

# DISCOVER | EXPLORE | ENJOY



REGIONAL PARK



LAGAN VALLEY

# Annual Report 2022/23

# Chairs Report

## Sara McClintock - Chair, Lagan Valley Regional Park Board

Dear Members and Supporters,

It is great to be able to share with you the Lagan Valley Regional Park's 2022/23 Annual Report. As you read through the pages, you will see that we have been busy and, as always, focused on our mission to address our key areas of biodiversity, visitors, community, landscape, heritage, and health & recreation.

It has been a year of action. Our volunteers helped us to survey the Park's users and to have an up-to-date picture of why people visit Lagan Valley and consistently make it the most visited outdoor visitor attraction in Northern Ireland. In 2022, there were 1.8 million visits of the Tow Path recorded with people old and young, coming from far and near. I believe this underlines the importance of the Lagan Valley as a place where people can breathe and find an escape from day-to-day life.

It has also been a year of reflection. We have spent considerable time looking at how we move forward as an organisation. We are grateful to everyone who has provided input into our management plan which will shape our work up to 2028. It will outline the role that our organisation can continue to play in delivering critical government targets.

I also extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Andy Bridge and his dedicated team of rangers and coordinators, whose tireless efforts are essential in safeguarding the park. They consistently manage this very large park to a high standard. Alongside them, our volunteers remain the backbone of our organisation. They continue to embody the spirit of community and dedication and we are truly grateful for their passion and effort.

Examining our accounts, we pay tribute to the ongoing financial and advisory support of our partners in local and central government. The Lagan Valley Regional Park remains an important outdoor haven for many in the greater Belfast-Lisburn area and is recognised as a cornerstone of both Councils' green space strategies. We rely on a joint approach with partners which enables us to maximise limited resources.

As a Board, our passion for promoting and protecting this beautiful corner of Northern Ireland remains steadfast. We invite you to share in our commitment and continue supporting our endeavours, ensuring the preservation of the Lagan Valley Regional Park for generations to come. Your ongoing support is pivotal and deeply appreciated.



# 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.

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 DfI Rivers 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 (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), DfI Rivers, 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 as strong now as ever in the Regional Park.

## Planning activity

The Regional Park responded to 14 planning applications in 2022, 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 through ongoing practical conservation and management as well as specific projects. Consultants have been appointed to develop the next Management Plan (2023 – 2028) which will be completed in 2023.

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.

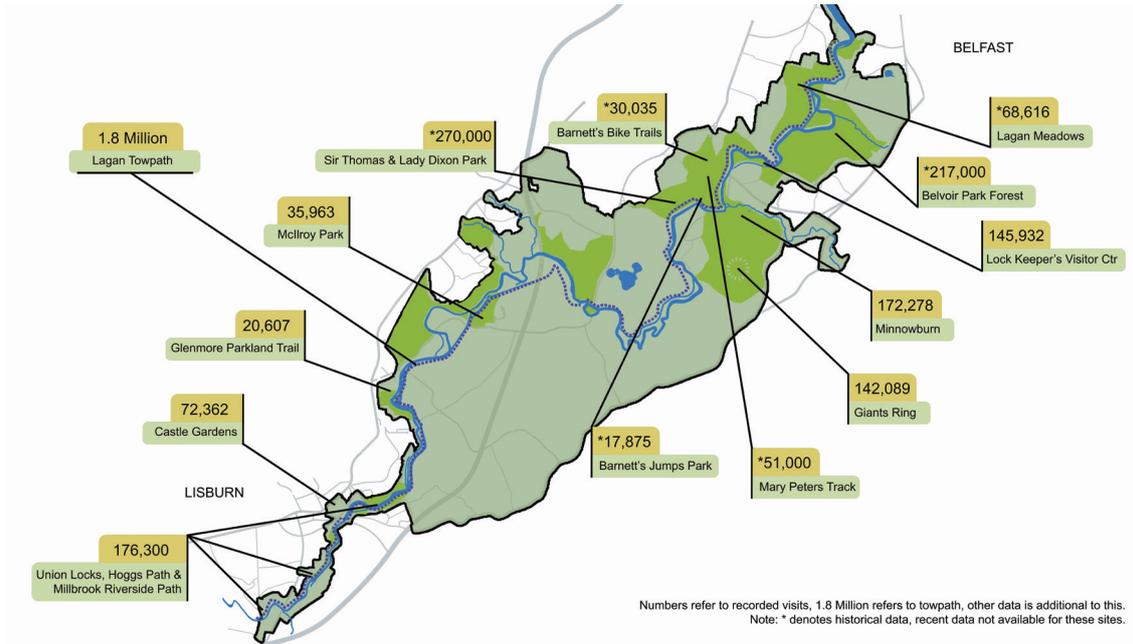
## Local Development Plans

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

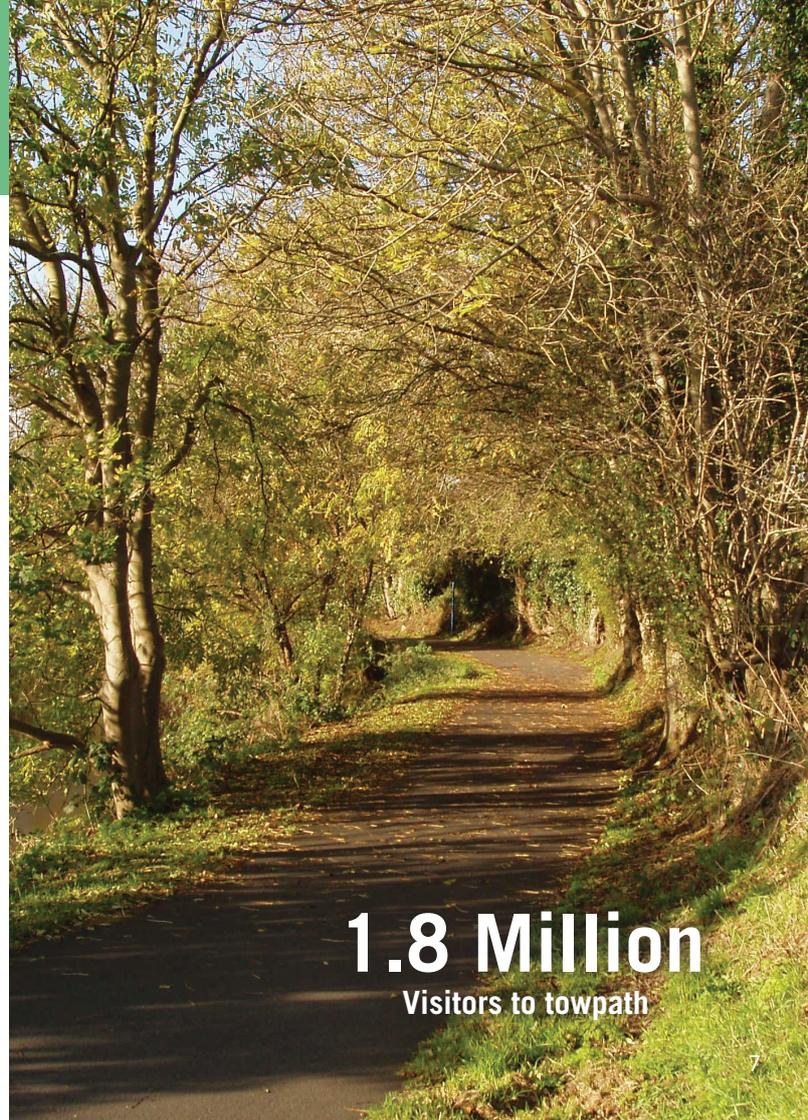
The most popular outdoor attraction in Northern Ireland.



Owned by the Department for Infrastructure, 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.

# 2022

- 142** Thousand visitors to Giant's Ring
- 172** Thousand visitors to Minnowburn
- 145** Thousand visitors to the lock keeper's site
- 176** Thousand visitors to riverside paths in Lisburn
- 20** Thousand visitors to Glenmore Riverside Trails
- 23** Events engaging with 324 people
- 11** Events by outside organisations involving over 1514 people

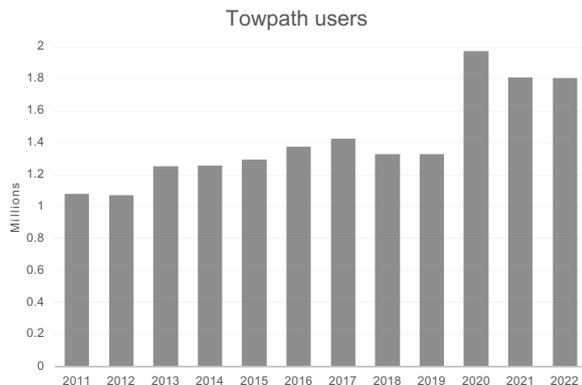


**1.8 Million**  
Visitors to towpath

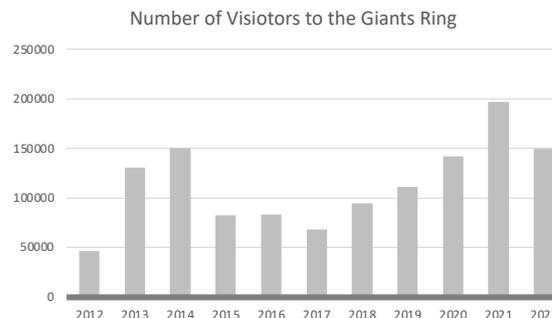
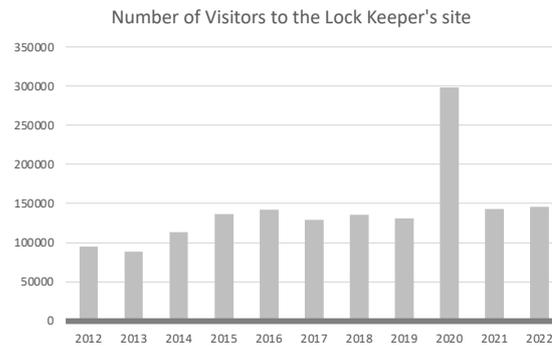
# 2022 User Survey

Since 1998 every five years a survey of people who use the park is conducted. This provides an opportunity for visitors to provide feedback and provides useful information for us about user's level of satisfaction with our management and their aspirations for the Regional Park. To give context to the survey the next few graphs show trends in user numbers on the towpath and at the Lock Keepers site and the Giants Ring, key hubs in the Regional Park.

2022 indicates user numbers may be stabilising post-COVID to numbers higher than before the pandemic hit. 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.

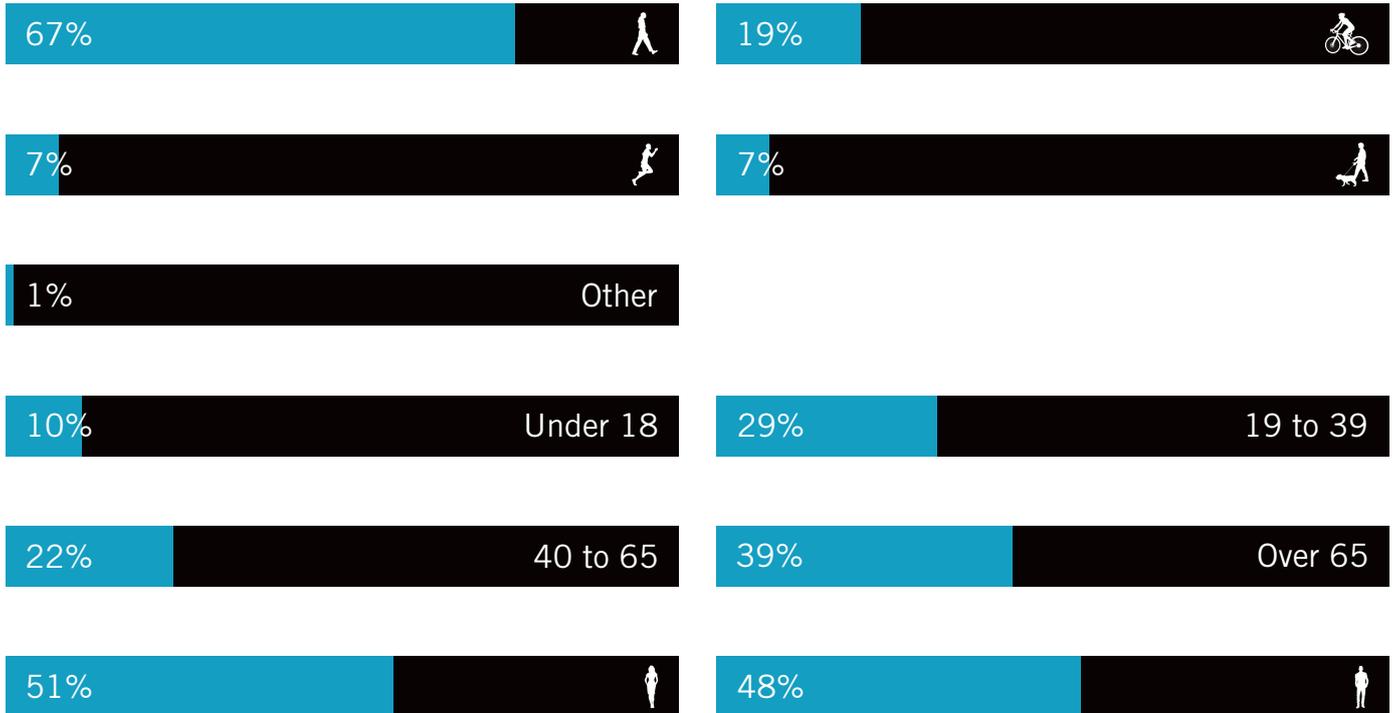


The lock keepers site forms a useful hub to visitors with the Lock Keeper's Café, the Lock Keepers Cottage, the Industry Lighter and the Lagan Valley Regional Park office.



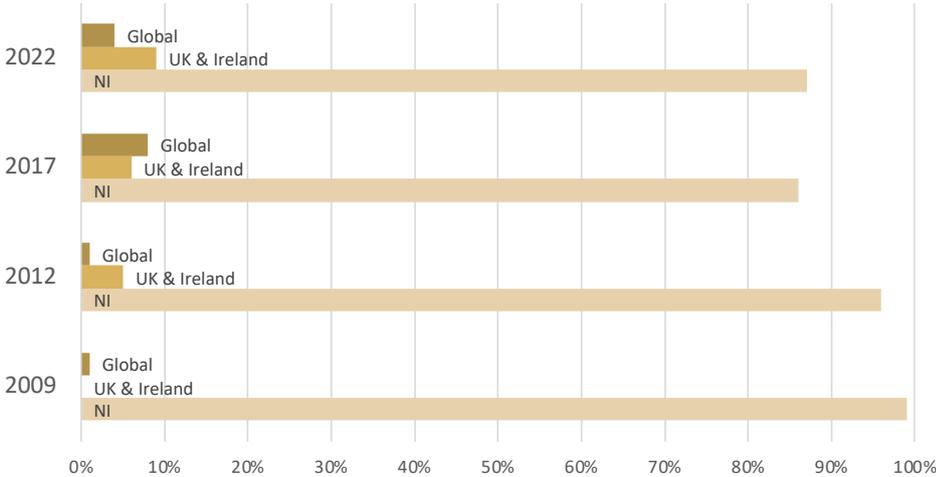
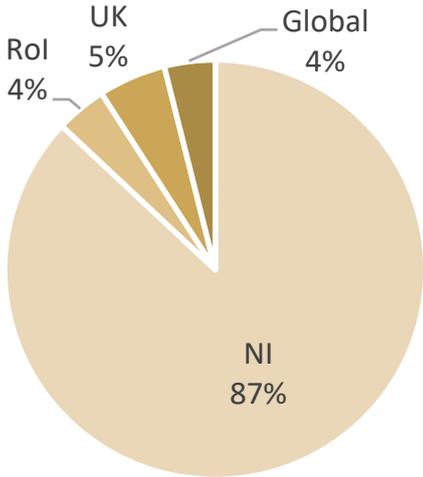
# Park Users

The type of users, their gender and age profile are summarised.



# Where visitors come from

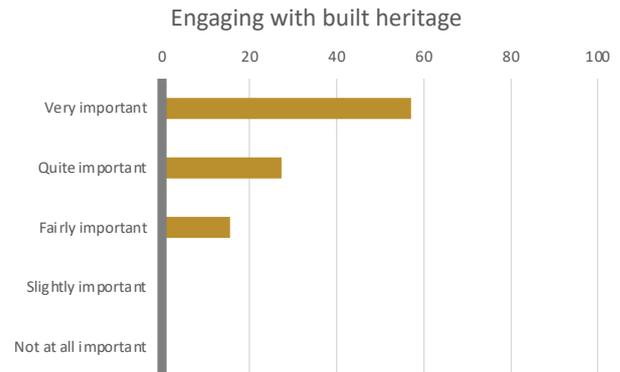
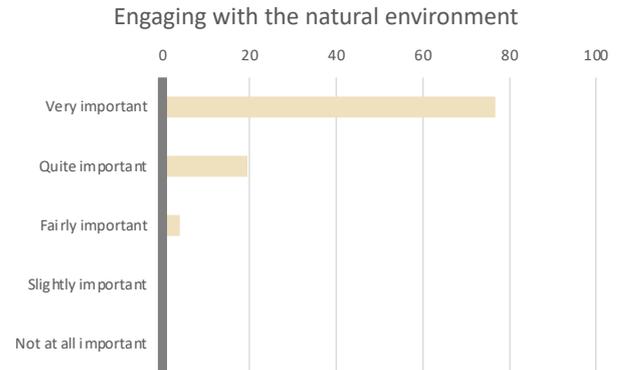
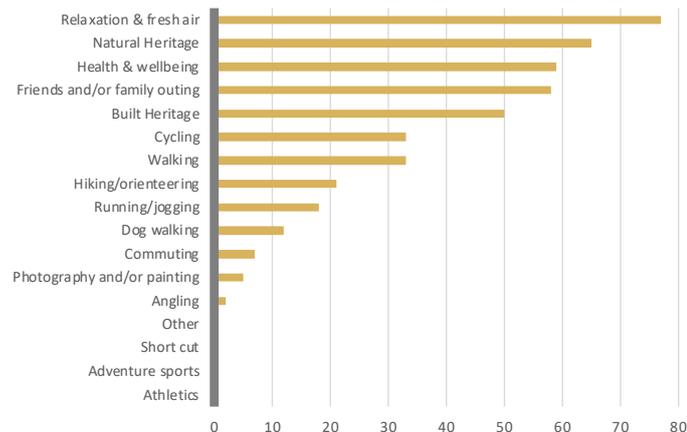
The majority of visitors to the area are local, but we have seen a steady increase in global, UK and RoI visitors over several surveys.



# Why people visit

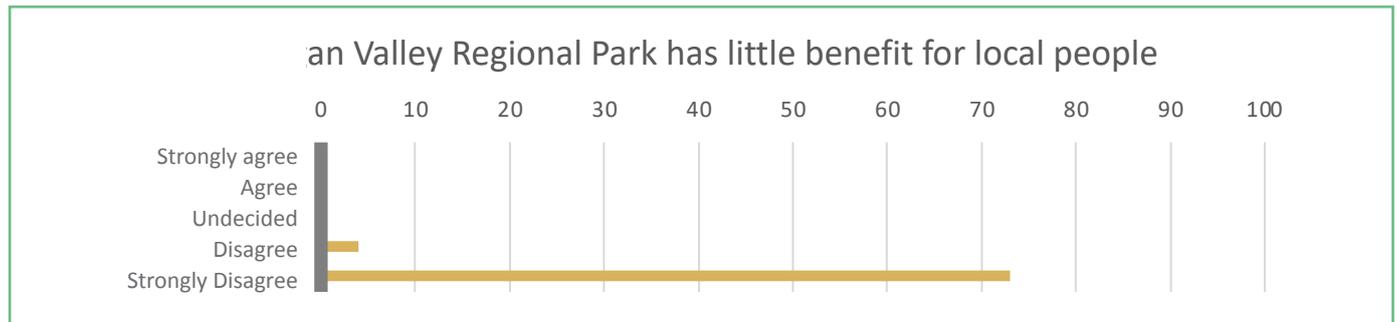
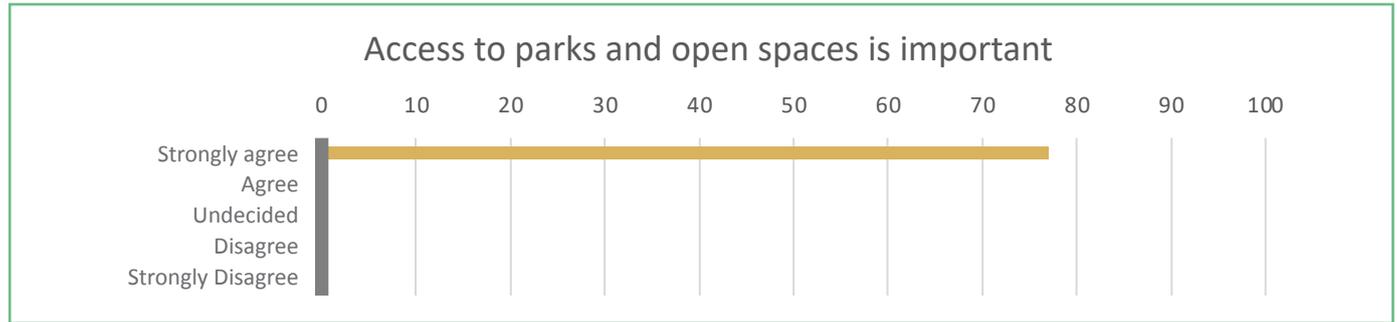
The most popular reasons that attract people who visit the Regional Park are related to health and wellbeing and both its natural and built heritage.

This is similarly borne out when we report the relative importance visitors put into engaging with these features.

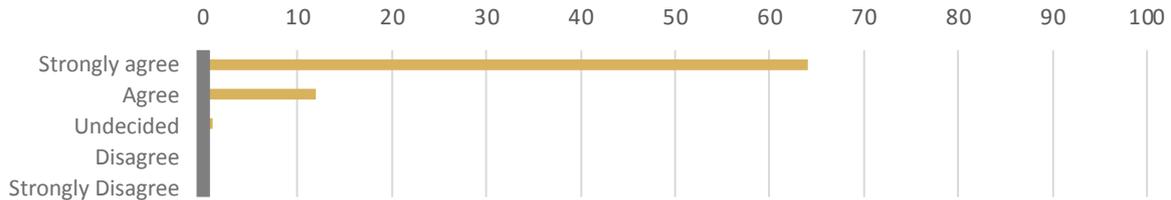


# Importance of open space

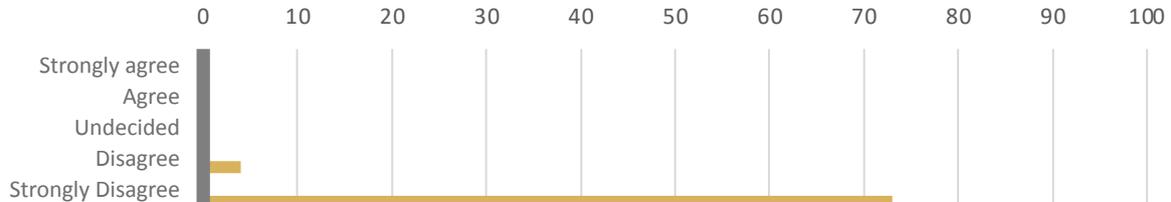
How strongly people agree or disagree with the next six statements reinforce the importance of this space for our community.



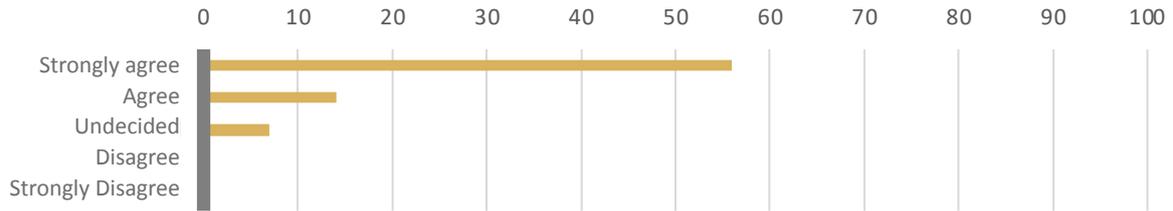
### Discovering the outdoors is a valuable education for children



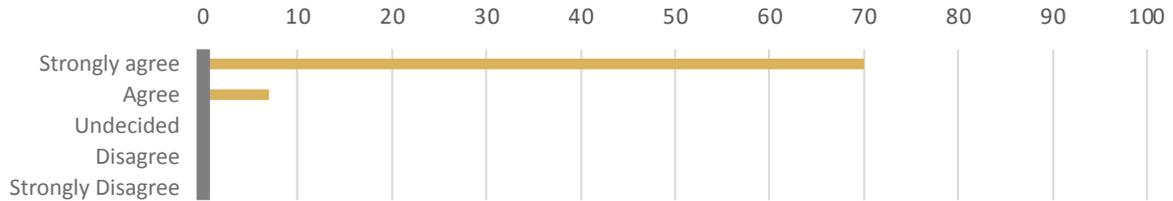
### There is little or no value in managing the landscape and environment of the Lagan Valley area



### Every park user has a responsibility to share, respect and enjoy the park and other users



### Exercising outdoors supports mental and physical wellbeing



# 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, pending available budget.

**142** Thousand visitors welcomed to the Giants Ring

**7** Conservation tasks caring for the Giants Ring

Lock Keepers Site

**145** 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 and volunteers play a key role in protecting the numerous species of wildlife in the Park.

We have resumed wildlife surveying 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, a survey that has been running for several years now, providing valuable data for the All Ireland Daubenton's Bat Waterway Survey, in partnership with Bat Conservation Ireland.

**75** Butterfly survey walks completed

**54** Bumblebee surveys completed

**12** Bat surveys completed

**11** 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.

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 that your dedication to LVRP, and know that the connections and friendships made here, remain strong.

# 1695

**Hours contributed from the local community through volunteering**



# Conservation Tasks

Conservation volunteer tasks are a great way for the local community to have agency in shaping and protecting this valuable public space.

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. Through direct community engagement, the biodiversity value of these connecting green spaces is developed and enhanced for the benefit of local communities and the Regional Park's many visitors.



**36** Conservation task days

**12** Sites managed with volunteer support

**19** Grassland management tasks over 7 sites

**6** Alien invasive species control tasks over 3 sites

**7** 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 and bramble control 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. This year three volunteer training days were delivered for our volunteers.



**3** 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.

**1204**

**Bags of litter collected**

**45**

**km of paths and trails patrolled weekly**

**31**

**Incidents responded to**

**3**

**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.

Type of Support	Skill Level	Hours Contributed	Notional Value
Board of Directors	Professional	400	£18,668
Heritage Guides	Skilled	717.5	£14,350
Wildlife Surveyors	Skilled	157.5	£3,150
Volunteer Rangers	Unskilled	176.5	£1,677
Conservation Group	Unskilled	643.5	£6,113
Overall contribution of volunteering during 2022/23 financial year			£43,958

Unskilled £9.50 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

Prepared by Aubrey Campbell and Company, Chartered Accountants and Registered Auditors.

Lagan Valley Regional Park  
Year ended 31st March 2023  
Income and Expenditure Summary

	2023		2022	
	Expenses £	Income £	Expenses £	Income £
Northern Ireland Environmental Agency		10,684		6,373
Belfast City Council - Core funding		67,000		66,055
Belfast City Council - Additional funding		15,104		15,104
Events income		-		634
Donations		-		-
Keep NI Beautiful		8,778		-
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council		66,060		66,055
Department for Infrastructure (Cycling & Waterways Unit)		42,000		40,000
Heritage Lottery Fund		4,582		6,480
DFC		5,982		6,562
Wages and salaries	158,771		155,765	
Tools & equipment	7,025		5,463	
Clothing and uniform	2,388		2,508	
Repairs and maintenance		834		680
Other office costs		3,257		4,477
Rent		5,750		5,750
Water charges		596		300
Light and heat		3,060		1,669
Insurance		7,776		5,893
Project Costs		4,343		2,215
Motor vehicle / travel expenses		3,350		1,935
IT Costs		3,427		5,161
Finance/HR/IT Charge		3,000		3,000
Telephone		758		271
Event costs		324		-
Legal and professional fees		3,040		2,940
Depreciation		3,719		1,382
Bank charges		184		153
Other interest payable and similar charges				
Total Expenses / Income	211,602	220,190	199,563	207,263

Surplus for the year (Income less Expenses as above) per council      2023      8,588      2022      7,700





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: 02890 491922  
E: [admin@laganvalley.co.uk](mailto:admin@laganvalley.co.uk)  
W: [www.laganvalley.co.uk](http://www.laganvalley.co.uk)