

**DISCOVER  
EXPLORE  
ENJOY**



**Annual Report 2020/21**

## Chair's Report

# Sara McClintock

We have never craved the outdoors more than we have over the last year. For so many people in the greater Belfast-Lisburn area, the Lagan Valley Regional Park was their outdoors of choice. It represented space, freedom, entertainment. We let its scenic beauty calm our racing minds and shared in the joy of its nature.

The impressive visitor numbers have borne this out. We welcomed an additional 40% of people into the beautiful open spaces of the Lagan Valley Regional Park over the last year. As a Board, we are overjoyed with the new found love of such a special place but also mindful of the responsibility to mitigate the impact that the Park's ever growing popularity brings.

This was at the forefront of our minds recently when we met for a 'walking meeting' – the first time we had met face-to-face in over 18 months – to discuss the Park's future direction and projects we want to earmark to take forward. This was the first in a series of meetings to identify our priorities out to 2027 and as part of that process we will welcome input from users old and new.

This is my first year as Chair of the Lagan Valley Regional Park and I feel very privileged to take over the role from Robert Wasson who has made such a positive contribution over the last four years, in particular, restoring the Park to a more stable financial footing. As you will see from the accounts, with the long-term support of our funding partners, we now have the means to carry out a strong programme of work to protect the Park's land and biodiversity for the future. In return, this enables us to help our partners deliver their own remits.

My experienced fellow Board members are keen to underline the critical role that Dr Andy Bridge and his small but dedicated team of rangers and co-ordinators play in the protection of the Park; equally, the unwavering support of our volunteer base. Despite COVID restrictions significantly reducing their time in the Park, their enthusiasm never waned.

Let's continue to build on this passion and joy for nature and all that it can bring – relaxation, friendship, tranquility and much more. We will continue to promote and protect this beautiful corner of Northern Ireland for now and for the generations to come.



# 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).**  
**Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs.**  
**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), DfI Roads, Butterfly Conservation NI, Bat Conservation Ireland, Queens University Belfast, DfI Rivers, 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)

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

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 24 planning applications in 2020, reflecting the continuing development pressure on the river corridor, against which we must continue to be vigilant.

## LVRP Management Plan

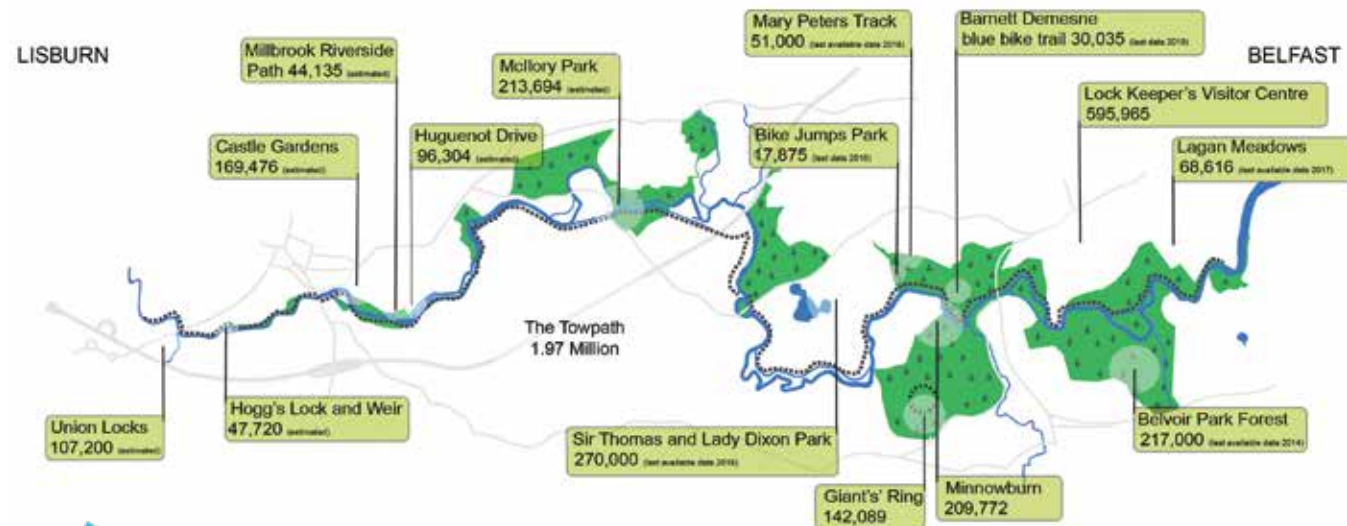
The LVRP Management Plan 2017-2022 directs the work of the Regional Park over the five year life span of the plan. The targets include routine work to manage the area under each of our 6 focus areas and specific projects that are above and beyond normal works.

The Finance and Strategy Sub-Committee of the LVRP Board have 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



Numbers refer to recorded visits; 1.97 million is for towpath only; the other figures are additional statistics from sites with the Regional Park

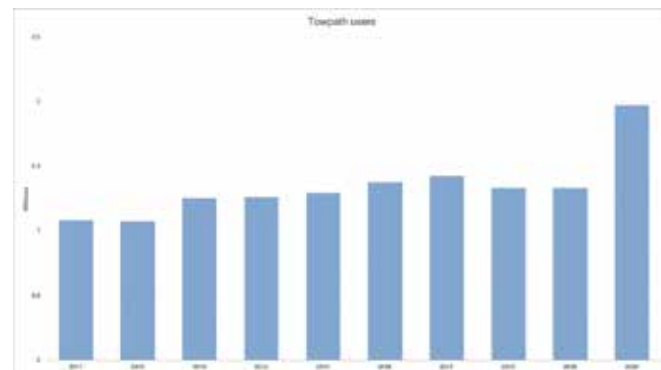


# 2020

2020 has been an exceptional year for all of us and the impact on the Regional Park has been considerable.

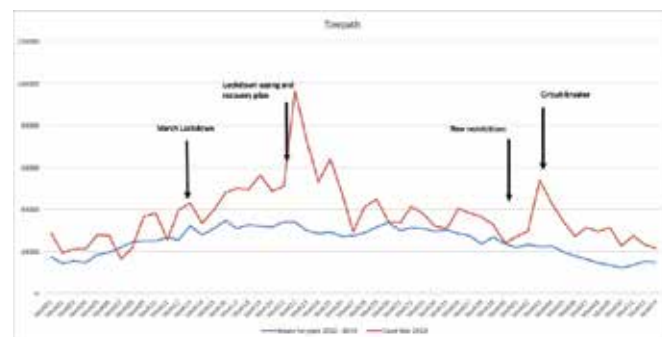
Initially, all but essential work had to be put on hold while we developed ways of working safely and adjusted our working conditions to constantly evolving guidance. This meant that normal resources in terms of staff and volunteers were reduced. At first this corresponded to a dip in visitors to the park, but this rapidly changed as more and more people started visiting the park.

Seeing the increased use of this valuable resource is indicative of a



shift in awareness of the value of easily accessible open green spaces. Motivations may be activity based, fitness, taking time out of the stresses of the day or just having time on our hands to fill. But it seems evident that getting out into nature has been a huge benefit for our personal wellbeing during what has been a challenging year for us all.

From the point of view of management, the increased use presents challenges, particularly where there are additional burdens on resources.



## Did you know? - Impact of 2020 on your park:

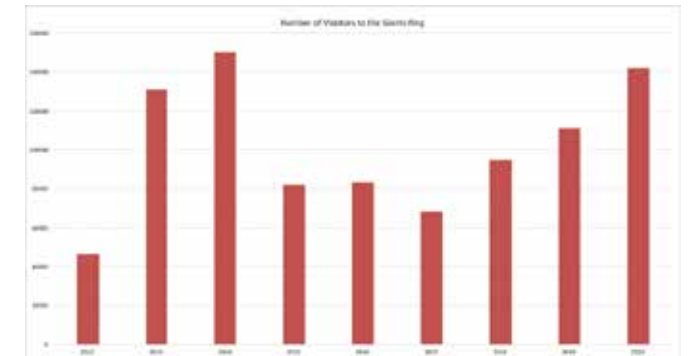




The infographic indicates some of the additional pressure that has been put on resources throughout the year. Working closely with colleagues in other organisations operating in the Regional Park, we find similar trends.

Recent years have seen steady and incremental increases in visitor numbers. This year has been challenging and despite the towpath seeing a decline in numbers at the start of lockdown, there was an unprecedented increase to 1.97 million users overall for 2020. This amounts to a 40% increase in visitors recorded on the towpath. Lisburn City Council have recorded a 45% increase in visitors to parks and open spaces and the National Trust has seen a 30% increase in visitor numbers at Minnowburn and the Giant's Ring has witnessed a 28% increase. All of this is despite many events having to be postponed or cancelled.

The Giant's 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 archaeological remains that have the potential to reveal more of the fascinating story of Ireland's early history.



Organisations across Northern Ireland are seeing significant challenges to managing resources as a result of similar impacts. Collectively we have been working in partnership and supporting co-ordinating bodies to raise public awareness of these impacts and how we all have a role to play in minimising our impact on our valuable outdoor spaces.



### LITTER



PLAN AHEAD AND  
BRING A BAG



TAKE YOUR  
RUBBISH HOME  
WITH YOU

### DOGS



CLEAN UP AFTER  
YOUR DOG



KEEP YOUR DOG ON A  
LEAD

### RESPECT



CONSIDER  
OTHER USERS  
AND THE  
ENVIRONMENT

### KEEP TO PATHS



MINIMISE YOUR  
IMPACT ON  
BIODIVERSITY

### CYCLISTS



RING YOUR BELL SO  
OTHERS ARE AWARE  
OF YOUR APPROACH

### PARKING



PARK RESPONSIBLY



### KEEP LEFT

**LOVE THIS PLACE – LEAVE NO TRACE**

# Biodiversity

Guardianship of biodiversity has been a major theme in the management of Lagan Valley Regional Park since it was established in 1967. The Biodiversity Working Group has focussed on the best approach to addressing the most urgent biodiversity concerns facing the Regional Park and 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. Some of the surveying we normally take park in has been able to go ahead, albeit sometimes in a limited capacity; a big thank you to all of our Volunteer Wildlife Surveyors who have helped with this.



## 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.

## 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 portal where the data are analysed across the whole of the UK.

## 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 McIlroy 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.

## Daubenton's Bat

With all 8 of Ireland's bat species recorded at Minnowburn, the Regional Park is an important refuge for this protected group. Volunteers from the Lagan Valley Regal Park carried out 6 transects along the Lagan, a survey that has been running for several years now, providing valuable data for the All Ireland Daubenton's Bat Waterway Survey.





# 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.

A big thank you to all our volunteers for their hard work and continuing support throughout this strange and challenging year. Although it has not been possible for all of our volunteers to actively help since early 2020, we appreciate that their dedication to LVRP, and the connections and friendships made here, remain strong. We look forward to the day when it is safe to resume all of our volunteering activities, re-open our heritage visitor sites, and have all of our fantastic LVRP team - back together.

## Conservation Tasks

It wasn't until September that our conservation volunteering was able to resume with associated mitigations for keeping everyone safe. Unfortunately, as part of the new safety mitigations, LVRP has been unable to provide the usual refreshments, however, the break time catch-up chats and craic with each other have been as good as ever — albeit standing further apart, and having to talk a bit louder!

### GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT

LVRP grassland management conservation tasks focused on two main areas this year; scrub removal and cutting and lifting annual growth.

Scrub is removed to manage the succession which degrades the biodiversity importance of those areas managed as grasslands, such as gorse removal at the Giant's Ring and the removal of blackthorn from the meadow in Belvoir ASSI.

In the absence of grazing, grassland habitat must be cut and lifted each year, in much the way that hay meadows were managed in the past, using traditional tools such as Austrian scythes. Cutting and lifting the vegetation from a meadow each year will improve its quality by reducing the nutrient load and improving its sward (structure), allowing more species to flourish and preventing the grassland from becoming rank and dominated by coarse grasses, and nutrient-loving species such as nettles and docks. Maintaining and improving the quality of grassland

habitat across LVRP will benefit our pollinators and other insects, and in turn our birds and mammals, and of course, also our visitors and local communities.

### HERITAGE GUIDES

Whilst we have been unable to facilitate our usual heritage guides for the cottage and barge we are working closely with Belfast City Council on the importance of maintenance of these two valuable heritage assets. A condition survey was carried out on the Industry Lighter at the end of the year and make recommendations to the Council to prioritise conservation works that will prevent the deterioration of the structure.

## Investing In Volunteers

Lagan Valley Regional Park's volunteer program has been accredited with Investing In Volunteers 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

It should be noted that as well as the practical hands-on volunteer help that supports the Regional Park, our board is also partly made up of volunteers who bring their professional experience and knowledge to the behind-the-scenes governance of this unique area. The table below shows an estimate of the monetary value of this year's voluntary support. This year's voluntary support has been considerably impacted by restrictions associated with COVID 19 amounting to a 70% drop in volunteer involvement.

Type of support	Skill level	Hours contributed	Notional Value
Board of Directors	Professional	396	£18,481
Heritage Guides	Skilled	-	-
Wildlife Surveyors	Skilled	142	£760
Volunteer Rangers	Unskilled	-	-
Conservation Group	Unskilled	192	£1,559
Overall contribution of volunteering during 2020/21 financial year			£20,801

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)

## Income and Expenditure Summary

Lagan Valley Regional Park  
Year ended 31st March 2021

	2021		2020	
	Expenses £	Income £		
Northern Ireland Environment Agency		10,311		12,000
Belfast City Council - Core funding		66,055		66,055
Belfast City Council - Additional funding		15,104		15,104
Events income		60		1,265
Donations		-		110
Other income		-		305
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council		66,055		66,055
Department for Infrastructure (Cycling & Waterways Unit)		40,000		40,000
Heritage Lottery Fund		6,331		7,161
DFC		4,853		4,750
Wages and salaries	146,392		135,910	
Tools & equipment	1,552		4,316	
Rent	5,875		6,008	
Water charges	310		164	
Light and heat	2,237		2,193	
Clothing and uniform	1,888		3,783	
Repairs and maintenance	786		2,455	
Insurance	5,597		5,507	
Motor vehicle / travel expenses	768		2,448	
Legal and professional fees	2,665		2,828	
Other office costs	13,489		11,493	
Depreciation	1,546		1,428	
Other interest payable and similar charges	129		178	
Total Expenses / Income	183,233	208,769	178,711	212,805
Variance for the year	2021	25,536	2020	34,094



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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