

A Park that offers a thriving, diverse and valued
riverside heritage that welcomes exploration,
learning and enjoyment whilst ensuring a sustainable
environment for all.

Annual Report 2013/14



A Visionary Year: Key achievements

Launch of our 10 year Strategic Vision
 Graduation of our award winning Laganscape Project;
 a HLF funded 5 year Landscape Partnership Scheme
 2013 Photo Competition

Volunteering Excellence

Total of 386 volunteer days recorded
 The Queens Award for Voluntary Service;
 the equivalent of the MBE for voluntary groups
 Heritage Guides awarded Castlereagh Borough Council's Mayor's Award for
 Volunteer groups

Ranger Service

Towpath Initiative;
 an initiative to raise awareness of considerate use of the Towpath
 Annual Events Program with 33 events engaging with over 800 people
 Three volunteer rangers contributing 134 days
 4 information stands at fairs and shows
 Over 42 km of trails and Park paths patrolled weekly
 Over 1250 enquires from members of the public
 370 bags of litter collected

Director	Representing	Board meetings attended							
		Jun	EGM	Sep	AGM	EGM	Dec	Mar	
Alderman Sara Duncan	Castlereagh Borough Council	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6
Cllr Anne-Marie Beattie	Castlereagh Borough Council								0
Alderman Tom Ekin	Belfast City Council	✓				✓			2
Alderman Ruth Patterson	Belfast City Council								0
Cllr Brian Dorman	Lisburn City Council	✓		✓	✓			✓	4
Cllr Jenny Palmer	Lisburn City Council			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Mr Dermot Hughes	CNCC			✓	✓		✓	✓	4
Mr Jim Jackson	CNCC	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	5
Craig Somerville	National Trust		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	5
Rosaleen Hughes	Public - Community	✓	✓			✓			3
Dr Fred Hamond	Public - Built Heritage			✓	✓	✓			3
Mrs Elvira Tulip	Public - Community	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	6
Jackson Tinto	Public-Volunteering/Natural Heritage	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7
David Scott	Public-Natural Heritage	✓				✓		✓	3
Frank Jordan	Public-Volunteering		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		5
Mags McGarvey	Public-Natural Heritage	✓				✓			2
Michael McSorley	Public-Volunteering/Community	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	5
Annette O'Donnell	Public-Rural Enterprise and Business								0

Our board of directors met on seven occasions this year: our four quarterly board meetings, our AGM and two EGM's dealing with the logo and new signage respectively.



Chair's Foreword

I was delighted to become the Chair of Lagan Valley Regional Park in September 2013; and may I thank the former Chair Councillor Sara Duncan for all her hard work and dedication.

Over the course of the year the four staff of Lagan Valley Regional Park

have undertaken a significant workload and in partnership with volunteers delivered successful projects. I commend everyone involved for their time and service.

This year the Heritage Lottery Fund Laganscape Project was completed. This five-year project, which included events along the Lagan Canal area and the recruitment of staff culminated in a high profile event in the Ramada Hotel in February. The Ramada was an ideal location, due to its proximity to the Park, at which to mark the end of this project with presentations before cutting the 'graduation' cake, unveiling a horse and hauler sculpture and planting ceremonial trees.

Over 40 public events took place within the Park this year and included walks, talks and tours. Through the work of the staff and volunteers a wider audience has been engaged with; and it is hoped that those people will continue to visit this Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The Strategic Vision for Lagan Valley Regional Park has now been completed and will focus on six key areas – biodiversity, community, health and recreation, heritage, landscape and visitors. This vision was taken very seriously from the outset and it was excellent to see it launched in March after two years of consultations, desktop research and public workshops. I look forward to seeing its full implementation by 2024.

Volunteers are a key part to any organisation or community and within Lagan Valley Regional Park they are an essential part. It was fantastic to see all the volunteers being acknowledged when collectively they were awarded the prestigious Queen's Award for Voluntary Service. This was a 'crowning' moment for all concerned within Lagan Valley Regional Park.

I would like to finish by thanking the staff, volunteers and fellow Board members of Lagan Valley Regional Park for all their work, support and commitment over the past year.

Councillor Jenny Palmer

Lisburn City Council

We can feel proud of the progress the Park has made over the last year and I am confident further progress will be made in the future.

Manager's Report

With the Laganscape project drawing to an end, retaining staff to complete the project has been challenging and it is to the credit of all of our team that we have been able to keep many initiatives started by Laganscape not only ticking over but also thriving. To see the project reach its graduation has been the result of years of hard work by so many people; staff, volunteers and partners. We look forward to maintaining the positive changes that this has brought to the Regional Park.

Developing the Park's 10 year Strategic Vision has been both challenging and rewarding. At our first public consultation meeting back in 2012 we had a surprisingly good turn out, considering we were experiencing one of our coldest winters on record and it was a chilly minus 11 when I stepped into the car with all the presentation materials. Much work has been done since then and for the first time the Park now has a clear vision. This document will not only help in developing future management plans but will serve as a useful marketing and promotional tool for our organisation.

A massive thank you goes out to all our volun-

teers, their level of support and dedication has been outstanding.

As usual, all of our team have supported and helped to develop one of the most exciting events programmes to date and we continue to provide a wide range of services; working with interest groups, schools and Scouts to name but a few.

Our Ranger Service continues to provide a valuable public service, dealing with enquiries about the region and providing assistance with a wide range of incidents.

I would like to acknowledge our core funders, Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Belfast City Council, Lisburn City Council, Castlereagh Borough Council and Department of Culture Arts and Leisure. I would also like to thank our numerous partners who support the Park in so many other ways. The success of the Park depends on this support and partnership.



Lagan Valley Regional Park

The River Lagan and its surrounding valley landscapes are renowned for their natural beauty. At the heart of the Lagan Valley are the River Lagan and canal systems that form the main access and wildlife corridor bridging two of Northern Ireland's population centres. This unique area, typified by its rolling landscapes, ornamental parklands and farmland, was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural

Beauty under the first round of designations in 1965. Shortly thereafter, due largely to concerns of development pressure, the Lagan Valley Regional Park was established as one of three unique semi-urban designations in the UK at that time. The Lagan Valley Regional Park covers an area of 4,200 acres and extends 11 miles along both sides of the River Lagan between Stranmillis, Belfast and Union Locks, Lisburn.



Lagan Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

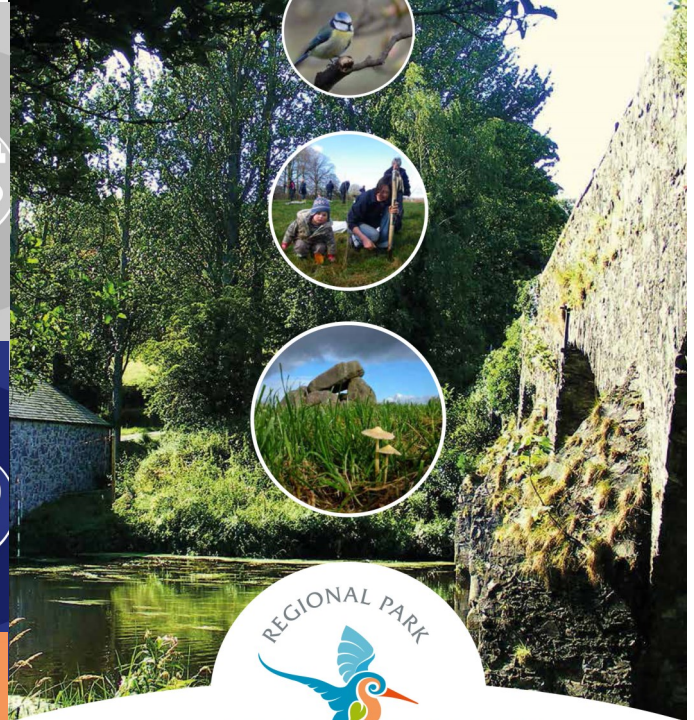
An AONB is a precious landscape where the distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard it (NAAONB, 2003). The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order 1985 sets out the main purposes of an AONB:

- To conserve or enhance the natural beauty or amenities of the area.
- To conserve wildlife, historic objects or natural phenomena within the area
- To promote enjoyment by the public
- To provide or maintain public access to the area
- These form the ethos of the Lagan Valley Regional Park's Mission.



Strategic Vision

This year saw the launch of our 10 year Strategic Vision. A strategic tool that clearly defines our strengths and focus areas for the future. This is our first Strategic Vision and is the culmination of 2 years of consultations and research.



DISCOVER | EXPLORE | ENJOY

Lagan Valley Regional Park Strategic Vision
September 2013
MISSION, AIMS AND VISION

Our Vision

A Park that offers a thriving, diverse and valued riverside heritage that welcomes exploration, learning and enjoyment whilst ensuring a sustainable environment for all.

DISCOVER EXPLORE ENJOY

1

Partnership and inclusivity

2

Conservation and protection

3

Value for money and transparency

4

Sustainability



Our Aims

- To conserve and manage the biodiversity in the Regional Park
- Support and facilitate ongoing research and education about the area's biodiversity and heritage
- Encourage the involvement of the community and to develop volunteering in the Regional Park
- Maintain and enhance the landscape quality of the Regional Park for the benefit of all
- Proactively conserve and manage the cultural and built heritage of the Regional Park
- Promote the benefits of green open spaces with the area for health and wellbeing
- Support appropriate recreation activities, events and the development of sustainable tourism for the benefit of region
- Increase public awareness of the natural and cultural heritage throughout the region

Partnership

Good partnerships are essential to the governance and management of the Regional Park. Working with our partners we have realized all of the goals laid out in the management plan for this year and, given the spectrum of varying aims and visions of our partners, it is thanks to the coordinated effort of our partners that we have achieved so much. In addition to the funding partners there are a number of other bodies and organisations with which the Lagan Valley Regional Park works. The Rivers' Agency is responsible for work along the river system and they provide services such as grass cutting along the towpath in close association with DCAL. Forest Service manages Belvoir Park Forest, and the National Trust manages the Minnowburn and Terrace Hill sites as well as some of the Giant's Ring paths.

Partner organisations

Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA)
 Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL)
 The National Trust
 Council for Nature Conservation and Countryside (CNCC)
 Belfast City Council
 Castlereagh Borough Council
 Lisburn City Council
 Forest Service
 Ulster Wildlife Trust (UWT)
 Rivers' Agency
 The Lagan Canal Trust
 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
 Roads Service



A celebration of award winning excellence, partnership, inclusivity and heritage.



Laganscape Comes of Age

The Laganscape project has been the single biggest influence on the park since its inception in 1967. This year has seen the five year project come to completion. The changes that it has brought to the Regional Park are numerous and far reaching and rather than mark the end of the project we felt it more appropriate to call it a graduation. The project has come of age and is now merging with the transformed structure of the Park and moving forward into a new and exciting future. We are pleased to see many of our partners contributing to the legacy of the Laganscape project and supporting the continuation of many of the initiatives it set up.

Unveiling of the horse and hauler

A sculpture entitled 'horse and hauler' by Owen Crawford, made in part from timbers that were taken from the lock chamber during the restoration, was commissioned by the Laganscape project to mark the coming of age of the project. From left to right: previous Chair of Lagan Valley Regional Park - Cllr Sara Duncan, Chair of Lagan Valley Regional Park - Cllr Jenny Palmer, Park Manager - Andy Bridge, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund NI - Paul Mullan, Deputy Mayor of Catlereagh - Anne-Marie Beatie, Acting Chair of HLF Committee - Martin McDonald, Laganscape Project Manager - Cathy Smyth and Mayor of Lisburn - Cllr Margaret Tolerton.

Planting of fruit tree

Much of the site has changed over the years and during the restoration of the lock and cottage. More recently, one of the trees that George Kilpatrick (the last lock keeper) planted had to be felled due to disease. This prompted us to look for a viable replacement. As the site has close connections with nearby fruit growing, we sourced an apple tree that was of local provenance and that Dorothy could plant to replace the lost tree.



Links to our heritage

Dorothy is the daughter of the last lock keeper and lived at the lock keepers cottage with 4 brothers and 5 sisters. She has worked closely with us during the restoration process and has been a wonderful source of local historical knowledge, both of family life at the cottage and of the broader heritage along the Lagan Navigation.



Celebration of an Award Winning Landscape Partnership Scheme

To symbolise the graduation of the Liganscape project a special 'Liganscape' cake was baked and was cut by way of celebrating a project that not only delivered above and beyond all expectation, but has also led to both the project and the Park winning several prestigious awards. The highest of which being the Queen's award for voluntary service and is showcased later in this report. The project also won the 2009 NIEA Environmental Project of the Year Award; was a finalist in the 2010 National Lottery Awards best environmental project, won the 2013 Castlereagh Borough Council Mayors Award for Volunteering and has been accredited by Investing in Volunteers 2012 - 15.

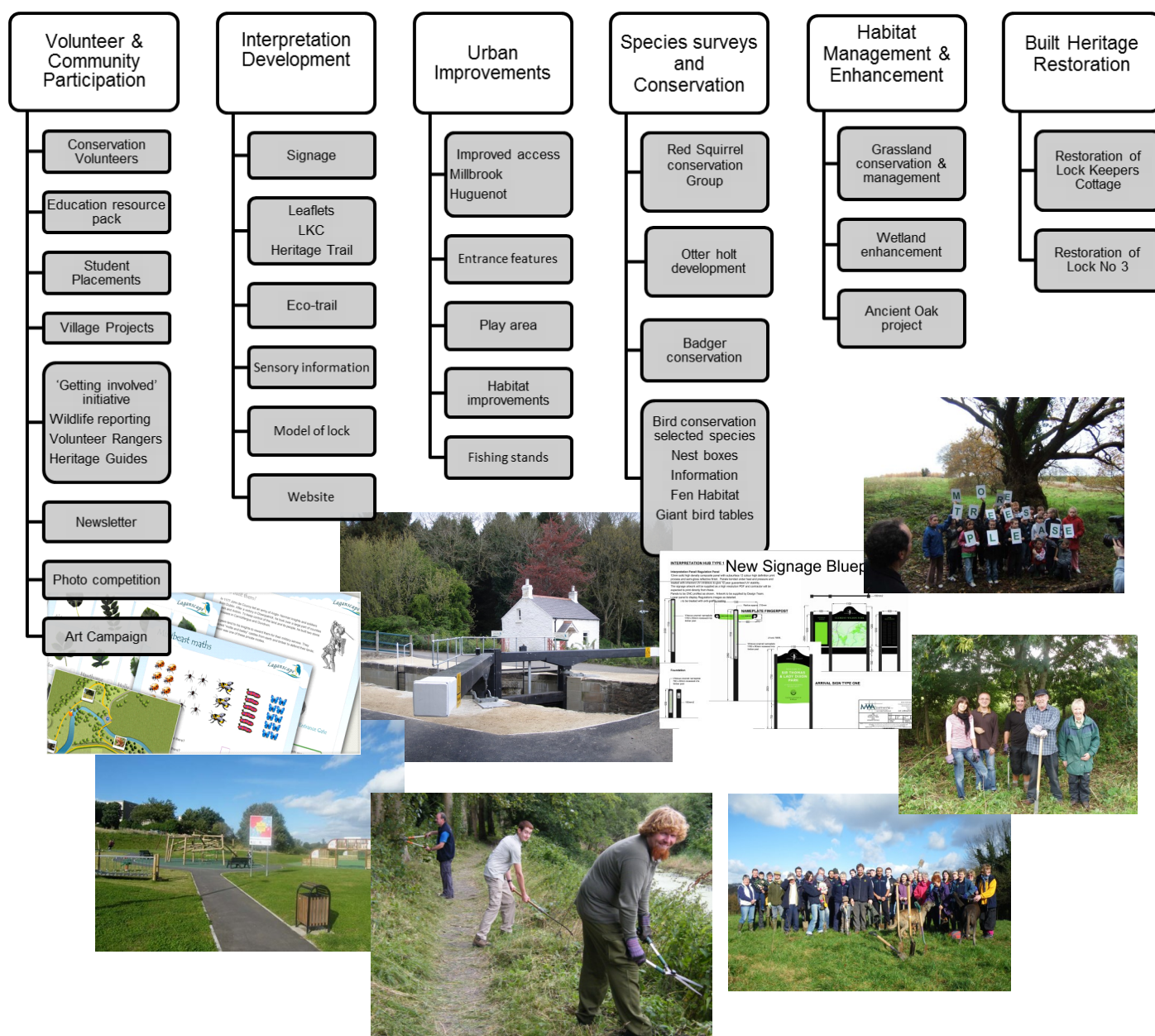


Laganscape overview of main projects

A look back at five years of excellence

The six schemes that represent the Heritage Lottery Funded landscape partnership scheme delivered 30 individual projects. The scheme employed 3.5 people throughout the five years and has changed the Regional Park far beyond what had initially been envisioned. The Regional Park now has community at its centre and embraces volunteering from a range of differing roles and abilities. We have:

- Volunteer Rangers that support and enhance the ranger service
- Wildlife Surveyors that gather data on wildflowers, badgers, squirrels, bats and butterflies
- A Saturday Conservation group that undertakes a range of projects improving biodiversity, tackling invasives and enhancing habitat and our
- Heritage Guides, who keep the cottage open for visitors to experience our 'living history' and a warm welcome beside a cosy fire.



Volunteering Excellence



Volunteering Pride

Volunteering Skills



The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service

The MBE for volunteer groups



"Where's the biscuits then eh? "



"Feels good to have made a difference"



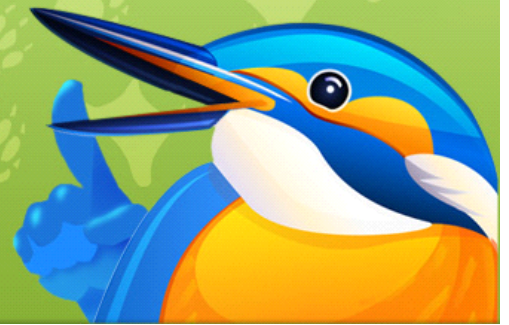
"brings history to life"



" We really enjoy being outdoors"



Welcome to Lagan Valley Regional Park



Education Resource Pack



Get this trail
guidance notes

instructions, directions, map etc.

The Education Resource Pack is a fantastic resource for teachers and leaders. Packed with new and innovative ways to teach the 'World Around Us'

Covering :

- Language and Literacy
- Mathematics and Numeracy
- The Arts
- The World Around Us
- Personal Development and Mutual Understanding



Lagan Navigation

Watch Video



Giant's Ring



Minibeasts



Plants, animals
& habitats



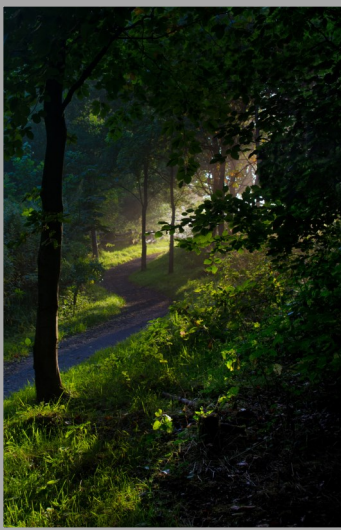
River Lagan



www.laganvalleylearning.co.uk



2013 Photo Competition



First Prize for the 'Natural World':
'Into the light' by Stephen Emerson

Lagan Valley Regional Park photo competition for 2013 was judged by members of our board in December. The prize giving was hosted at Lagan Valley Island. Cllr Jenny Palmer presented prizes of £100 to the winners in each category, with second place and third place scooping £50 and £30 respectively.

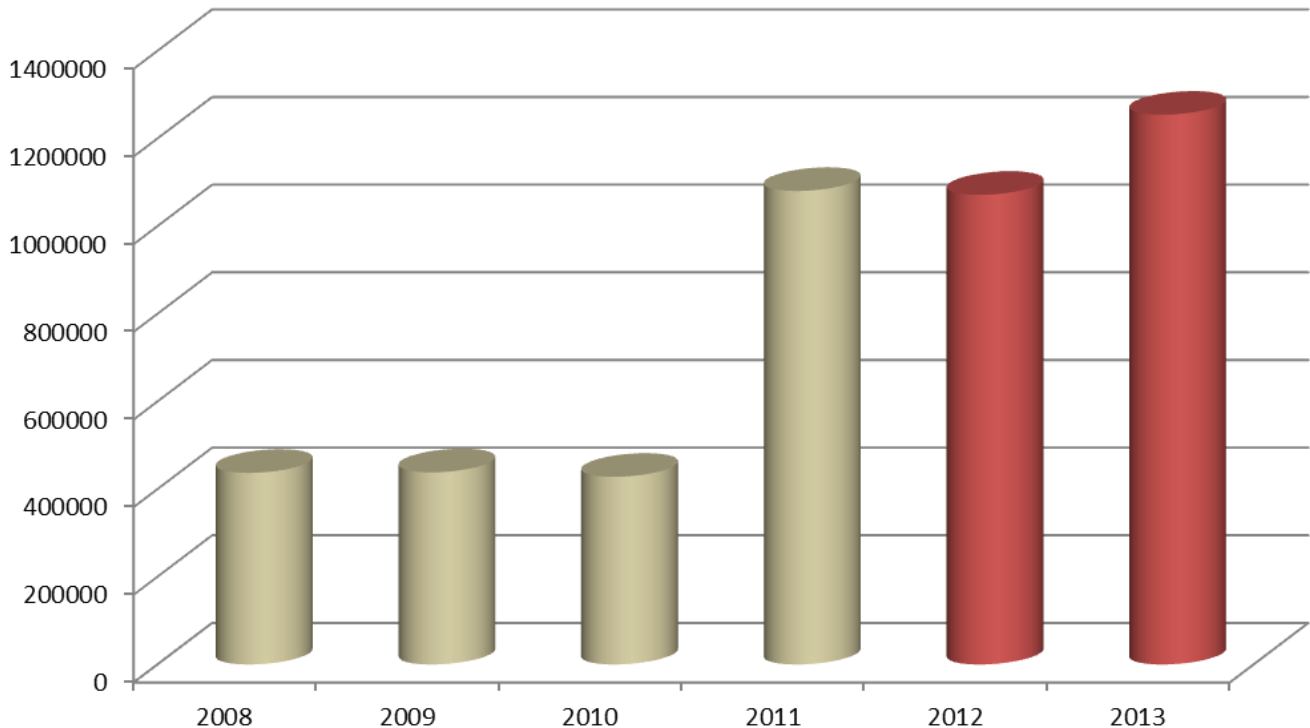


First Prize for 'Built Heritage and Art':
'By the Boat House' by Sharon Cuatriz



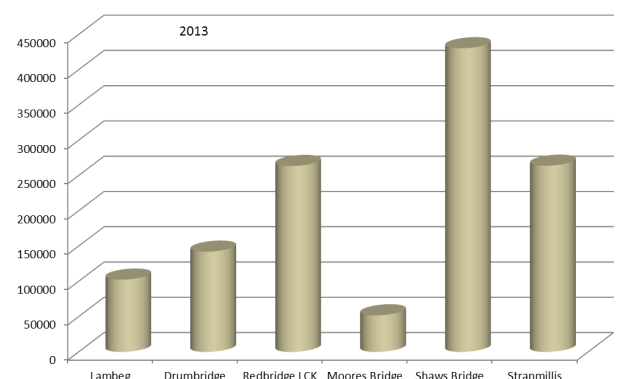
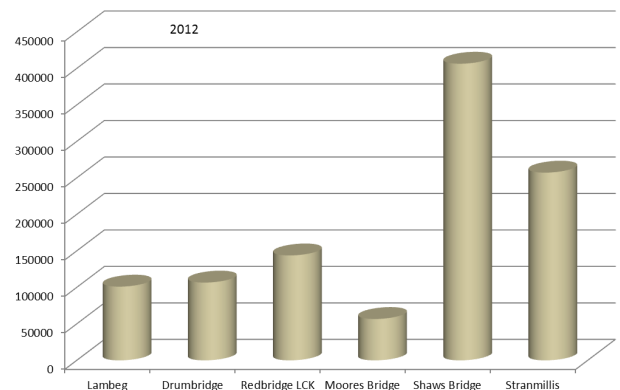
Visitors

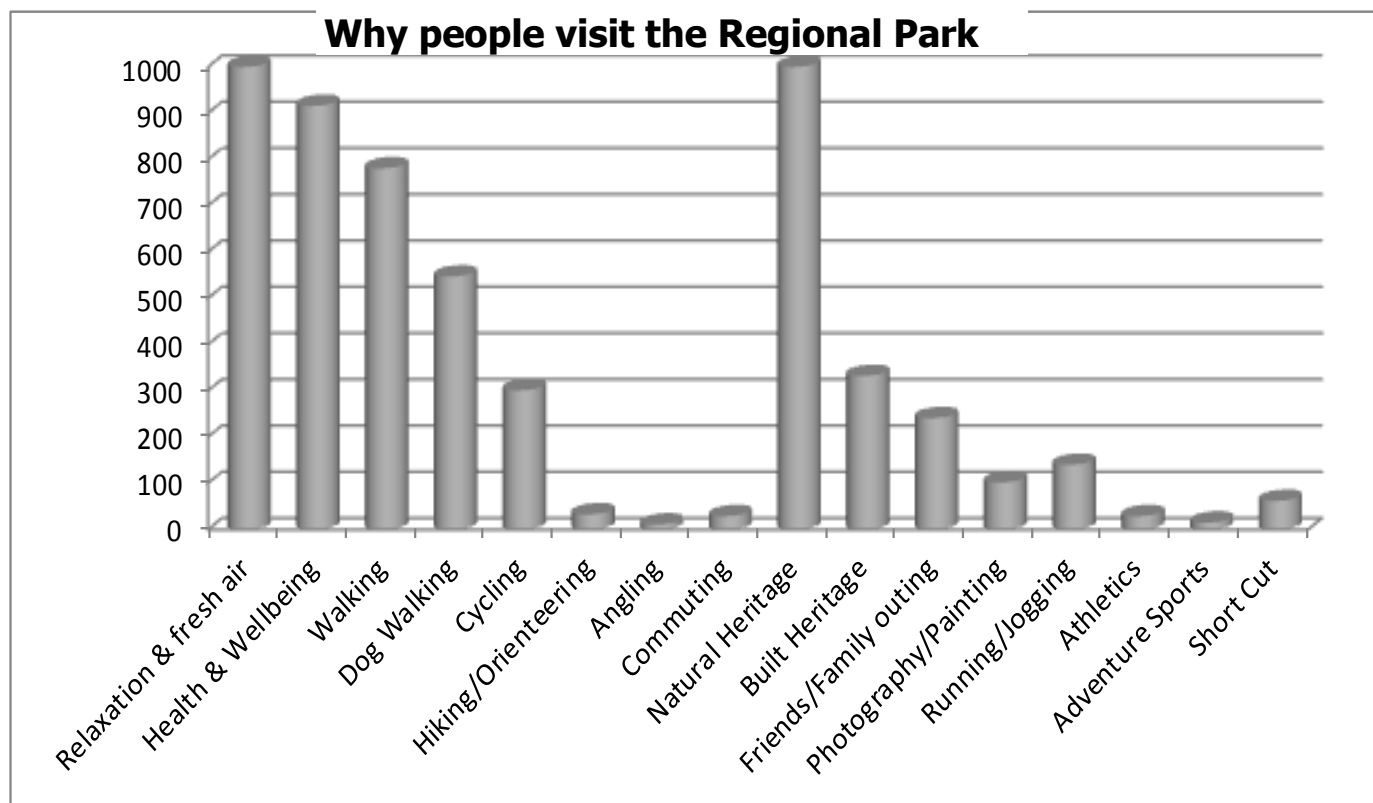
One of our 6 focus areas in our strategic vision are our visitors. Our aim is for a Park that is a regional, high quality visitor experience and a valued resource. We want the Park to continue to be a quality destination, a special place to visit and somewhere people are inspired to return to again and again, because it provides experiences unparalleled across the rest of the region. We believe that to be a valued destination, the Park not only needs great activities, sights and experiences, it needs to be valued and recognised, easy to find and get around and safe and accessible to people of all abilities.



User numbers

We base our user numbers on six counters that are strategically set along the towpath, the main route through the Regional Park. Whilst we have kept records of visitor numbers over many years' the data has not been complete due to issues with counter reliability and vandalism. It was because of this that we decided to replace our counters in 2012. Having made this decision, however, we did get a full data set for our old counters in 2011. The new counters, shown in red above have been functioning well and have exhibited close to 100% reliability. If we simply add the data from the six counters, it is clear that our user numbers are in excess of 1 million each year. Whilst it should be noted that simply adding the data from the six counters may not be statistically valid, it does give a good indication of user numbers and serves as a standard for year on year comparisons.





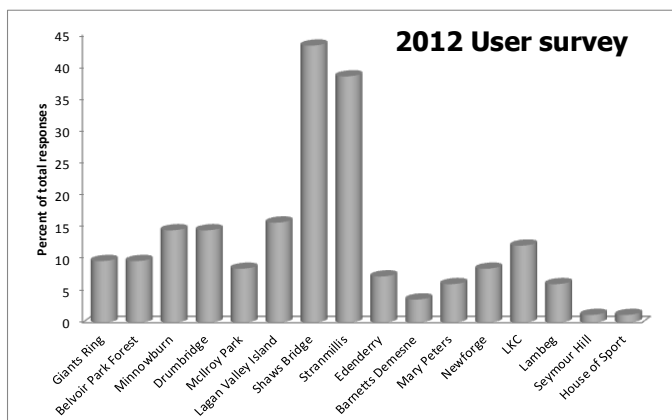
Honey pot sites

Our user data is routinely supplemented with user surveys carried out every three years and we can drill down into the data to answer a range of questions. One useful thing we can ask of the data is: What sites or access points are the most popular? The two graphs opposite show counter readings for 2012 and 2013 respectively and show total recorded users at each of the six counters. From this data and cross-referencing with the data from the 2012 user survey below, it is clear that Shaw's Bridge and Stranmillis are the most used areas, which is backed up over the past several years of data.

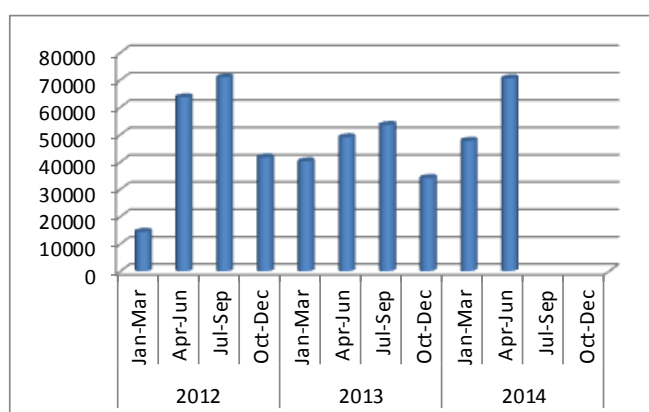
LKC Visitor Centre

It is also worth noting that the counter at the Red Bridge beside the recently developed Lock Keeper's Visitor Centre has shown a marked increase in users from 2012 to 2013. However, a separate counter positioned at the access to the visitor centre does not appear to support this (blue graph below). It is possible that more people are attracted to the area but that not all of these people actually come into the visitor centre and café. It will be interesting to see how these patterns pan out in future years, especially with the arrival of the barge at the site in August 2014.

Most Popular places in the Regional Park



Access to Visitor Centre Only



Biodiversity Case Study - The Red Squirrel

Squirrel Transects

We would like to thank our volunteers for their relentless dedication to these surveys, despite the sadly dwindling numbers of red squirrels. It should also be noted that there were times when squirrels were spotted away from the transect, but only those seen on the transect could be recorded.

Whilst the scope of this report can only give the most obvious trends, the often poetic elegance of our surveyors reports have provided other information that may help with answering some other questions of the data. We did take a look at the weather to see if this had a significant effect on the pattern below and we found no significant weather effects. In addition our surveyors have also spotted and recorded other wildlife whilst on route along these transects. It is only by tenacity and long term dedication that we can build up enough data to be able to confidently make observations about animal populations.

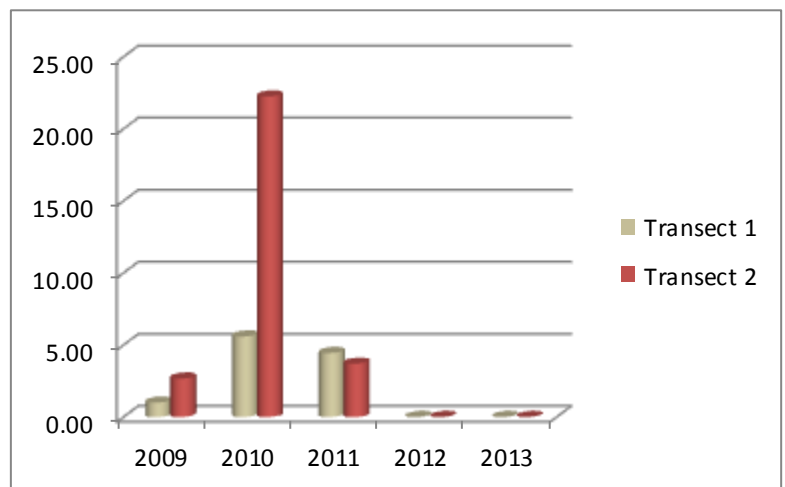
Annual totals of squirrel counts

The adjacent graphs show annual totals since the surveys were started in 2009. The top graph shows the two transects carried out for red squirrels and the lower graph, grey squirrels.

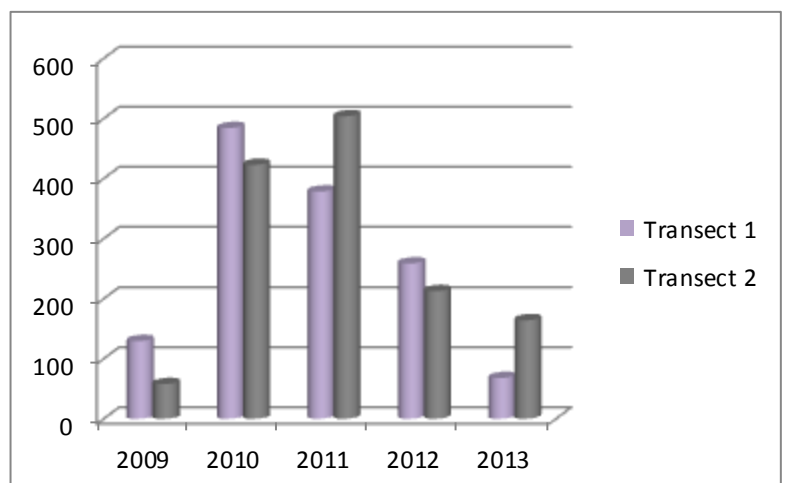
As these are total figures they are influenced by the number of surveys carried out and perhaps the downward trend in both reds and greys is similarly influenced by this effect, making it difficult to confidently infer a trend over time.

Incidentally, since the transects were set up our wildlife surveyors have counted 2667 squirrels - an amazing feat !

Yearly totals - Red



Yearly totals - Grey



Squirrel Transects

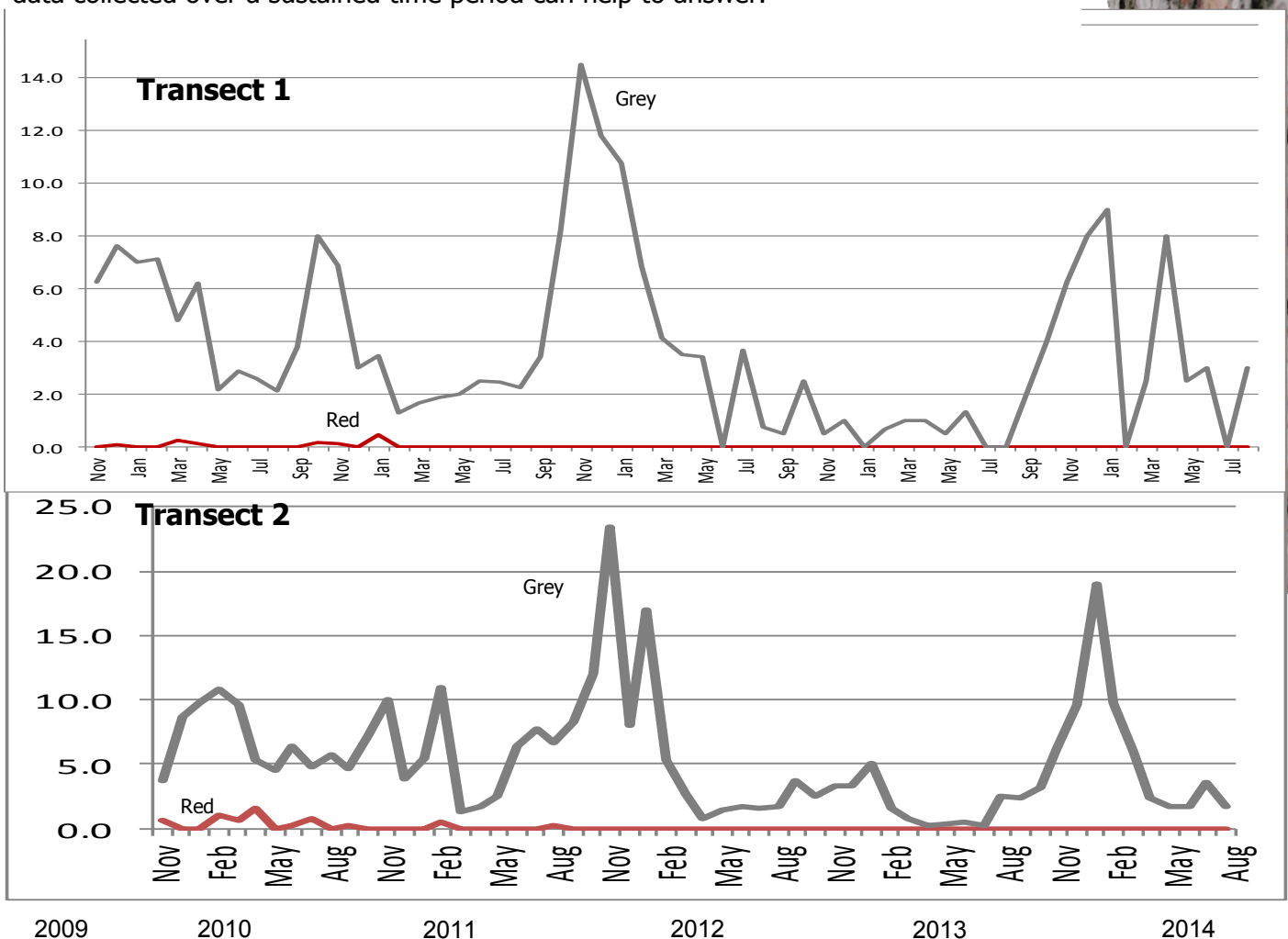
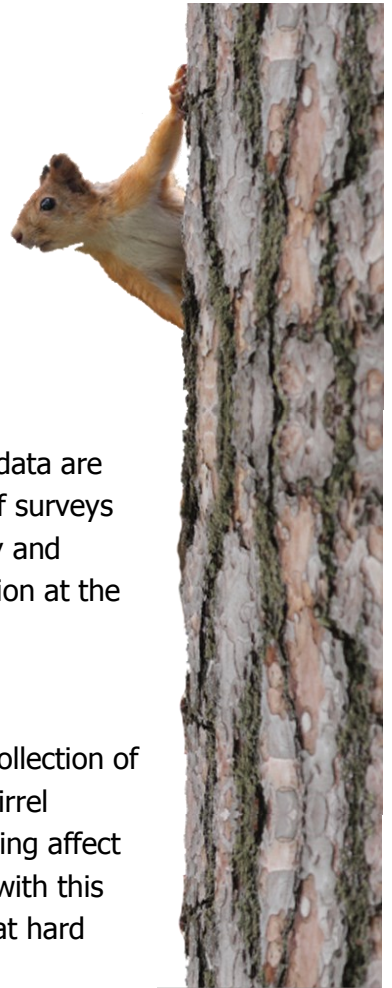
As the Lagscape project was being developed there were frequently observed occurrences of the red squirrel, not just in Belvoir Park Forest but throughout the Regional Park. However, the threat of the grey squirrel was beginning to concern conservation organisations and ecologists across Northern Ireland. Given this concern the Lagscape project drafted into its program support for a community red squirrel group in Belvoir along with survey work and conservation measures.

Findings

The graphs below represent monthly averages of squirrel numbers. As these data are based on averages, they are not as prone to effects related to the numbers of surveys carried out in a given month. Further, these data enable us to see both yearly and seasonal trends. For example following the decline of the red squirrel population at the end of 2010, there was a spike in grey squirrel numbers in mid 2011.

Looking Ahead

Sadly no red squirrels have been recorded for two years now. However, the collection of data remains of interest in monitoring biodiversity. What happens to grey squirrel populations long term after the decline of reds? How does large scale tree felling affect the dynamics of the grey and are there any favourable conditions associated with this that may allow repopulation of reds? These are just some of the questions that hard data collected over a sustained time period can help to answer.





Volunteer Rangers

As well as our two staff rangers, you may well also meet one of our volunteer rangers whilst out and about in the Park. Eamonn, Frank and Michael continue to provide valuable support to our ranger service carrying out patrols, conservation work and monitoring. As well as our dedicated rangers there are also a number of volunteers who work in the garden at the Lock Keepers Cottage maintaining and planting shrubs.



What we do

- Over 370 bags of litter collected
- Over 1250 public enquiries dealt with
- 4 public information stands
- 42 km of paths and trails patrolled weekly (that's over 2000km annually!)
- Reported 64 incidents to partner organisations
- 37 public events delivered; promoting biodiversity, heritage, health and the Regional Park
- Maintaining survey work and transects for butterflies, badgers, otters, squirrels and bats
- Delivering additional events for groups and organisations

Ranger Service

Effectively, whilst out patrolling in the Park the ranger is a mobile interpretation point for members of the community and visitors alike. The Ranger Service informs and educates visitors through direct public contact and through promotion at public events and country fairs.

The Ranger Service works closely with authorities such as the Police and the Environment Agency on issues such as wildlife incidents and disturbances in the Park.





Public Interface

The Park Office is prominently positioned on the towpath at the visitor centre with the key attractions of the Lock Keeper's Cottage, the lock and the Café. The office is a primary interface for the public in dealing with enquiries and providing information and education.

This year the Park Office dealt with:

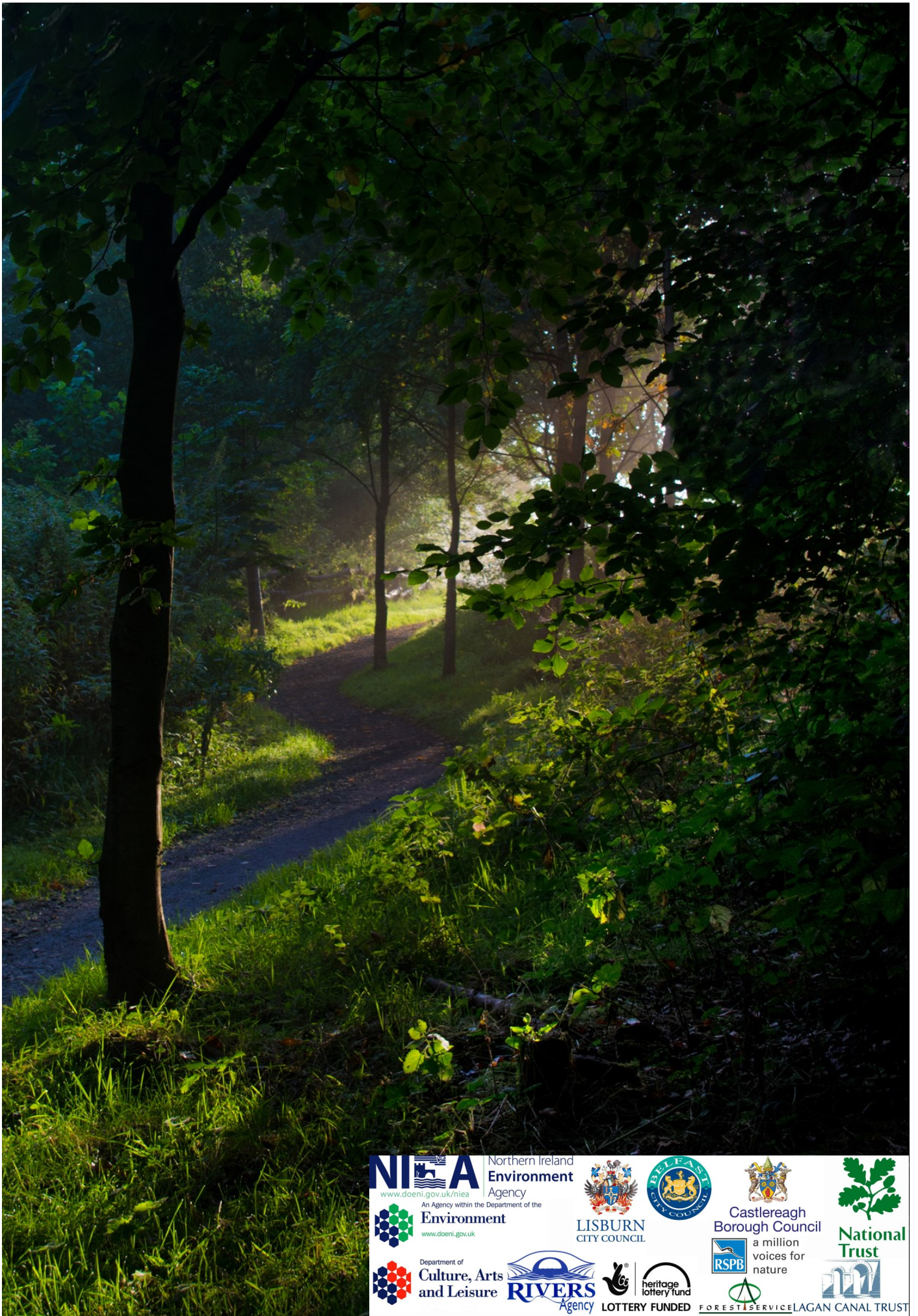
- Over 1250 general queries

These contacts may be in person, via email or by phone and account for around 40% of office time. We also received enquires about volunteering, student projects and placements, planning, site security, directions, wildlife and heritage to name a few.

All of these queries require some form of follow up; whether it is site visits, investigation or contacting a relevant organisation. These range from reports and queries about wildlife and heritage, directions, access issues and recreation to complaints about litter, dog fouling, toilets, maintenance, fallen trees and vandalism.

Whilst it means we are having a good level of public engagement it also means that time taken up dealing with these queries cannot be spent on the development and implementation of the very projects that would go some way to alleviating the complaints.





Northern Ireland
Environment
Agency



Department of
**Culture, Arts
and Leisure**



LISBURN
CITY COUNCIL



Castlereagh
Borough Council
a million
voices for
nature



National
Trust



LOTTERY FUNDED FOREST SERVICE LAGAN CANAL TRUST