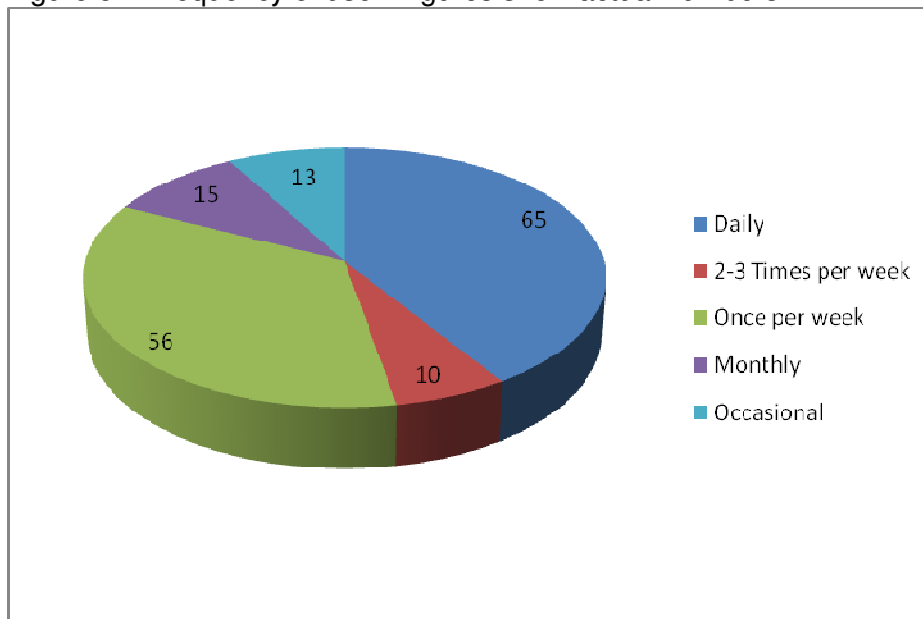
Figure 7 – Employment status – figures show actual numbers



Employment status of towpath users is shown in Figure 7. Employed people are by far the largest group comprising 49% of users: retired users were the second largest group accounting for 37% of users, 6% were students, 4% comprised unemployed people and 4% comprised others. The other category included carers and home managers.

Question 2 – Frequency of use

Figure 8 – Frequency of use – figures show actual numbers



From Figure 8, The majority of people (41%) use the towpath daily, 35% weekly, with the remaining 24% visiting the towpath a few times per week, monthly and occasionally.

Questions 3 & 4 – Access and Egress

Figure 9 - Access points

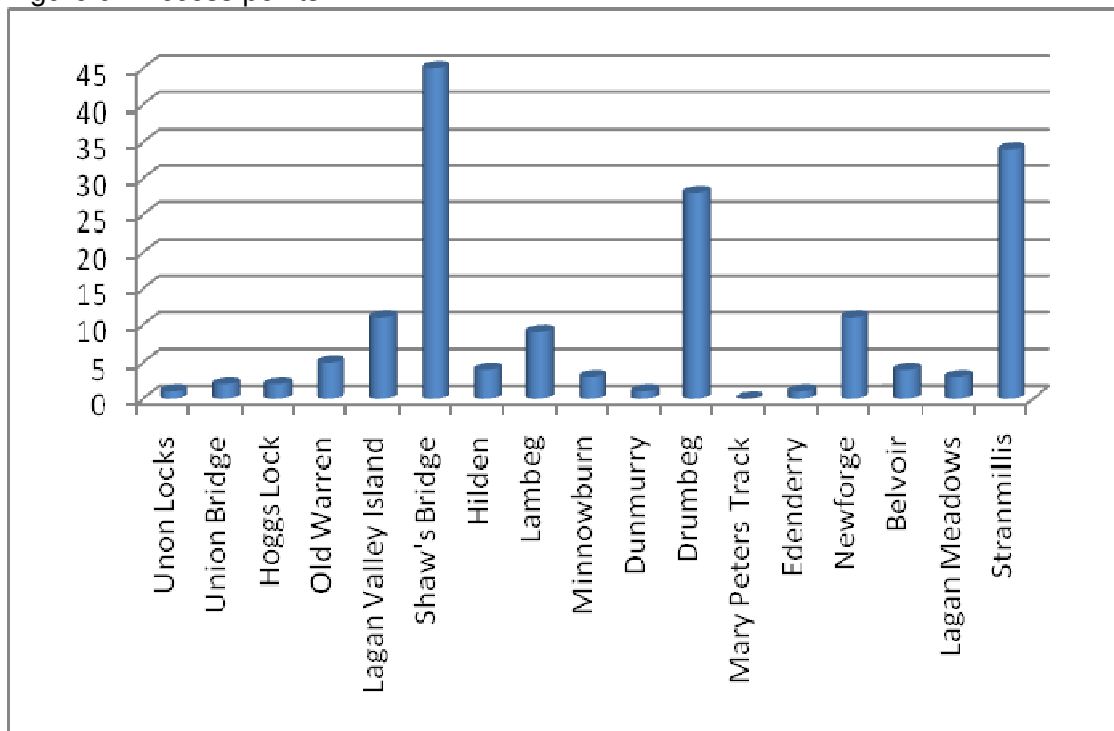
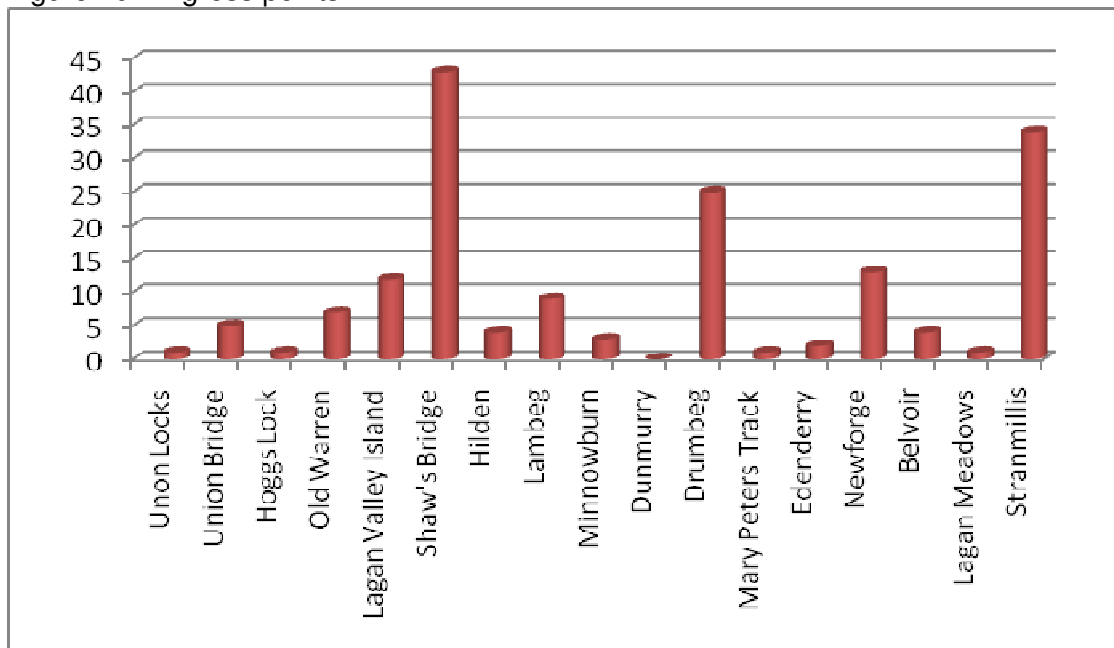


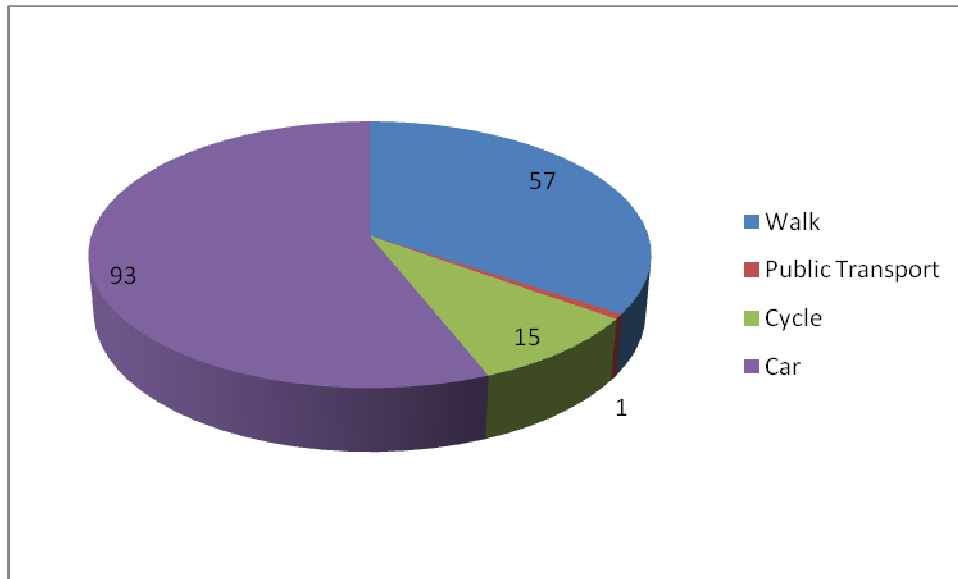
Figure 10 – Egress points



Figures 9 and 10 show the main access and egress points to the towpath and their relative levels of use. We can see that the most used access points are at Shaw's Bridge, Drumbeg and Stranmillis, with medium use made of Lagan Valley Island, Lambeg and Newforge. The remaining access points have low use. Whilst there is slight variation in the specific data, this pattern is identical for egress points. Both these data sets therefore, show that Shaw's Bridge, Drumbeg and Stranmillis are the most popular ways of accessing and leaving the towpath. The use of these three locations represents 65% of users for access and 62% of users for egress.

Question 5 – Travel to the towpath

Figure 11 – Modes of transport to get to the towpath - figures show actual numbers



By far the most popular means of getting to the towpath (Figure 11) is by car. 56% of all users questioned arrived at their destination by car. 34% of those questioned walked, 9% cycled and only 1% of those questioned used public transport to arrive at the towpath.

Question 6 – Where did you travel from?

Figure 12 – Setting out place - figures show actual numbers

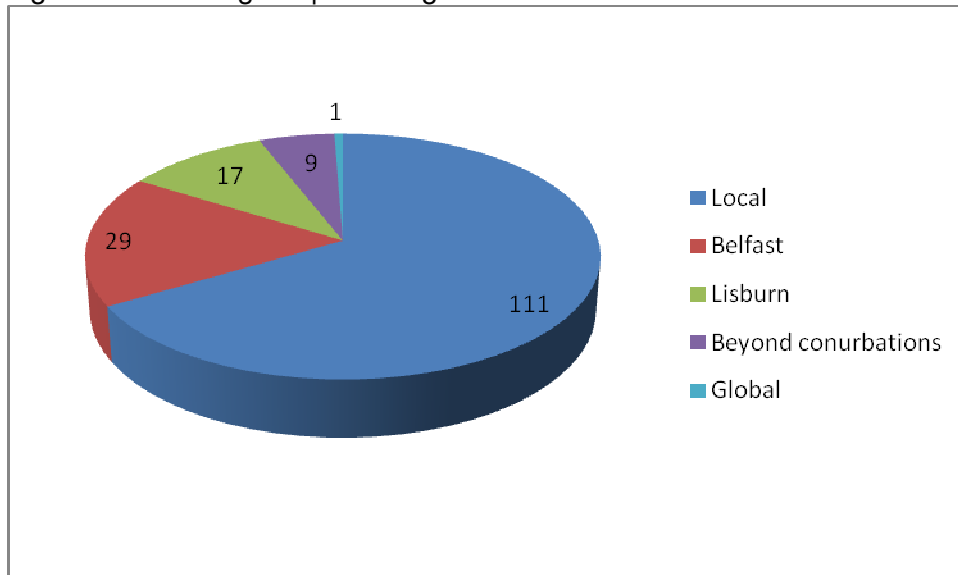
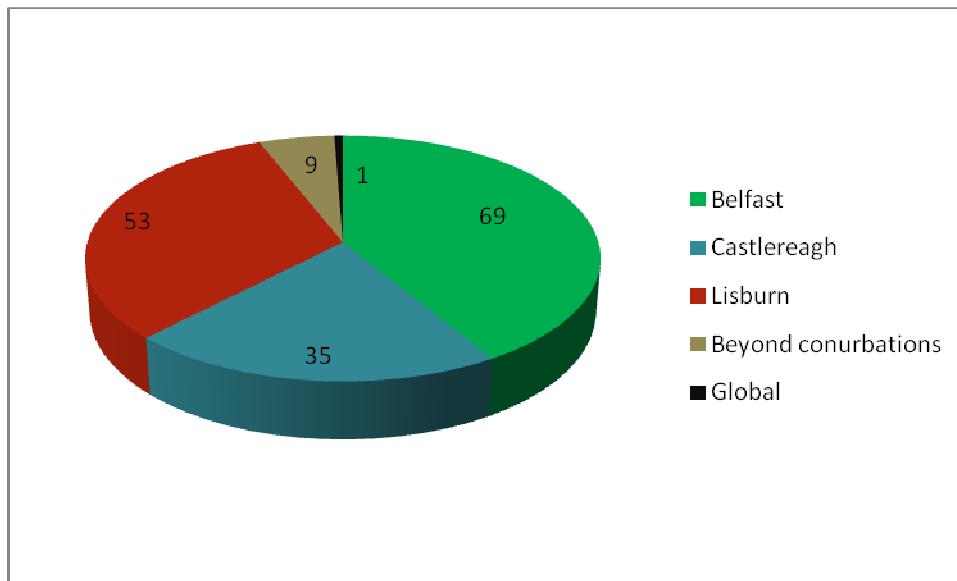


Figure 13 – Setting out place showing proportion of local visitors within each of the three council regions - figures show actual numbers



A wide range of destinations were volunteered in response to this question, however, for the purposes of simplicity answers were pooled, so that local destinations were areas within or bordering the Regional Park except Lisburn and Belfast, Lisburn and Belfast represent all those start points that fall within the districts of each respective city. Beyond conurbations represent start points that lie outside the districts of Belfast and Lisburn, and global represents outside the UK and Ireland.

From Figure 12 it is clear that the majority of users live within or very close to the LVRP boundary, with most of the remainder coming from either Belfast or Lisburn. Few visitors to the towpath in this survey come from further afield. When we drill down further and distribute the local category into the three council areas, we can see in Figure 13 that 41% come from the Belfast area, 32% from the Lisburn area and 21% from the Castlereagh area.

ii) Why visit the Regional Park?

Questions 7 & 8 – Purpose and attraction to visiting the towpath?

Figure 14 - Main purpose of visit

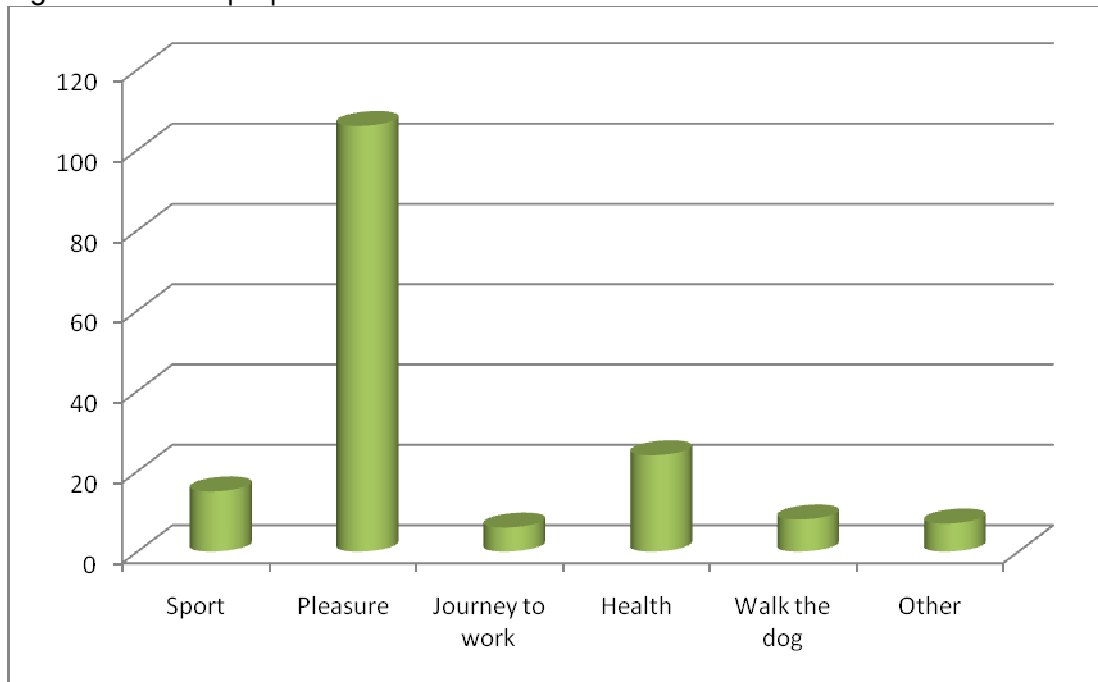
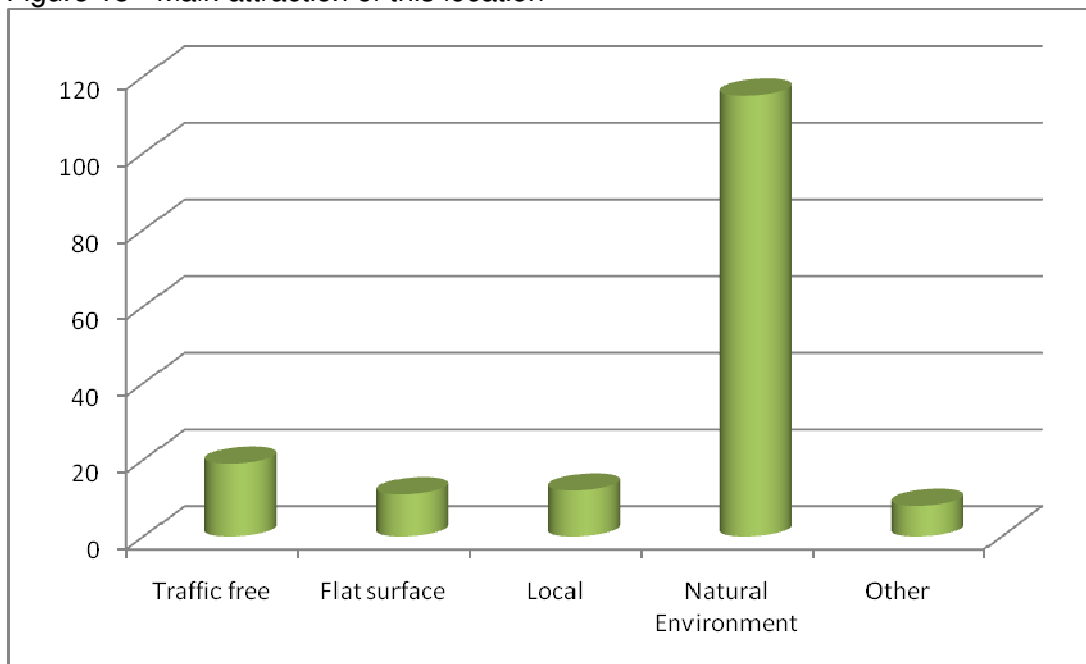


Figure 14 shows the purpose of people's visit to the towpath, whilst Figure 14 shows what attracted them to the towpath. 64 % of users came to the towpath for pleasure and a further 14% for health and 9% for sport. With smaller numbers of users using the towpath to commute to work, walk the dog, with a few others citing reasons such as taking a shortcut, carrying out research and the feeling of safety the location brought. Clearly the towpath is used by more people for pleasure than any other purpose. But health and sport too, are becoming ever increasing reasons for people visiting the park.

Figure 15 - Main attraction of this location

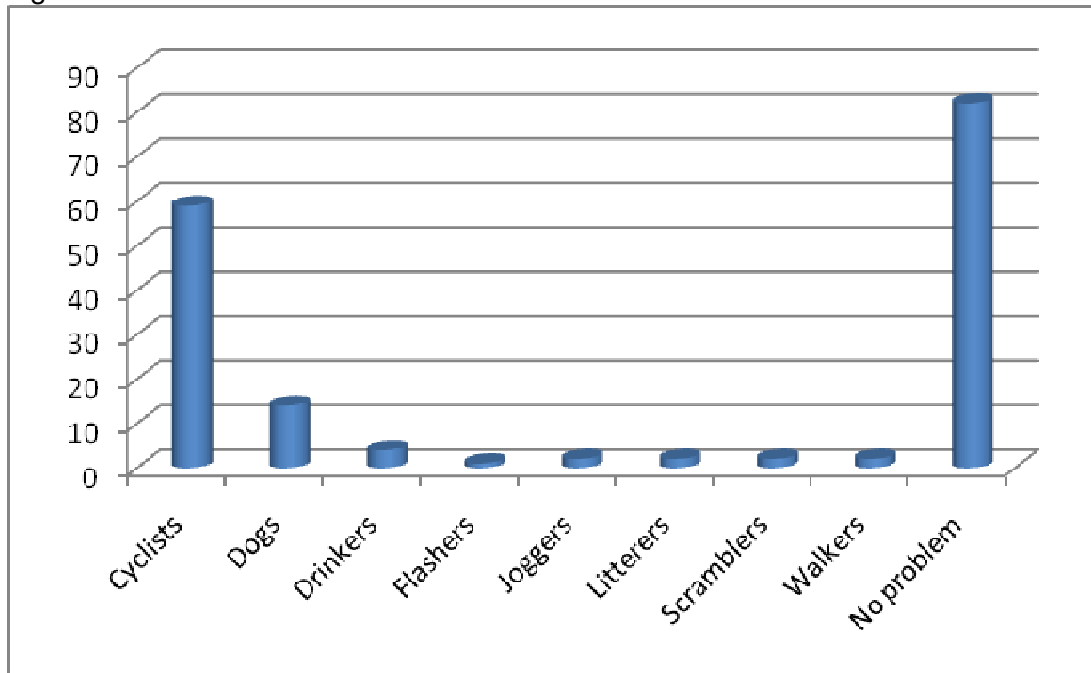


In terms of the attraction for using the towpath the natural environment is by far the most popular attraction that the towpath has for visitors interviewed in this survey, with 70% citing this as their draw to the area.

iii) Other towpath users

Question 9 – Do you have a problem with other towpath users?

Figure 16 - Problems with other users?



People were asked if they had any problems with other towpath users and 51% said they had and 49% said they had not encountered problems with any other users.

Of those that answered yes, some 68% had an issue with cyclists, with cycling too fast and without due care to other users, being cited most often. The other noteworthy response was around dogs (16%), in particular dog faeces and dogs being out of control.

The data in this question should be viewed with a little circumspection regarding the proportion of representation for example where the same number of cyclists as walkers interviewed to give a balanced representation?

iv) Information

Question 10 – Do you think there should be more information, notices and rangers on the towpath?

44% said there should be more, whilst 56% felt there was no need for any more information. It should be noted that respondents displayed different views towards information notices and park rangers. Of the 44% that said there should be more, many specifically felt more rangers would be beneficial, but this was not quantified.

v) Access issues

Question 11 – Are there any sections of the path or barriers that make things difficult for you?

Most of the people surveyed, 86% had no issues with access along the towpath, with 14% who found some access difficulties.

Question 12 - Would you benefit from route improvements that would target any of these access issues (visually impaired, mobility difficulties, wheelchair users, pushchairs etc)?

93% of those interviewed would not benefit from such targeted improvements whilst 7% felt they would be of benefit to them. Safety barriers, lighting, better toilet facilities and access, were the main benefits suggested by those interviewed.

vi) Encouraging visitors back and improvements

Question 13 - Which of the following would encourage you to visit the Regional Park more frequently?

Figure 17 - potential to encourage people back

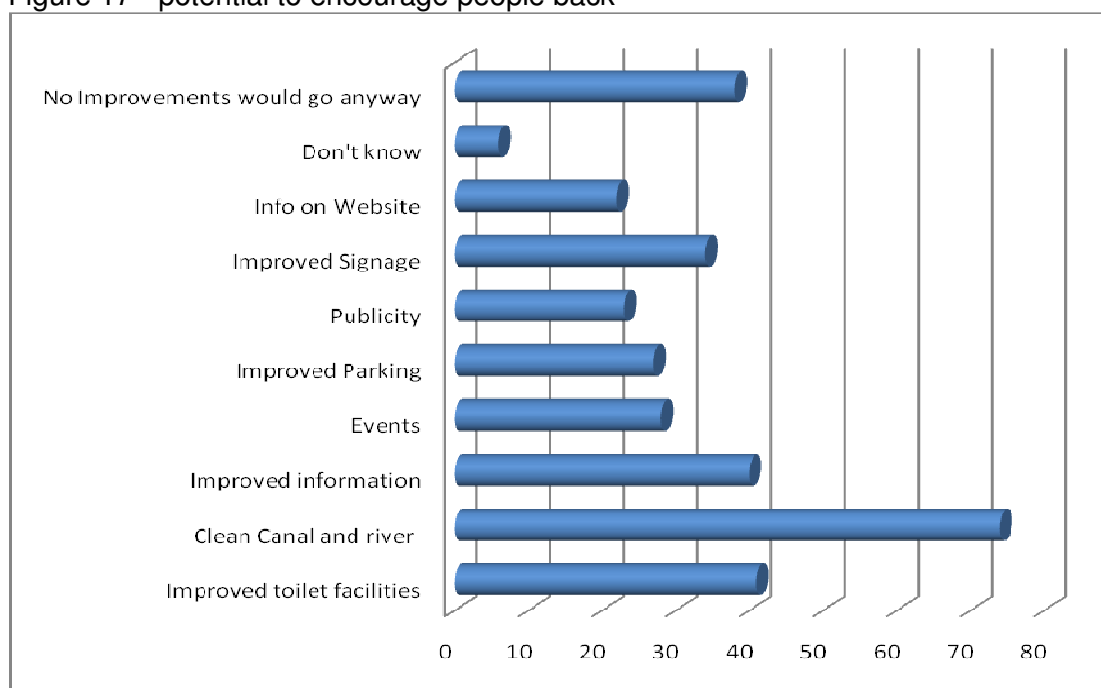
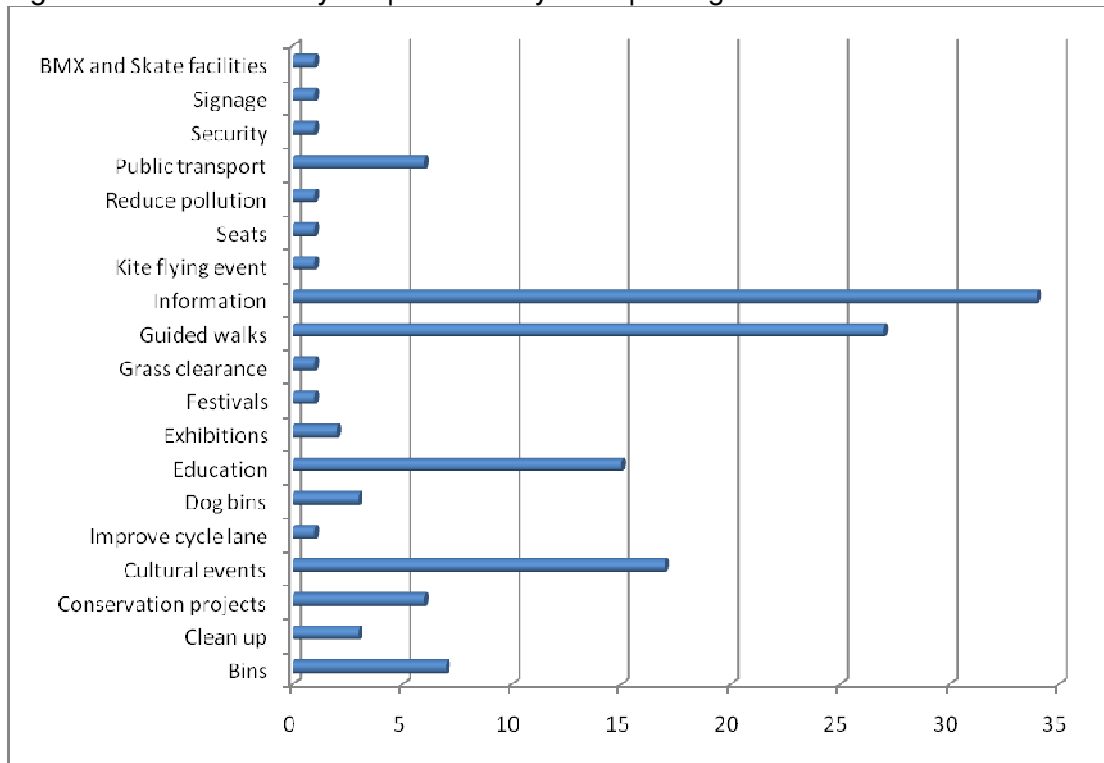


Figure 17 shows responses to the options people were presented with in this question and how they voted for each one. The most popular response was to clean up the canal and river (22%), after this a number of secondary issues people felt were important included improved information (12%), signage (10%) and toilet facilities (12%). It should also be noted that a large group of people felt that no improvements were necessary (11%).

Question 14 - If you had £100 to spend on the Regional Park, what would you like to see it spent on?

Figure 18 - What would you spend money on improving?

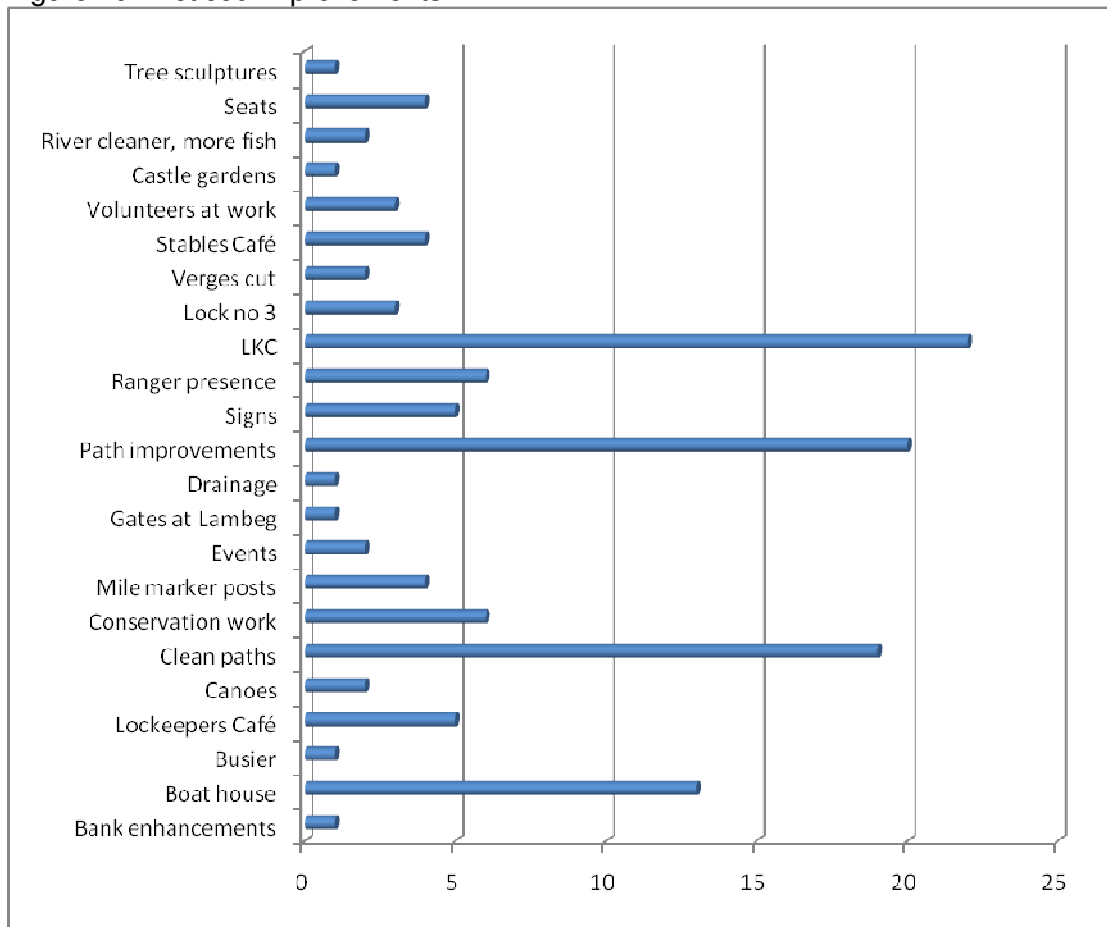


If the people struggled to come up with their own ideas, they were offered the following suggestions as prompts: cultural events, education, guided walks, information, public transport or exhibitions.

Information and guided walks appeared to be the most popular categories of those listed. Additional categories that became evident from peoples answers were that of conservation, litter/bins and a final category for other. The other category included suggestions such as added security along the towpath. It should also be noted that several users did not have a response to this question.

Question 15 - Have you noticed any enhancements to the Park and if so what?

Figure 19 - noticed improvements



64% of those interviewed said that they had noticed enhancements within the Regional Park and 36% did not. Of those who had noticed improvements, they were in the areas listed in Figure 17.

Of the improvements that were most noticed, the restoration of the Lock Keeper's Cottage, path improvements, a clean towpath and the boat house at Shaw's Bridge were all considered to be important improvements by a large proportion of the people interviewed.

It should be noted that some respondents were likely to have suggested more than one enhancement and thus their results may be duplicated in different categories. For example: 'wider paths and less litter'.

Question 16 - Are you a member of a club/organisation/group?

8% of those interviewed were visiting the regional park as part of an organisation or group the remaining 92% were here in an unaffiliated capacity.

4.0 Discussion

In considering the responses to the various questions it is important to note that the data collated is from a sample of users in the park and may not be fully representative of all users.

4.1 User Profile

i) Gender and age profile

Both Figure 1 and Figure 2 indicate that broadly there are twice as many males using the towpath as females. One inference may be that females are less likely to use the towpath unaccompanied. Further studies may be required to assess this, noting in the counts whether males and females are indeed accompanied.

ii) User groups and popular sections

Walkers are by far the biggest user group on the towpath. Shaw's Bridge to Drumbridge is the most popular section of the towpath, perhaps due to the surveys being taken close to Shaw's Bridge, a key access place to a number of visitor attractions.

Similarly, the survey highlights Shaw's Bridge as well as Drumbeg and Stranmillis as popular access and egress points, with Lagan Valley Island, Lambeg and Newforge as moderately popular. As the majority of users arrive at their destination by car it seems reasonable to infer that these sites are at least in part popularised by the availability of parking at 5 out of the 6 access points. The popularity of starting and leaving points along the towpath would suggest that users often undertake circular or 'there and back' walks within the Regional Park.

4.2 Survey Questions

It should be noted that when interviewing people walkers were somewhat easier to engage by staff than a fast moving cyclist or runner, who may not have wished to stop during a run.

i) Getting to the Regional Park

Whilst most people arrive at the Regional Park by car, and many walk or cycle, it is noteworthy to see that only one person interviewed used public transport. As figure 12 shows most users are local and live within or close to the Regional Park boundary. This is likely to account for the majority of those people who access the towpath on foot. The newly developed Regional Park map has public transport information included which may help enable people to avail themselves of public transport.

ii) Why visit the Regional Park?

It is apparent from the survey that the Regional Park's main attraction is its natural environment and most people come to the park for pleasure. In terms of existing users, this highlights the importance of the natural environment in regional parks and all those factors such as landscapes, habitats and biodiversity that comprise the natural environment.

iii) Other towpath users

In this survey about half those questioned had issues with other towpath users and for those that did cyclists were high up on the agenda. However, as most of the survey questionnaires were carried out on walkers the data may have a bias towards the views and opinions of walkers and not fully represent the whole range of users.

Dog faeces and dogs out of control also represent a significant problem. Some cyclists commented that walkers could appear to obstruct the towpath. Other common comments included complaints against dog walkers and runners refusing to give way.

iv) Information

Almost half those surveyed would like to see more information and most that did would have preferred it to be through the Ranger Service. Rangers with a recognisable uniform have long been the focus of people's queries and questions. Their presence enables people's concerns to be aired as and when issues arise. When asked if they wished to see more information and rangers in the park, there was no clear distinction between the two, however it was noted that some respondents had differing views on information and rangers that question 10 did not fairly represent. This could be addressed in the future by information and ranger questions being in separate categories.

v) Access issues

Only a small percent (14%) of those interviewed found that there were sections of the path or barriers that proved difficult for them. Likewise only 7% felt that they would benefit from improvements aimed at access issues. Some of the difficulties were with styles coming down onto the towpath from other sites rather than the towpath itself. Initially this may appear that the towpath is very accessible, however most people interviewed in the survey didn't have any mobility limitations. It would be useful to conduct a survey aimed at people with some mobility limitations to gauge access from their perspective.

vi) Encouraging visitors back and improvements

Desired improvements were spread over a range of issues, but key was a desire to see a cleaner river and canal. The responses to this issue were focussed on litter and rubbish both on banks and peripheral properties and rubbish caught up in the water system itself. Litter and rubbish in the environment is an endemic problem across Northern Ireland and the Regional Park is no different in this respect. Both nationally and locally this issue is being addressed to some degree by campaigns. Similarly the Regional Park is doing an enormous amount of work collecting litter from the towpath, holding 'clean up' events and through public awareness stands. These are all ultimately scraping the surface of a deeper problem of supply. No matter how many clean ups and collections are carried out there will always be a litter issue unless the litter is stopped in the first place. Other expressed needs for improvement included information over a range of sources such as signage, events, the website and publicity. Toilet facilities and more parking are deemed to be important improvements to the Regional Park.

When we asked if people were given £100, where would they spend it, some of the main suggestions were again around information. Interestingly spending money on cleaning litter was not a priority with users. The litter issue may be something that the public perceive as a problem that authorities should be addressing and not therefore a desirable spend on their part. It should be noted that the litter issue is around the litter found in the watercourse and surrounding vegetation rather than the towpath: indeed the cleanliness of the towpath was noteworthy as a noticed improvement in the Regional Park.

It was encouraging to see the responses to the question about improvements, in particular to see the broad range of improvements that people have noticed. Top of the list was the restoration of the Lock Keeper's Cottage. Not only has this received a lot of publicity through its enormous local interest, but also through the many events

that LVRP have run. Opening the cottage to visitors has helped to raise its profile. Also noteworthy are the path improvements along the towpath, the cleanliness of the path and the new boat house at Shaw's bridge. Again it is encouraging to see that people do notice and other improvements mentioned were the café facilities provided by The Lock Keeper's Inn and the Stables Café. The restored Castle Gardens, the cutting of the verges, seats, volunteers at work in the park and the new marker posts were also mentioned. All of these suggest that people using the towpath and the Regional Park notice and avail themselves of the improvements that the various partner organisations have made.

5.0 Comparison of data with previous surveys

Previous user surveys were carried out in 1998, 2001 and 2006. Whilst the first survey was largely focused on the use of the towpath for cycling and new questions have been added over the years, it is nevertheless possible to compare results with the previous surveys and consider any changes in user trends that might have been seen over this time.

5.1 User Profile

i) Gender and age profile

The proportion of males to females using the towpath has remained broadly similar over the surveys. The number of users in the under 15 age range was very low in the 2001 and 2006 surveys, but has seen an increase in the 2009 survey. Perhaps the work that has been done with schools, summer schemes and events aimed at younger people has been to some extent responsible for this.

ii) User groups and most popular sections

Cyclists have shown slight but steady increase from 24% in 1998 to 31% in the last survey. With the proportion of walkers dropping slightly as a proportion in the last survey. The proportion of runners has remained fairly constant throughout the surveys only fluctuating by 2%. The increase in cyclists in this survey might be due to the route now becoming established as part of the national cycle network and more people becoming aware of this.

5.2 Survey Questions

i) Getting to the Regional Park

The surveys of 2001 and 2006 show roughly even distribution of methods of accessing the Regional Park with car, walk and cycle representing roughly 1/3 each. However this survey has shown a large increase in the car up to 93%, and fewer people accessing the Park by bicycle.

Most users throughout the surveys have been local and live within or close to the Regional Park boundary. There is therefore a potential to attract more people in from the rest of Northern Ireland, Ireland and further.

ii) Why visit the Regional Park?

Consistent throughout all surveys has been the use of the region for pleasure and the attraction has been the natural environment, these factors are consistently around 60% - 70% of the responses to these questions. This reiterates the importance of the natural environment in the Regional Parks and all those factors such as landscapes, habitats and biodiversity that comprise the natural environment.

iii) Other towpath users

The first survey carried out in 1998 was devised chiefly to assess the views of the public to widening the towpath and to cyclists using the towpath. At that time and for many years before, cyclists were using the towpath and have continued to do so as improvements have been made. The potential for user conflict has therefore been an ongoing one. With considerate use from both walkers and cyclists the towpath can facilitate both without issue. However, where problems can arise is from inconsiderate use. Two key criticisms of cyclists are excessive speed and not using bells. Some work has been carried out in partnership with LVRP, DCAL, Sustrans

and the PSNI in trying to spread the message, through signage, that cyclists should give way to pedestrians.

To promote safe cycling and the use of bells the LVRP Ranger Service runs several annual cycling events. In 2007 the PSNI held an event in the Park to encourage and demonstrate considerate cycling and free bells were given out with sponsorship from Bikedock. The media has also been used from time to time to promote the message of safe cycling. In order to manage mixed use popular routes, initiatives such as these need to be ongoing.

There has been a significant rise in complaints against cyclists in comparison with the 2006 User Survey despite no evidence that the number of cyclists has increased. This suggests that perhaps there has been a notable increase in irresponsible behaviour by some cyclists since 2006.

iv) Information

Requests for information and interpretation on the towpath have lessened over the survey history suggesting that we are starting to meet the needs of the public for information. However, there remains a significant need for information and additional rangers in order to continue to meet the demand.

v) Access issues

In comparison with previous towpath surveys there was a substantial reduction in the issues respondents had with sections of the path or barriers making access difficult. Likewise, there was less call for improvements for people with mobility difficulties, pushchairs and the like in comparison with previous surveys. This could be influenced by the extensive path improvements and increased seating since the 2006 survey. The pilot scheme during 2008 to remove all gates along the towpath now means that there are fewer restrictions to access which may also support this.

Appendix A –Recording Sheet

	Child (0-15 yrs)				Adult (16 - 59 yrs)				Elderly (60+ yrs)			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
Upstream / Downstream	U/s	D/s	U/s	D/s	U/s	D/s	U/s	D/s	U/ s	D/ s	U/ s	D/ s
Cyclist												
Pedestrian												
Runners												
Wheelchair												
Other												

Appendix B - Questionnaire

Q1 – Walker Runner/Jogger Cyclist Angler Limited Mobility Other(.....)
 - Age category? 5 – 15 16 – 20 21 – 35 36 – 50 50+
 - Status? Student Employed Unemployed Retired Other (.....)

Q2 – How often do you use the towpath?
 More than once a day Daily Once per week Monthly Less than once a month

Q3 – Where did you join the towpath?

i) Stranmillis ii) Lagan meadows iii) Belvoir iv) Newforge v) Shaw’s Bridge vi) Minnowburn vii) Edenderry viii) Drumbeg ix) Lambeg x)Hilden xi) Hillhall Estate/Low Road xii) Union Bridge xiii) Becky Hoggs lock xiv) Lisburn Civic Centre xv) Moore’s Bridge xvi) Old Warren xvii) Other

Q4 – Where will you leave the towpath?

i) Stranmillis ii) Lagan meadows iii) Belvoir iv) Newforge v) Shaw’s Bridge vi) Minnowburn vii) Edenderry viii) Drumbeg ix) Lambeg x)Hilden xi) Hillhall Estate/Low Road xii) Union Bridge xiii) Becky Hoggs lock xiv) Lisburn Civic Centre xv) Moore’s Bridge xvi) Old Warren xvii) Other

Q5 – How did you reach your start point? Car Public transport Walk Cycle Other

Q6 – Where did you set out from to reach the towpath? (home location)

Q7 – Main purpose of your visit? Pleasure Sport Journey to work Health Other (.....)

Q8 – What is the main attraction for using the towpath?

Natural environment (Peace & quiet wildlife etc) Topography (flatness, surfaced paths etc) Proximity Traffic free Other (.....)

Q9 – Have you any problems with other towpath users yes no and if so with whom?

Comments:.....(Walkers Runners/Joggers Cyclists Anglers Others)

Q10 – Should there be more information notices and rangers on the towpath? Yes No ?

Q11 – Are there any sections of the path or barriers which make things difficult or impossible for you?

Yes **No** , If so can you describe the problems.....

Q12 - Would you benefit from any improvements in the route to help visually impaired people, people with mobility difficulties, wheelchair users, parents with pushchairs etc? Yes No If so what sort of improvements would you like to see?

Q13 – Which of the following would encourage you to visit the Regional Park more frequently?

Public toilet facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clean Canal/River banks	<input type="checkbox"/>
Better information & interpretation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Events	<input type="checkbox"/>
Better parking	<input type="checkbox"/>
More information available to publicise sites	<input type="checkbox"/>
Better signposting	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reliable sources of information on the internet	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don’t know	<input type="checkbox"/>

Nothing I would go anyway

Q14 – If you had £100 to spend on the Regional Park what would you like to see it spent on?

Suggestions -

(Cultural events / Education / Guided Walks / Information / Public transport / Exhibitions)

Q15 – Have you noticed any enhancements to the park and if so what?

Q16 – Are you a member of a club / organisation / group?

Appendix C - Informal Feedback

Many of the people spoken to throughout the survey period gave varying degrees of input regarding comments about the towpath. These comments have been provided below. The subjects that come up most frequently are given first.

River litter

This is a constant theme from users of the towpath, regarding the unsightly appearance of the water course; plastic bags caught up in the overhanging tree branches, household items in the river; old bicycle frames etc. Some people feel their feedback and complaints were pointless in this respect as nothing ever gets done, which ties in with the next point on people's attitudes to the problem.

Attitudes to litter

Many people complained of the litter problem in places but beyond that there was a feeling of sadness and despair at the attitudes of the people responsible for dumping their litter on the towpath.

Dog fouling

Many people have complained about dog fouling on the towpath and the litter created along the towpath from the bags used to collect dog faeces.

Navigation of the river

Much interest has been expressed in the idea of making the Lagan watercourse navigable again, however feelings were ambivalent, whilst many would like to see boats return to the river, there were those too who expressed concern that it might jeopardise some of the semi-wetland habitats and hence our wildlife and bird life.

Perceived threat

Some women expressed a feeling of vulnerability when wandering around some areas towards evening, such as Giant's Ring and the more secluded stretches of towpath i.e. Minnowburn to Drumbeg, and Drumbeg to Hilden. Some people reported that they had unwanted attention from undesirables, often from the opposite bank of the towpath.

Rangers

Most people surveyed were glad to see staff on the towpath both for information, conservation and security and were interested to learn more about their role.

Features of local historic interest

Many people were glad to see that the features that link the present park to its history are being restored and the general feeling is that it gives the Lagan Valley Regional Park character and a sense of uniqueness. In particular the work at Lock 3, the Lock Keeper's Cottage and the Lock Keeper's Inn were talked about with enthusiasm. There was interest in the new boat house at Shaw's Bridge, some giving negative feedback: others were not aware of what the building was.

Drinking groups

Some people expressed concern over a perceived threat from groups of people gathering and drinking in certain areas. Most common sites for this activity were: the benches at Lockview, Eel weir, the car park at Drumbridge and Becky Hogg's lock.

Path Improvements

Along much of the towpath people were on the whole impressed with the towpath improvements in particular the resurfacing and widening of the paths.

Improved water quality

Many people have commented that the improvement in water quality in recent years has seen an increase in sightings of many species of wildlife such as the kingfisher, heron and otter, whilst many are impressed with the return of salmon to the river.

Parking

Some people found that parking was difficult during the busy summer weekends at Shaw's Bridge.

Appendix D - Historical Towpath Counter Data

User Counters

In addition to the physical user counts undertaken during the survey, a series of electronic counters, commissioned by the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure, are located along the towpath. These counters are monitored weekly by the Lagan Valley Regional Park Ranger Service to record the volume of people passing the individual areas.

The counters are located at the following locations:

Stranmillis
Shaw's Bridge
Drumbridge
Lambeg
Moore's Bridge

The annual figures for all five counters are given in the table below. During 2008 and 2009 there were large gaps in the data due to problems with the counters. The adjusted figures show the annual total with these gaps filled with average data where there were gaps. Whilst not an actual count it gives a better indication of use during these years than totals with missing data.

Year	Number of users recorded
2004	481389
2005	573738
2006	393963
2007	414638
2008	486286 Adjusted
2009	465792 Adjusted

The old system of recording was consistently prone to problems. It was replaced at the start of 2008 with a new system from 'Instep' that worked on a pressure plate method. Both systems have been notoriously unreliable and due to gaps in data the records are likely to be a gross underestimate of the total usage.

Park wide, there are over 34km of paths of which the towpath is only 18km which implies that the total Park use could be much more than these figures indicate.

Appendix E - Survey Review

Year of Survey	Total user count during survey	Total questionnaires completed during survey
1998	2479	350
2001	4160	382
2006	2055	361
2009	2072	168

The table shows a summary of surveys carried out so far in the Lagan Valley Regional Park. Two aspects of the data are of interest: the high user count seen in the 2001 survey and the low number of questionnaires completed during the 2009 survey. The return from the survey in 2009 is relatively low, with an average of only one questionnaire completed per survey. This is something that should be considered for future surveys both in terms of net return for staff time and the validity of doing such a long survey over a web based survey.