

**DISCOVER  
EXPLORE  
ENJOY**



**LAGAN VALLEY**

**Annual Report 2019/20**

## Chairs Report

# Robert Wasson

As we came towards the end of this year in the Park, the impact of the pandemic was starting to become clear. While this has been a hugely challenging time for everyone, the rediscovery of the value and beauty of our natural spaces has been an unexpected consequence. Lagan Valley Regional Park has played a very important role in supporting citizens in the greater Belfast-Lisburn area. In the longer term this will result in many new people being introduced to what the Park has to offer, and them adopting the Park as a new, rich part of their lives.

The good work of Dr. Andy Bridge and his small but dedicated team continues, reinforced as always by our dedicated band of Volunteers. This year we achieved our third 3-year accreditation from Investors in Volunteering - not to be taken for granted, but no surprise to those of us who see our Volunteers' work at first hand.

The establishment of a Biodiversity Working Group is an excellent initiative that provides additional focus on this aspect of our work; expect to hear more as our various initiatives take shape.

Public engagement is vital; without visitors, we

would not be doing our job. The team ran many initiatives throughout the year, which engaged a wide variety of user types, and in overall terms we continue to be Northern Ireland's largest outdoor attraction, with more than 1.3m visits per annum.

Partnership is crucial to the work we do. We thank our funding partners for the long term support which allows us to do our work, and in return enabling us to help them deliver their own remits. We are pleased to report that financially LVRP has moved beyond the funding crisis of two years ago, and we can now plan more confidently for the future. There is still work remaining to build out a second pillar of financial resources such as from sponsorships, trust funds, legacies, users, and other non-public sources. Good foundation work was done on this during the year. Our management partners are also key to our work, we thank them also for their collaboration over the year.

More than ever, we are reminded of the value of the simpler things in life, and the natural world especially. At LVRP we will continue to dedicate ourselves to looking after this particular, beautiful corner of Northern Ireland.



# Our Vision

A Park which 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 clearly defines our six focus areas of Biodiversity, Visitors, Community, Landscape, Heritage and Health & Recreation.

## OUR AIMS

- 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 our Mission emerges: to protect and conserve the unique landscape character of Lagan Valley Regional Park and the Lagan Valley AONB, to enhance its biodiversity and cultural heritage, and to 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 Department for Infrastructure's Rivers Agency is responsible for work along the river system and they provide services such as grass cutting along the towpath. The Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs' 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 the synergy created by matching contributions 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 (Heritage Lottery Fund) Legacy.**

## Our other partners

Our Management Partnerships help with 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, Queens University Belfast, Rivers Agency, Lagan Navigation Trust, Lagan Rivers Trust, The Woodland Trust, and Ulster Wildlife.

# Planning

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

### Local Development Plans (LDPs)

The Regional Park has submitted recommendations about the draft Preferred Options Papers for both councils. In view of the importance of the existing policies relating to the Regional Park and its protection, it is clear that both councils appreciate the need to protect the Regional Park as a valuable resource and asset.

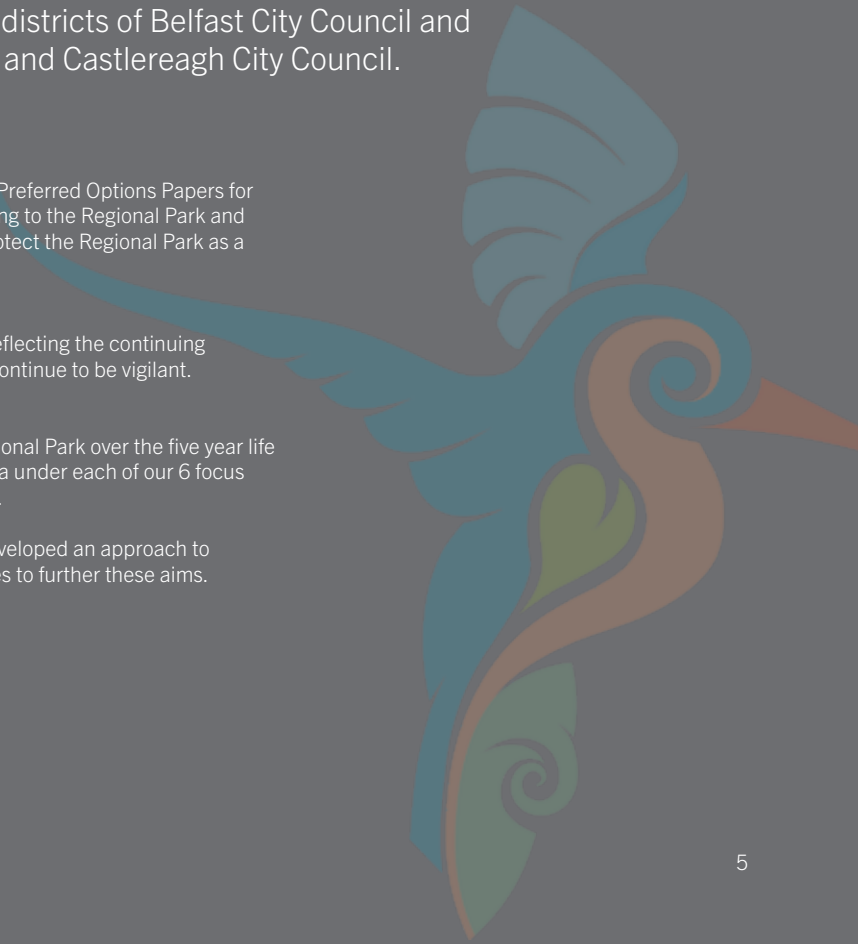
### Planning activity

The Regional Park responded to 22 planning applications in 2019, reflecting the continuing development pressure on the river corridor, against which we must continue to 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 include routine work to manage the area under each of our 6 focus areas and specific projects that are above and beyond normal works.

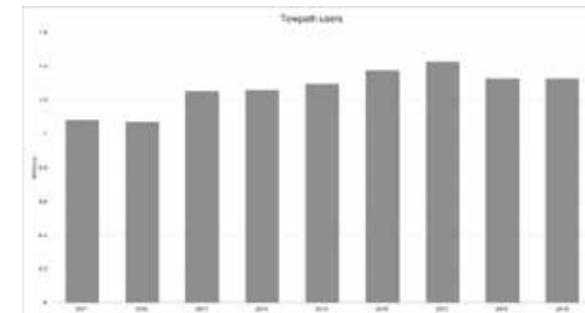
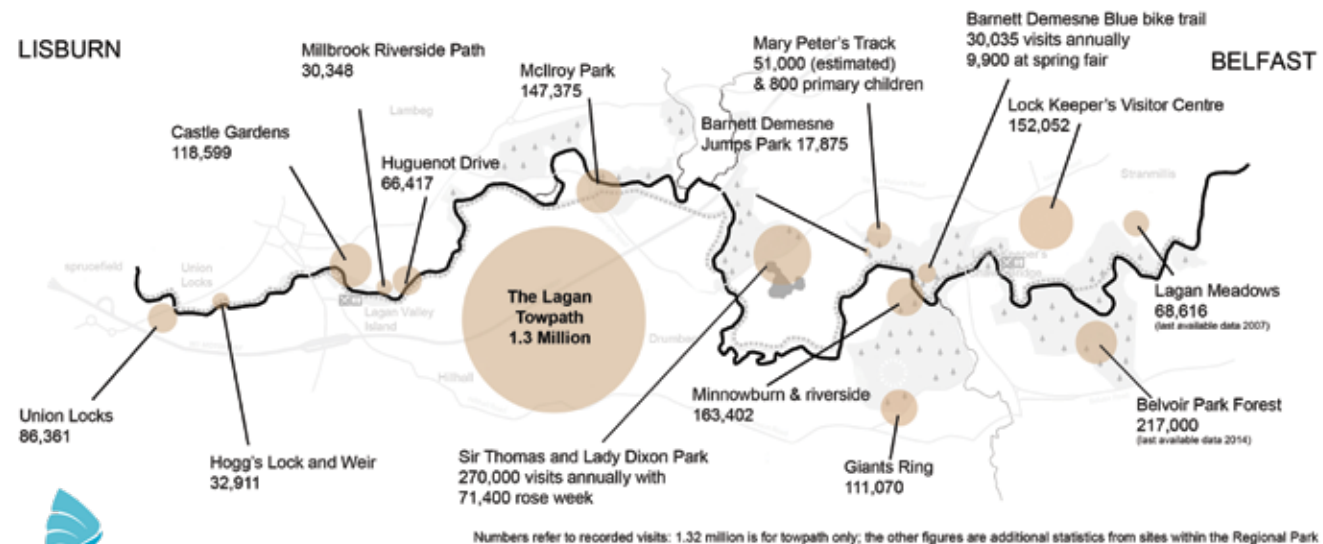
The Finance and Strategy Sub-Committee of the LVRP Board has developed an approach to funding these projects and will continue to seek funding opportunities to further these aims.





# 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

Guardianship of biodiversity has been a major theme in the management of Lagan Valley Regional Park since it was established in 1967. The establishment of a Biodiversity Working group this year will greatly help in properly understanding and focusing direction on those biodiversity issues that are most important both in the Regional Park and in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Given the range of land managers and biodiversity issues, the challenge of coordinated management is considerable. The conservation work

of the Park is considerable and long term records have been greatly beneficial to understanding the biodiversity of the river corridor. A key issue arising from our meetings to date is the need for comprehensive and scientifically robust baseline data across habitats and species.

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.

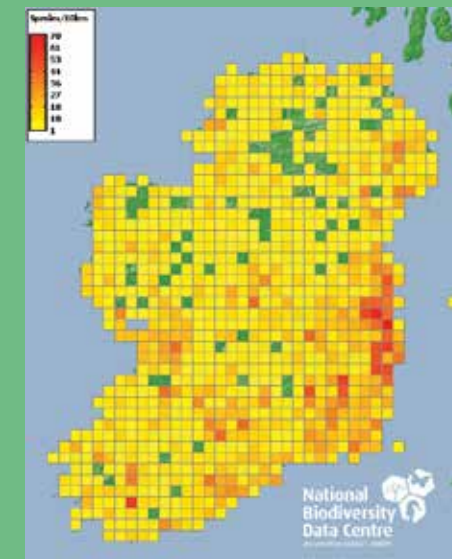


# Pollinators

Pollinators are a vital element to biodiversity, providing valuable ecosystem services for pollinating both native plants and the crops upon which we depend for food. Two groups of insects on which the Park has focused for several years are butterflies and bumblebees. 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

# Bumblebees

Volunteers and staff have been supporting the All Ireland Pollinator Plan through the establishment of transects (Shaws Bridge, Belvoir Park Forest X2, Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park and Mclroy Park) and through walking these transects each year through the summer months. Data collected is uploaded directly to the National Biodiversity Data Centre and contributes to the broader understating of species' abundance, distribution and changes across the Island of Ireland.





# Butterflies

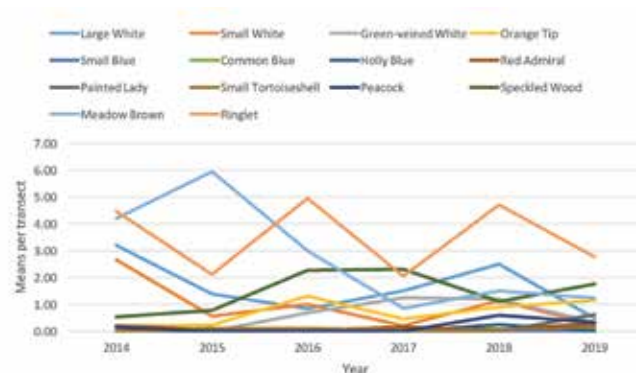
Butterfly records for the area are gathered through several transects, representing the main habitat types found along the river corridor. The results from the transects are uploaded onto the United Kingdom Butterfly Monitoring Scheme's website where the data are analysed across the whole of the UK. The UKBMS 2020 publication "Official Statistic briefing" gives an overview of the UK trends in butterfly populations:

- Trends for UK butterfly species vary, with just under a third of butterfly species assessed in the UK showing a significant long-term decline in abundance (31%), compared to 26% showing a significant long-term increase. However, the situation is more positive over the last decade, with 6 species (10%) showing a statistically significant increase over this period compared to 5 species (9%) showing a significant decline.
- Following a modest recovery in 2018, 2019 was an excellent year for butterflies. Just over half of species (53%) showed a higher population index in 2019 compared to the year before. 2019 ranked as the 8th best year in the 44 year series, and the best year since 1997.
- Four species had their best year on record in the UK in 2019 (Chequered Skipper, Orange-tip, Brimstone, and Marbled White). No species had their worst year on record in the UK. Some habitat specialist species, however, have not recovered to the higher numbers that were typically found in the early 1970s, whilst some wider countryside species are also in long-term decline.

- County level trends reflected that 2019 was largely a good year for butterflies, with Scotland recording record abundances for 6 species.

The data collected in the Regional Park span several years on two long running transects at Belvoir Park Forest and Lagan Meadows and we can see fluctuations of butterfly species over time:

Belvoir Park Forest



# Small Mammals

## Academic partnership

Lagan Valley Regional Park values and supports our partnership with academic institutions. This year Stephanie Bevan, a postgraduate on the QUB course in Ecological Management and Conservation Biology completed a Masters project on terrestrial small mammal population abundance and distribution (available from the publications section of our website). It provides invaluable baseline data, paving the way for further research.

## Case study the Daubenton's Bat.

16 volunteers and two members of staff took part in the annual survey completing transects along the river system for the Daubenton's Bat. This particular bat forms an important part of river corridor ecosystems, swooping down like nocturnal swifts and swallows and feeding on the small insects that thrive above the water.

These surveys are carried out as part of the all-Ireland Daubenton's Bat Waterways Survey. Our survey is a small but important piece of the overall picture that provides valuable information for monitoring this species across Ireland. This project started in 2006. Continued support enables population changes to be identified early. Most of the sites surveyed have recorded Daubenton's Bats including the river Lagan.



# A Park with People at its heart

The Regional Park has six key focus areas in its Strategic Vision, with our central focus being 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.

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. Likewise, our volunteers themselves speak of how involvement with the Park has benefitted them.



# Investing In Volunteers



Lagan Valley Regional Park's volunteer program prides itself on excellence and this year we were awarded the accreditation for a further three years. This is the third time Lagan Valley Regional Park has been awarded the accreditation and we have held the standard since 2009.

Investing in Volunteers is the UK quality standard for the involvement of volunteers within an organisation. The accreditation focuses on the four key areas of Planning for volunteer involvement, Recruiting volunteers, Selection and Matching volunteers, and Supporting and Retaining volunteers.

The standard helps us to improve our volunteer management and allows us to publicly demonstrate and promote our commitment to volunteering. We have been approached by other organisations in Northern Ireland seeking to implement best practice in the volunteer sector.

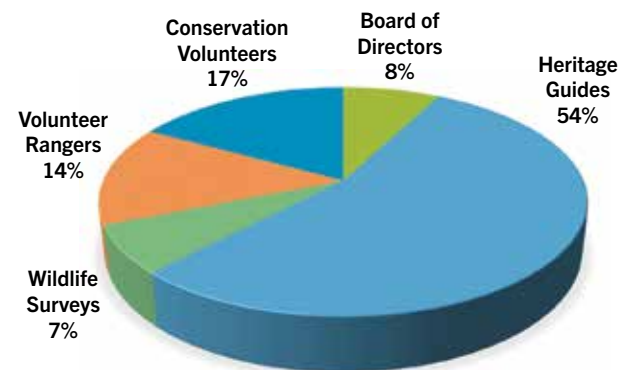
# Valuing our volunteers

As a thank you for 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 trips, we would like to thank you for your help over the year and hope to see you on future events.

These away days also give the opportunity to learn about other organisations that carry out similar work. They help to develop working knowledge in the field, and to hone existing skills. We were also 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. The table below shows an estimate of the monetary value of this year's volunteer work. This is, in effect, equivalent to an additional 53% in staff numbers.

| Type of support  | Skill level  | Hours contributed | Notional Value |
|--|--------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Board of Directors   | Professional | 308               | £14,374        |
| Heritage Guides  | Skilled      | 2193              | £43,860        |
| Wildlife Surveyors   | Skilled      | 272               | £5,440         |
| Volunteer Rangers  | Unskilled    | 569               | £4,671         |
| Conservation Group   | Unskilled    | 683               | £5,607         |
| Overall contribution of volunteering during 2019/20 financial year |              |                   | £73,952        |

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)



# Raising awareness and understanding

## Events programme

This year we delivered 26 public events engaging with 3268 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 focused on wildlife and the second was an evening canoe which 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, Parkinson's UK, Christian Aid Ireland.

We supported several 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). In addition the 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 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 Mclloy Park in partnership with Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council.

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

Our sister website [www.laganvalleylearning.co.uk](http://www.laganvalleylearning.co.uk) 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 also a resource for higher learning, with Masters students from Queens University learning about environmental 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 delivering talks to them about the Lagan Valley, its heritage and its wildlife.



# Lagan Valley Regional Park Visitor Centre – A heritage and social hub



The Lock Keeper's Cottage and the Industry Lighter have 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 visitors 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; whilst 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. Visitor numbers have remained steady at over 250,000 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. The Lighter 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

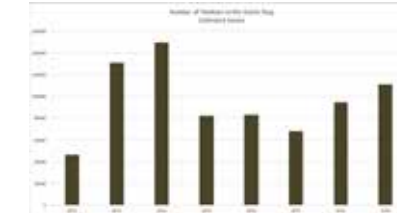
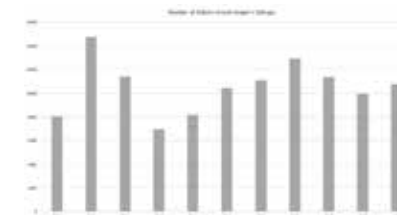
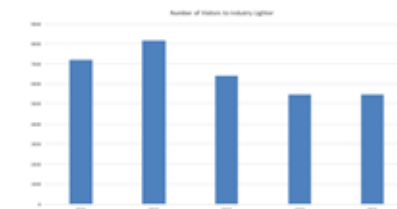
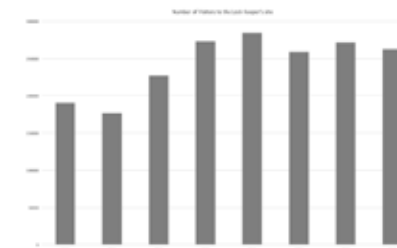
The Lock Keeper's Cottage was opened in 2008 following restoration funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, which also financed the restoration of the lock; the third lock of the Lagan Navigation.

At the Lock Keeper's Cottage visitors 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 visitors from elsewhere in Europe and wider afield and without exception the comments which people leave are enthusiastic.

## THE GIANTS RING

The Giants Ring comprises a Neolithic Passage tomb surrounded by a raised circular earthen enclosure. As a Scheduled Monument in State Care set in an Area of Significant Archaeological Interest it is one of Northern Ireland's most important historical monuments. In addition to the visible structures, the Ballynahatty plateau is scattered with archeological remains that have the potential to reveal more of the fascinating story of Ireland's early history.

The Regional Park facilitates the Giants Ring stakeholder group and has played a significant part in bringing partners together to better manage this landscape. The site remains popular and saw a peak in numbers following path improvements in 2012.



# 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 move on to other things. Whilst it is sad to see people depart, 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.

## KEEPING OUR RIVER CLEAN

Whilst Government Departments ensure the structural maintenance structures along the river corridor and ensure the water flow is not impeded, the aesthetics of the River and Canal in terms of litter and detritus fall through the net. The Regional Park attempts to address this in a limited way by running some ad-hoc additional clean-up events and activities to try to alleviate the issues around water based rubbish.



- 854 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 2020

|  | 2020        |               | 2019        |                 |
|--|-------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------|
|  | Expenses £  | Income £      | Expenses £  | Income £        |
| Northern Ireland Environmental Agency                      |             | 12,000        |             | 16,500          |
| Belfast City Council - Core funding                        |             | 66,055        |             | 41,055          |
| Belfast City Council - Additional funding                  |             | 15,104        |             | 21,607          |
| Department of Agriculture and Rural Development            |             | -             |             | -               |
| Events income  |             | 1,265         |             | 996             |
| Donations  |             | 110           |             | 1,250           |
| Other income   |             | 305           |             | 360             |
| Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council                         |             | 66,055        |             | 41,055          |
| Department for Infrastructure (Cycling & Waterways Unit)   |             | 40,000        |             | 22,950          |
| Heritage Lottery Fund                                      |             | 7,161         |             | -               |
| DFC  |             | 4,750         |             | -               |
| Other exceptional income from other trading activities     |             |               |             | -               |
| Wages and salaries   | 135,910     |               | 118,786     |                 |
| Operating leases   | 4,316       |               | 5,478       |                 |
| Rent   | 6,008       |               | 7,360       |                 |
| Water charges  | 164         |               | 1,669       |                 |
| Light and heat   | 5,976       |               | 5,077       |                 |
| Repairs and maintenance                                    | 2,455       |               | 3,479       |                 |
| Insurance  | 5,507       |               | 5,209       |                 |
| Motor vehicle expenses                                     | 913         |               | 688         |                 |
| Other motor/travel costs                                   | 1,535       |               | 1,529       |                 |
| Legal and professional fees                                | 2,828       |               | 2,636       |                 |
| Telephone  | -           |               | -           |                 |
| Other office costs   | 11,493      |               | 9,547       |                 |
| Depreciation   | 1,428       |               | 1,055       |                 |
| Other interest payable and similar charges                 | 178         |               | 142         |                 |
| Total Expenses / Income                                    | 178,711     | 212,805       | 162,655     | 145,773         |
| <b>Surplus for the year Income less Expenses as above)</b> | <b>2020</b> | <b>34,094</b> | <b>2019</b> | <b>(16,882)</b> |



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.



### **Lagan Valley Regional Park,**

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