

**DISCOVER
EXPLORE
ENJOY**



Annual Report 2021/22

Chair's Report

Sara McClintock

It is great to be together again in nature! Due to the Covid pandemic, this is the first annual report in several years to detail the valuable contribution made by our volunteers – and we have missed them!

The work of our conservation and tourism volunteer teams is a critical part of who we are and what we do in the Lagan Valley Regional Park. Their work to welcome our visitors and to maintain traditional conservation techniques is central to our six focus areas of biodiversity, visitors, community, landscape, heritage and health & recreation.

As a Board, we are also extremely grateful for the role that Dr Andy Bridge and his small but dedicated team of rangers and coordinators play in the protection of the Park. We are conscious that, along with our volunteers, they punch way above their weight in terms of managing such a significant area of land.

We also deeply appreciate the ongoing financial and advisory support of our partners. For so many people in the greater Belfast-Lisburn area, the Lagan Valley Regional Park remains their outdoors of choice. Its scenic beauty and the joy of its nature is recognised as a lynch pin of both Councils' green space strategies. As you will see from the accounts, with the long-term support of our funding partners, we now have a strong list of 'to dos' which will help us to deliver against our goals and to protect the Park's land and biodiversity for the future. In return, we are able to help our partners deliver their own programmes of work.

As a Board, we remain passionate about promoting and protecting this beautiful corner of Northern Ireland. We hope that you feel the same and that you will continue to support our efforts both now and in the future.



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), Transport NI, Butterfly Conservation NI, Bat Conservation Ireland, National Biodiversity Data Centre, QUB, Rivers Agency, Lagan Navigation Trust, Lagan Rivers Trust, The Woodland Trust, and Ulster Wildlife.

Planning

Development pressure is a strong now as ever and the Regional Park

Planning activity

The Regional Park responded to 21 planning applications in 2021, 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 has directed the work of the Regional Park over the operational five year period and is now coming to completion. Our focus has been linked to the six key focus areas outlined in our strategic vision; largely ongoing practical conservation and management as well as specific projects.

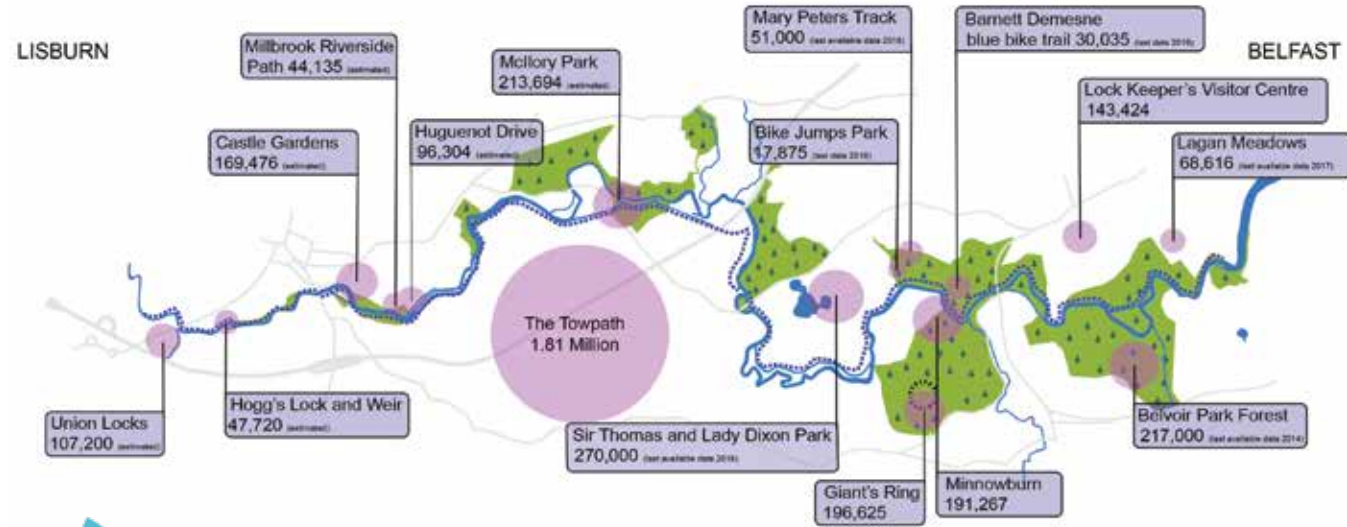
The Finance and Strategy Sub-Committee of the LVRP Board have developed an approach to funding these projects and will continue to seek funding opportunities to further these aims.

Local Development Plans

The Regional Park has begun consultations with Belfast City Council around the Draft Plan Strategy for the Belfast Local Development Plan and anticipates further consultation with Belfast and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council as the local government strategic planning is established.

Lagan Valley Regional Park:

the most popular outdoor attraction in Northern Ireland



Numbers refer to recorded visits; 1.81 million is for towpath only; the other figures are additional statistics from sites with the Regional Park

The towpath forms a cultural, social and biodiversity link between the cities of Lisburn and Belfast. It is a section of the Ulster Way, it is a 'medium distance walk' under Walk NI's designation and it is part of the National Cycle Network.



Belvoir ASSI is home to some of the oldest living oak tree's in Northern Ireland. As part of our partnership with DAERA we carry out 'haloing' of these oak tree's removing some of the faster growing species from under the crown before they become tangled up in the oaks branches. There are a total of 129 veteran and ancient trees in Belvoir ASSI and 104 of these are Oak.

2021

1.81 Million visitors to Towpath

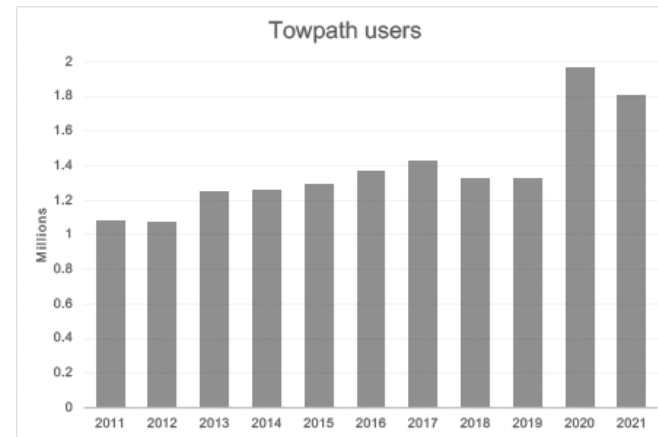
6 Events engaging with 73 people post covid restrictions

190 Thousand visitors to Giant's Ring

140 Thousand visitors to the Lock Keeper's site

6 Events by outside organisations involving over 2000 people

2021 shows a small drop in users compared with 2020, but still remains considerably higher than before covid19. It seems evident that easily accessible open green spaces connecting us to nature are a valuable resource and a huge benefit for our personal wellbeing. Obviously with this additional pressure resources remain stretched as we move forward and we welcome this shift in awareness of easily accessible green space.



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. Increasing visitor pressure has resulted in erosion damage to the ringed mound which through liaison with HED is to be remedied through protective measures on the surface.

190 Thousand
visitors welcomed to the Giants Ring

9 Conservation tasks
caring for the Giants Ring



Glenmore Parkland Trail in Lisburn

The Glenmore Parkland Trail was completed this year bringing a total of 215K of investment to the area through DAERA and Council funding over two phases; developing 2.25 km of new trails and creating valuable access within the Regional Park and seeding potential biodiversity improvements with over 3100 trees planted in the area.



Lock Keepers Site

140 Thousand
visitors to the lock keeper's site



Biodiversity

Guardianship of biodiversity has been a major theme in the management of Lagan Valley Regional Park since it was established in 1967.

Given the range of land managers and biodiversity issues, the challenge of coordinated management is significant. 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. To support the furtherance of this we have engaged a Masters student in partnership with QUB to lay the ground work for developing a framework for Nature Recovery Network.

Wildlife Surveying

Lagan Valley Regional Park Rangers play a key role in protecting the numerous species of wildlife in the Park. Whilst we have still been restricted in what we can do, we have resumed some survey work with the support of the local community through volunteering. As part of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, our volunteers and staff 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.

With all 8 of Irelands bat species recorded at Minnowburn, the Regional Park is an important refuge for this protected group. Volunteers from the Lagan Valley Regal Park complete six transects along the Lagan, for the All Ireland Daubenton's Bat Waterway Survey, providing vital data for this nationwide monitoring scheme, in partnership with Bat Conservation Ireland.

78 | Butterfly survey walks completed

36 | Bumblebee surveys completed

12 | Bat surveys completed

9 | Volunteers engaged through wildlife surveys



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.

We extend a big thank you to all our volunteers for their hard work and continuing support through the year. Although we have not completely returned to full pre covid capacity, we appreciate your dedication to LVRP, and know that the connections and friendships made here, remain strong.

792 Hours contributed from the local community through volunteering

Conservation Tasks

With ongoing Covid restrictions to group activities in spring 2021, LVRP conservation volunteer tasks restarted in June, with an increased group size from tasks in 2020.

From scything meadows with traditional scythes and 'haloing' veteran oaks, to controlling encroaching scrub and invasive species alongside improving sites for visitors and removing litter from the River Corridor, the weekly activities of the conservation volunteers are invaluable in managing natural habitats in, LVRP and increasing their biodiversity value and in involving communities and enhancing the Regional Park for its many visitors.

37 Conservation task days

11 Sites managed with volunteer support

19 Grassland management tasks over 5 sites

8 Alien invasive species control tasks over 3 sites

6 Woodland management tasks in Belvoir ASSI

Grassland Management

LVRP grassland management conservation tasks focus on two main areas; scrub removal and cutting and lifting annual growth. Scrub is removed to manage the succession which degrades the biodiversity importance of 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 improves biodiversity value 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 benefits pollinators and other insects, and in turn birds and mammals, ultimately benefiting our visitors and local communities.



Upskilling and training

Each year we schedule practical training for our volunteers to enable them to learn new skills, enhance existing ones and build confidence in their abilities. Whilst ongoing training supports volunteering in practical terms, it also recognises and builds on the aspirations and interests of our volunteers and is, where possible, tailored to appropriate activities and sites. We welcome volunteer suggestions for further training and development.

**2 Volunteer
training days**



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.

Your ranger service works tirelessly in the background managing issues, dealing with enquiries and complaints, liaising with partner organisations and landowners and delivering events. Patrolling the Park, the ranger service is effectively the eyes and ears of the Regional Park and its partners.

1152 Bags of litter collected

42 km of paths and trails patrolled weekly

23 Incidents responded to

2 Community river cleans



Economic added value of volunteering in LVRP

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 overall volunteer support. Some impact of Covid19 is still evident, but is indicative of many programmers starting up again.

Type of support	Skill level	Hours contributed	Notional Value
Board of Directors	Professional	405	£18,901
Heritage Guides	Skilled	-	-
Wildlife Surveyors	Skilled	96	£1,920
Volunteer Rangers	Unskilled	144	£1,283
Conservation Group	Unskilled	652	£5,809
Overall contribution of volunteering during 2021/22 financial year			£27,913

Unskilled £8.91 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 ParkYear ended 31st March 2022

	2022		2021	
	Expenses £	Income £		
Northern Ireland Environment Agency		6,373		10,311
Belfast City Council - Core funding		66,055		66,055
Belfast City Council - Additional funding		15,104		15,104
Events income		634		60
Donations		-		-
Other income		-		-
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council		66,055		66,055
Department for Infrastructure (Cycling & Waterways Unit)		40,000		40,000
Heritage Lottery Fund		6,480		6,331
DFC		6,562		4,853
Wages and salaries	155,765		146,392	
Tools & equipment	5,463		1,552	
Clothing and uniform	2,508		1,888	
Repairs and maintenance	680		786	
Other office costs	4,477		3,081	
Rent	5,750		5,875	
Water charges	300		310	
Light and heat	1,669		2,237	
Insurance	5,893		5,597	
Project Costs	2,215		3,543	
Motor vehicle / travel expenses	1,935		768	
IT Costs	5,161		4,191	
Finance/HR/IT Charge	3,000		2,000	
Telephone	271		675	
Legal and professional fees	2,940		2,665	
Depreciation	1,382		1,546	
Bank Charges	153		129	
Total Expenses / Income	199,563	207,263	183,233	208,769
Surplus for the year (Income less Expenses as above) per council	2022	7,700	2021	25,536



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,

3 Lock Keeper's Lane, Belfast, BT8 7XT

T: 028 9049 1922

E: admin@laganvalley.co.uk

W: www.laganvalley.co.uk

