



DISCOVER | EXPLORE | ENJOY

Annual Report 2018/19



Chairs Report

Robert Wasson

2018/19 has seen the Park move confidently forward; continuing to translate the original vision from our establishment in 1967, into life enhancing day-to-day experiences for our many visitors – over 1.3m, the greatest of any outdoor attraction in Northern Ireland. Our effective stewardship of this wonderful 4,200 acres continues – a thriving mosaic of riverside habitats; grassland, woodland, wetland, demesnes and farmland, 11 miles of accessible riverside path linking the cities of Lisburn and Belfast, with an additional 24 miles of adjoining trails.

Our last annual report noted significant concerns around core funding. 2018/19 has seen us make good progress on this front. A detailed paper outlining the position was prepared for our core funding partners, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and Belfast City Council. This was followed by an intensive period of meetings with Councillors, sub-committees and Officers in each of the Councils. At the beginning of January 2019 the Councils each approved an increase of funding to repair erosion due to inflation over several years. Thanks are due to my Board colleagues, LVRP staff,

Councillors and Council officers for their work and focus in securing this.

There is of course more to do. In the upcoming year we will seek to secure the second tranche of core funding, and to build on foundation fundraising work this year, so that we also start to build out a second pillar of financial resources from our park users, sponsorships, trusts, legacies and other non-public sources. The aim is not just to secure our financial sustainability for core operations, but to allow us to further enhance the Park to the benefit of our users and the environment itself.

As ever, we recognise the work of our dedicated band of volunteers. They are the lifeblood of the Park, and we look forward to volunteer opportunities and public engagement increasing even more in the coming year.

These are fast-changing times, and at such times it is important to protect the things of worth that have always been there, and that sustain us. That is our job in protecting the Park, and we continue confidently into the next year.

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.

The Regional Park's Strategic Vision, available from our office, clearly defines our six focus areas of Biodiversity, Visitors, Community, Landscape, Heritage and Health & Recreation.

OUR AIMS

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

Outstanding Natural Beauty

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a precious landscape where the distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the public interest to safeguard it. The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order 1985 sets out the main purposes of an AONB:

- To conserve and 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

From these purposes emerged our Mission; to protect and conserve the unique landscape character of Lagan Valley Regional Park and the Lagan Valley AONB, enhance its biodiversity and cultural heritage and promote its benefit to visitors and the community.



Partnership

Good partnerships are essential to the governance and management of the Regional Park.

Working with our partners we have achieved all the goals laid out in the management plan for this year. It is thanks to the coordinated effort of our partners that we have achieved so much. Both Belfast City Council and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council are major landowners and manage significant sites in the Regional Park. In addition to our funding partners there are a number of other bodies and organisations with which Lagan Valley Regional Park works. The Rivers Agency for example is responsible for work along the river system and they provide services such as grass cutting along the towpath in close association with the Department for Infrastructure. The Forest Service manages Belvoir Park Forest and the National Trust manages the Minnowburn site.

Our funding partners

Working together in partnership means that all partners benefit from a much greater value for their contribution as it is matched by others who contribute to the pot. The idea of synergy, where the creation of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts is particularly relevant. We seek to continue that approach with our partners in the future. Our key funding partners are:

Belfast City Council
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council
Department for Infrastructure (DfI)
Department for Communities (DfC)
Northern Ireland Environment Agency (DAERA)
HLF Legacy

Our other partners

Working together in partnership means that the benefits far outweigh individual organisations working alone. Partnerships may include delivery of specific targets, sharing of resources, training, joint management and project support. Our key management partners include: The National Trust, Sustrans, Forest Service (DAERA), Transport NI, Butterfly Conservation NI, Bat Conservation Ireland, QUB, Rivers Agency, Lagan Navigation Trust, Lagan Rivers Trust, The Woodland Trust, and Ulster Wildlife.

Planning

Lagan Valley Regional Park spans the two council areas of Belfast City Council and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council.

Local Development Plans (LDPs)

The Regional Park has made recommendations into the development of the Preferred Options Papers for each of the two councils. Belfast currently has a Draft Plan Strategy and the Draft Plan Strategy for Lisburn will soon be available for consultation. Many of the existing policies relating to the Regional Park and its protection are important and both councils appreciate the need to protect this valuable resource and asset.

Belfast Green and Blue Infrastructure Plan and the Belfast Open Spaces Strategy have been available for consultation this year and the Regional Park has been engaged in the consultation process.

Planning activity

The Regional Park responded to 22 planning applications in 2017, reflecting the continuing development pressure on the river corridor, against which we must be vigilant.

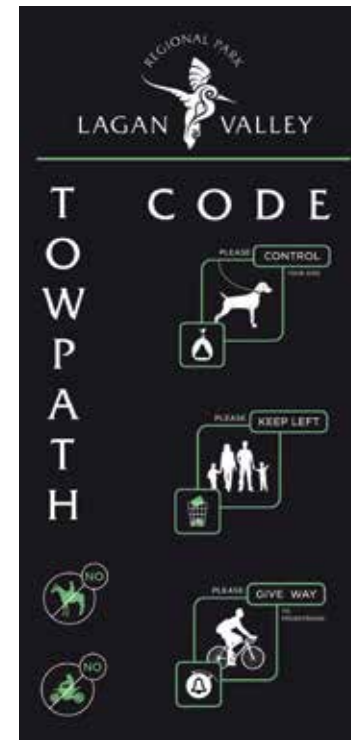
LVRP Management Plan

The LVRP Management Plan 2017-2022 directs the work of the Regional Park over the five year life span of the plan. The targets can be broadly divided into routine work to manage the area under each of our 6 focus areas and those projects that are above and beyond normal works.

The Finance and Strategy Sub-Committee have developed an approach to funding these projects and will seek funding opportunities to further these aims.

The Lagan Towpath; connecting people and biodiversity

In 1819 Thomas Bradshaw reported a story current at the time that claimed 'a ship had sailed to the West Indies and back from Belfast during the time occupied by a lighter in voyaging to Lough Neagh.' He was, of course, referring to the lack of maintenance on the Lagan Navigation from its opening in 1794. Clearly the need for maintenance and good management was as important 200 years ago as it is today.



Today management issues are to some extent a factor of the towpaths popularity. The towpath is used by a range of people; walkers, cyclist, dog owners and many others. The towpath connects the two cities of Lisburn and Belfast and forms many interconnected links to the communities that border the area with over 24 miles of additional paths and trails.

Access to green spaces both within and outside of the urban environment may reduce health inequalities providing benefits to all strata of society and has been demonstrated to be beneficial to both physical and mental health¹, with the key benefit of reducing strain on the health system.

In order for everyone to have a great experience when on the towpath, we encourage all users to show consideration to others.

¹Health in the green economy: Nathalie Röbbel, World Health Organisation 2011

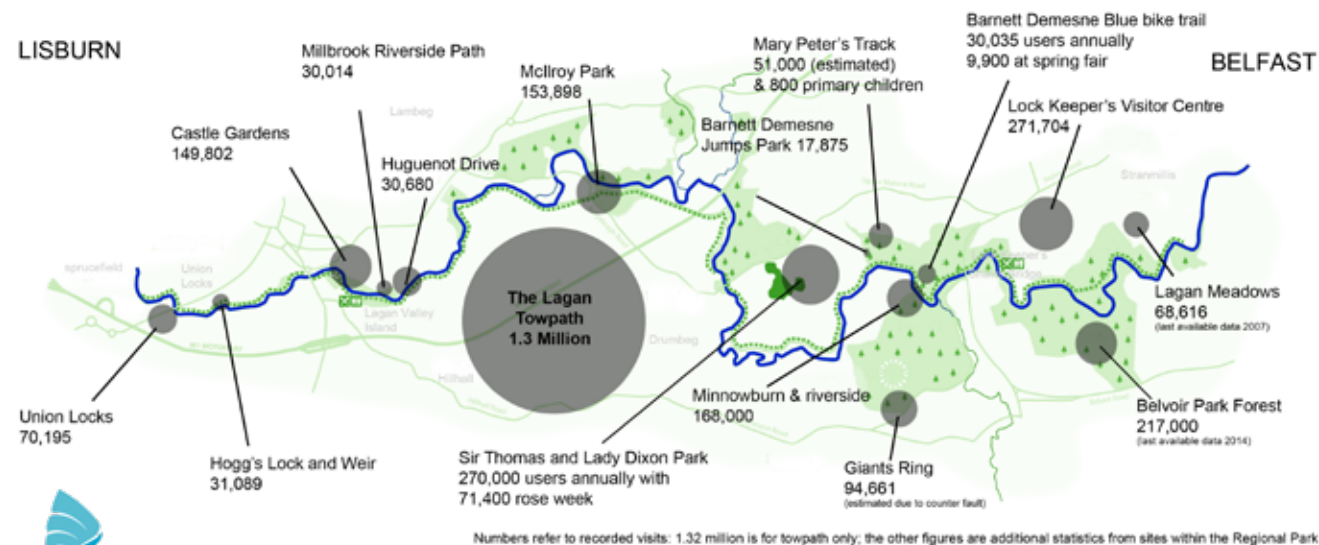


This year saw a reprint of the towpath leaflet. Packed with information for towpath users, the guide has kept to the popular format of the old leaflet, with a fresh new look and the information updated. Funding for the leaflet was provided by DfI and it remains free at source.

The Lagan Valley Regional Park forms an essential corridor connecting a range of wildlife habitats.

Lagan Valley Regional Park:

the most popular outdoor attraction in Northern Ireland



The towpath forms a cultural, social and biodiversity link between the cities of Lisburn and Belfast, two of Northern Ireland's largest population centres. It is a section of the Ulster Way, a 'medium distance walk' under Walk NI and it is part of the National Cycle Network. Steadily the past several years have seen incremental increases in visitor numbers. This year saw user numbers of 1.3 million for the towpath alone, easily making Lagan Valley Regional Park the most visited outdoor attraction in Northern Ireland.

Biodiversity

The kingfisher is a wonderful symbol of the river system and is the bird on which our emblem is based. This year a pair took to breeding close to the Lighter at the Lock Keeper's Cottage, giving a perfect opportunity for photographs.

The past three years the woodpecker, a newcomer to Ireland has been seen and heard in the Regional Park regularly and one of our partner's recorded video footage of a pine marten near Lagan Meadows.

Lagan Valley Regional Park Rangers play a key role in protecting the numerous species of wildlife in the Park. We would also like to say a big thank you to all of our Volunteer Wildlife Surveyors. As part of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, our volunteers have been recording pollinators through two national monitoring schemes: the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme in partnership with butterfly conservation, and the bumblebee monitoring scheme with the National Biodiversity Data Centre in the Republic of Ireland.



UK Bioblitz Campaign nature reserves are not enough!

TV presenter and naturalist Chris Packham came to Lagan Valley Regional Park in July as part of the first independent audit of its kind in the UK involving Citizen Science. His goal is to highlight the extent to which the nation's species are under threat.

McIlroy Park, in the Lagan Valley Regional Park, hosted Chris as part of his UK Bioblitz – nature reserves are not enough! Campaign.

I'm doing this because I want to highlight that the UK's landscape is in big trouble. We should have a far greater expectation of having wildlife around us all of the time but sadly we find ourselves going to nature reserves

The ultimate aim is to celebrate some conservation success stories, but also to flag up some of its failures.

Chris concludes:

We treat them like they're museums and art galleries, we go there, we get fully satisfied there's lots of life, but on the way home when we're driving through the countryside there's nothing left. Some parts of it are absolutely bereft, they're deserts, and what we want to do is say to people 'that's not good enough'. We want wildlife everywhere; nature reserves are not enough



A Park with People at its heart

The Regional Park has six key focus areas in its Strategic Vision, and our key focus is community.

We want a park that is **people focused**, a place where everyone is welcome to visit, **get involved** and **discover** the Park on our doorstep. It is a place that connects the hearts of two of Northern Ireland’s largest population centres and has strong links with **community**. The Park has a great sense of cultural connectivity and links to its past. The Park is a hugely valuable resource and we will continue to develop events and other ways for people of all backgrounds and abilities to get involved. A thriving park with community at its heart is also a great economic asset to the region, where tourism can benefit all.

Volunteering has become central to the Regional Park. Our volunteer programme prides itself on excellence and we pride ourselves on the Investing in Volunteers accreditation, the UK quality standard for the involvement of volunteers within an organisation.

Underpinning every aspect of the Regional Park are our volunteers; from heritage guides, to conservation volunteers and rangers, to the directors on our board. We could not operate without our volunteers, but volunteers equally speak of how involvement with the Park has benefitted them too.

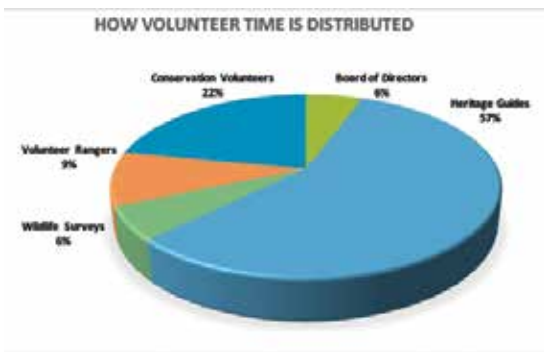


Valuing our volunteers

As a big thank you to all our volunteers support and commitment we held two volunteer days out this year; North Down Museum for our heritage guides and the RSPB reserve at Portmore Lough for those involved in conservation. For those volunteers unable to make either of the trip, we would like to thank you for your help over the year and hope to see you on future events. These days also give the opportunity to learn about other organisations who carryout similar work, develop working knowledge in the field and hone existing skills. We were pleased to welcome 40 volunteers to what has now become a traditional social get together around Christmas time, a time to meet the other volunteers.

Type of support	Skill level	Hours contributed	Notional Value
Board of Directors	Professional	234	£10,921
Heritage Guides	Skilled	2374	£47,480
Wildlife Surveyors	Skilled	247	£4,940
Volunteer Rangers	Unskilled	393	£3,226
Conservation Group	Unskilled	915	£7,512
Overall contribution of volunteering during 2018/19 financial year			£74,079

Unskilled £8.21 per hour (national minimum wage), skilled £20.00 per hour (based on HLF recommended £150 per day – 7.5hr days) and professional £46.67 per hour (based on HLF recommended £350 per day – 7.5hr days)



Lagan Valley Regional Park Visitor Centre

- A heritage and social hub

The opening of the Lock Keeper's Cottage and the Industry Lighter has been managed by Lagan Valley Regional Park for several years now. Coupled with the Lock Keeper's Café the site is a thriving hub of activity, where a visitor can step back in time and see several restored features all on the same site. The Lock Keeper's Cottage was restored through Heritage Lottery and Council funding; the lock and old bridge were restored through Heritage Lottery and Central Government funding and the Industry Lighter was restored through European and council funding.

Heritage Guides at the cottage and lighter provide visitors with a tailored interpretation of this living history. Many of our Heritage Guides have been with us for several years and have built up an astonishing wealth of knowledge not only about these features and the Lagan Navigation of old, but also the cultural heritage connecting communities with their past.

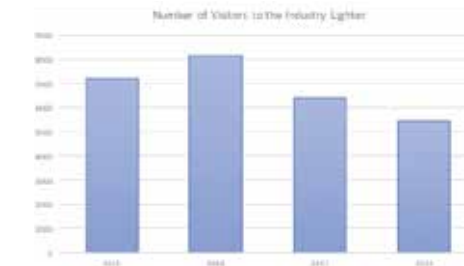
VISITORS TO THE LOCK KEEPER'S SITE

The numbers of visitors to the site have been recorded since counters were installed at the end of 2011. The number of visitors has steadily increased over the 5 years we have been recording and now the site receives over 250,000 visitors each year.



VISITORS TO THE INDUSTRY LIGHTER

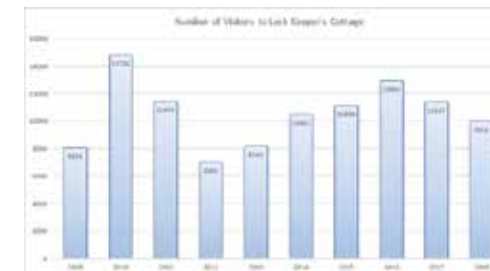
The Industry Lighter was opened in November 2014 and makes this heritage hub complete. Barges on the Lagan Navigation were called 'lighters' and the Industry was built in 1920 by Portadown Foundry. It was used on the Lagan Navigation during the early part of its life to transport mainly coal. Much of its latter days were spent as a sand barge on Lough Neagh.



VISITORS TO THE LOCK KEEPER'S COTTAGE

The Lock Keeper's Cottage was opened in 2008 following restoration funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, which also financed the restoration of the lock; the third lock of the Lagan Navigation.

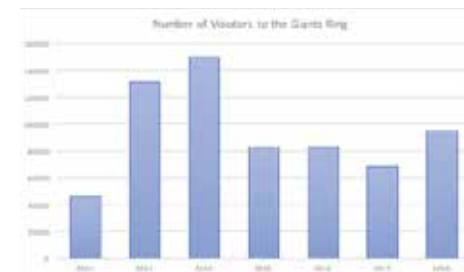
At the Lock Keeper's Cottage you can expect a cosy welcome to a piece of Northern Ireland's living history. This is where the Lock Keeper and his family lived and looked after the lock. Join our Heritage Guides for a remarkable snapshot of life on the Lagan Navigation. Most of our visitors are from Northern Ireland, Ireland and the UK, but we are receiving more European and global visitors and without exception the comments people leave are enthusiastic.



THE GIANTS RING

The Giants Ring comprises a Neolithic Passage tomb surrounded by earthworks and an abundance of archeological remains that can unfold the fascinating story of Ireland's early history. As a State Care Historic Monument set in an Area of Significant Archaeological Interest it is one of Northern Ireland's most significant monuments. The Regional Park has facilitated the Giants ring stakeholder meeting for several years and has played a significant part in bringing partners together to better manage this landscape.

Visitor numbers to the monument saw an increase following path resurfacing to some sections in 2012, however numbers have now stabilised with some fluctuation.



Raising awareness and understanding

WEBSITE OVERHAUL

Our website now has a cleaner look, following a basic overhaul and has been migrated onto a new platform to maintain maximum compatibility with modern browsers with improvements to the Content Management System.



EVENTS PROGRAMME

This year we delivered 21 public events engaging with 366 people, including guided walks and educational talks. Two of our events took part in Rose Week which this year attracted 71,400 visitors.

This year we teamed up with Belfast Boat club for two new ventures to deliver guided canoe expeditions on the lower reaches of the Lagan. The first was focussed on wildlife and the second was an evening canoe focussed on bats. The river and its wildlife take on a whole different perspective when viewed from water level, the event was fully booked and received positive feedback.

SUPPORTING THE DELIVERY OF MUCH MORE

We have been able to support many groups including several charity walks: NI hospice, Athletics NI, Stroke Association, Cancer Fund for Children, Parkinsons UK, Christian Aid Ireland.

We supported a number of 10k runs including Athletics NI charity run, Shorts/Bombardier charity run, Dub Runners Giant Trail Race (500 runners), the Resolution Run (300 runners) and the Les Jones memorial race (300 runners), Ormeau runners 5k charity race (250 runners) and Mary Peters Track is the start/finish of the first of the Run Forest Run series attracting around 650 runners. The Lagan head of the river boat race also took place early in the year.

ACCESSIBLE INTERFACE

The Regional Park Office, located behind the Lockkeeper's Cafe is an easily accessible primary interface for the public. This year we dealt with around 1000 enquiries including the provision of information on volunteering, access, directions, planning, site security, wildlife, heritage, to name a few.

ENGAGING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Bushcraft events are a great opportunity to engage with children and teach them about our natural environment and how it relates to their lives in a practical way. There are lots of fun activities for the children to get involved with and these events are ideal for birthday parties and groups. Seymour Hill Primary school and St Joseph's Primary school took part in our outreach program as part of the all-Ireland pollinator plan with the planting of a wildflower meadow at McIlroy Park in partnership with Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council.



The Ranger Service took the Park promotional stand out to QUB Careers and Biodiversity Fair and to Belfast City Council's Spring Fair.

Our sister website [laganvalleylearning](#) continues to support learning for schools through its teachers pack, promoting the outdoor classroom through engaging with sites in the Regional Park. Teachers will inspire and educate the next generation to respect and value the world around us. It is therefore fitting that elements of teacher training are carried out in the Regional Park, promoting this asset for education.

HIGHER LEARNING

The Regional Park is a resource for higher learning too, with Masters students from Queens University learning about environment management issues. The annual study visit focuses on the issues surrounding three invasive plant species occurring along the river system: Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed and Giant hogweed.

TALKS AND SHOWS

The Regional Park entertained 5 community groups by taking a talk out to them about the Lagan Valley, its heritage and its wildlife.



The Ranger Service

Rangers are ‘the sharp end of the environment industry; skilled people who have to balance the demands, aspirations and curiosity of the public, with protection and enhancement of the physical and cultural fabric of the countryside, with sensitivity, humour and integrity’

- Countryside Commission

VOLUNTEER RANGERS

Our Ranger Service has been supported and greatly enhanced by the help of Volunteer Rangers this year who have given their time and hard work throughout the year. We would like to extend a big thank you.

UPSKILLING AND TRAINING

Each year we schedule practical training for our volunteers so that they can develop new skills and build confidence in their abilities. We believe upskilling and valuing our volunteers helps in providing them with the confidence and experience to go on to other things. Whilst it is sad to see people go, we feel so privileged to have played a role in at least five of our volunteers to have gone on into full-time paid employment locally.

BELVOIR FOREST FIRE

A prolonged dry spell through May and June led to a spate of fires across Northern Ireland. Walkers along the towpath were dismayed to see part of Belvoir

Park Forest on fire. Both LVRP Ranger Service and Forest Service staff provided valuable support to Fire and Rescue service to bring the blaze under control.

KEEPING OUR RIVER CLEAN

Several events are ran each year by the Ranger Service to keep the River and Canal clean. The first of these was the big spring clean at Lagan Valley Island, Lisburn in partnership with Lisburn City Council.

Another big clean up took place at Glenmore activity centre with local canoeists helping our Ranger Service and volunteers to drag out a wide variety of detritus from the water. The list of items removed always seems to include a shopping trolley, an old bicycle and a couple of tires.

Incredibly a grand total of 596 bags of litter were removed from the towpath, car parks and river clean ups this year.



- 596 bags of litter collected
- 42 km of paths and trails patrolled weekly
- Responded to numerous incidents and advised relevant partners and authorities
- Carrying out and facilitating surveys and transects for butterflies, badgers, otters, squirrels and bats



Income and Expenditure Summary

Lagan Valley Regional Park
Year ended 31st March 2019

	2019		2018	
	Expenses £	Income £	Expenses £	Income £
Northern Ireland Environmental Agency		16,500		13,500
Belfast City Council - Core funding		41,055		41,055
Belfast City Council - Additional funding		21,607		16,993
Department of Agriculture and Rural Development		-		2000
Events income		996		420
Donations		1250		759
Other income		360		205
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council		41,055		40,952
Department for Infrastructure (Cycling & Waterways Unit)		22,950		15,000
Heritage Lottery Fund		-		11,390
Other exceptional income from other trading activities		-		780
Wages and salaries	118,786		125,243	
Operating leases	5,478		5,557	
Rent	7,360		6,196	
Water charges	1,669		1,330	
Light and heat	5,077		4,131	
Repairs and maintenance	3,479		5,237	
Insurance	5,209		4,604	
Motor vehicle expenses	688		430	
Other motor/travel costs	1,529		1,607	
Legal and professional fees	2,636		2,563	
Telephone	-		404	
Other office costs	9,547		4,773	
Depreciation	1,055		916	
Other interest payable and similar charges	142		127	
TOTAL EXPENSES / INCOME	162,655	145,773	163,118	143,053
Surplus for the year Income less Expenses as above)	2019	(-16,882)	2018	(-20,065)



Lagan Valley Regional Park is a charity (NIC103700) and welcomes donations to help us continue to protect and conserve the unique landscape character of the Park, enhance its biodiversity, cultural heritage and promote its benefit to visitors and the community. You can find out more by contacting the office or visiting our website.



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